**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MARK-010**. **WORKS WHICH HALLOW THE SABBATH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"23.* *And it came to pass, that He went through the cornfields on the Sabbath day; and His disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn. 24. And the Pharisees said unto Him, Behold, why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful? 25. And He said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? 28. How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him? 27. And He said unto them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: 28. Therefore the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath."*

*Mark 2:23-28*

*"1. And He entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. 2. And they watched Him, whether He would heal him on the Sabbath day; that they might accuse Him. 3. And He saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. 4. And He saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. 5. And when He had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, He saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other."*

*Mark 3:1-5*

These two Sabbath scenes make a climax to the preceding paragraphs, in which Jesus has asserted His right to brush aside Rabbinical ordinances about eating with sinners and about fasting. Here He goes much further, in claiming power over the divine ordinance of the Sabbath. Formalists are moved to more holy horror by free handling of forms than by heterodoxy as to principles. So we can understand how the Phariseessuspicions were exacerbated to murderous hate by these two incidents. It is doubtful whether Mark puts them together because they occurred together, or because they bear on the same subject. They deal with the two classes of workswhich later Christian theology has recognised as legitimate exceptions to the law of the Sabbath rest; namely, works of necessity and of mercy.

Whether we adopt the view that the disciples were clearing a path through standing corn, or the simpler one, that they gathered the ears of corn on the edge of a made path as they went, the point of the Phariseesobjection was that they broke the Sabbath by plucking, which was a kind of reaping. According to Luke, their breach of the Rabbinical exposition of the law was an event more dreadful in the eyes of these narrow pedants; for there was not only reaping, but the analogue of winnowing and grinding, for the grains were rubbed in the disciplespalms. What daring sin! What impious defiance of law! But of what law? Not that of the Fourth Commandment, which simply forbade labour, but that of the doctorsexpositions of the commandment, which expended miraculous ingenuity and hair-splitting on deciding what was labour and what was not. The foundations of that astonishing structure now found in the Talmud were, no doubt, laid before Christ. This expansion of the prohibition, so as to take in such trifles as plucking and rubbing a handful of heads of corn, has many parallels there.

But it is noteworthy that our Lord does not avail Himself of the distinction between God's commandment and men's exposition of it. He does not embarrass himself with two controversies at once. At fit times He disputed Rabbinical authority, and branded their casuistry as binding grievous burdens on men; but here He allows their assumption of the equal authority of their commentary and of the text to pass unchallenged, and accepts the statement that His disciples had been doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, and vindicates their breach of law.

Note that His answer deals first with an example of similar breach of ceremonial law, and then rises to lay down a broad principle which governed that precedent, vindicates the act of the disciples, and draws for all ages a broad line of demarcation between the obligations of ceremonial and of moral law. Clearly, His adducing David's act in taking the shewbread implies that the disciplesreason for plucking the ears of corn was not to clear a path but to satisfy hunger. Probably, too, it suggests that He also was hungry, and partook of the simple food.

Note, too, the tinge of irony in that Did ye never read?In all your minute study of the letter of the Scripture, did you never take heed to that page? The principle on which the priest at Nob let the hungry fugitives devour the sacred bread, was the subordination of ceremonial law to men's necessities. It was well to lay the loaves on the table in the Presence, but it was better to take them and feed the fainting servant of God and his followers with them. Out of the very heart of the law which the Pharisees appealed to, in order to spin restricting prohibitions, Jesus drew an example of freedom which ran on all-fours with His disciplescase. The Pharisees had pored over the Old Testament all their lives, but it would have been long before they had found such a doctrine as this in it.

Jesus goes on to bring out the principle which shaped the instance he gave. He does not state it in its widest form, but confines it to the matter in hand--Sabbath obligations. Ceremonial law in all its parts is established as a means to an end--the highest good of men. Therefore, the end is more important than the means; and, in any case of apparent collision, the means must give way that the end may be secured. External observances are not of permanent, unalterable obligation. They stand on a different footing from primal moral duties, which remain equally imperative whether doing them leads to physical good or evil. David and his men were bound to keep these, whether they starved or not; but they were not bound to leave the shew bread lying in the shrine, and starve.

Man is made for the moral law. It is supreme, and he is under it, whether obedience leads to death or not. But all ceremonial regulations are merely established to help men to reach the true end of their being, and may be suspended or modified by his necessities. The Sabbath comes under the class of such ceremonial regulations, and may therefore be elastic when the pressure of necessity is brought to bear.

But note that our Lord, even while thus defining the limits of the obligation, asserts its universality. The Sabbath was made for man--not for a nation or an age, but for all time and for the whole race. Those who would sweep away the observance of the weekly day of rest are fond of quoting this text; but they give little heed to its first clause, and do not note that their favourite passage upsets their main contention, and establishes the law of the Sabbath as a possession for the world for ever. It is not a burden, but a privilege, made and meant for man's highest good.

Christ's conclusion that He is Lord even of the Sabbathis based upon the consideration of the true design of the day. If it is once understood that it is appointed, not as an inflexible duty, like the obligation of truth or purity, but as a means to man's good, physical and spiritual, then He who has in charge all man's higher interests, and who is the perfect realisation of the ideal of manhood, has full authority to modify and suspend the ceremonial observance if in His unerring judgment the suspension is desirable.

This is not an abrogation of the Sabbath, but, on the contrary, a confirmation of the universal and merciful appointment. It does not give permission to keep or neglect it, according to whim or for the sake of amusement, but it does draw, strong and clear, the distinction between a positive rite which may be modified, and an unchangeable precept of the moral law which it is better for a man to die than to neglect or transgress.

The second Sabbath scene deals with the same question from another point of view. Works of necessity warranted the supercession of Sabbath law; works of beneficence are no breaches of it. There are circumstances in which it is right to do what is not lawfulon the Sabbath, for such works as healing the man with a withered hand are always lawful.

We note the cruel indifference to the sufferer's woe which so characteristically accompanies a religion which is mainly a matter of outside observances. What cared the Pharisees whether the poor cripple was healed or no? They wanted him cured only that they might have a charge against Jesus. Note, too, the strange condition of mind, which recognised Christ's miraculous power, and yet considered Him an impious sinner.

Observe our Lord's purpose to make the miracle most conspicuous. He bids the man stand out in the midst, before all the cold eyes of malicious Pharisees and gaping spectators. A secret espionage was going on in the synagogue. He sees it all, and drags it into full light by setting the man forth and by His sudden, sharp thrust of a question. He takes the first word this time, and puts the stealthy spies on the defensive. His interrogation may possibly be regarded as having a bearing on their conduct, for there was murder in their hearts (verse 6). There they sat with solemn faces, posing as sticklers for law and religion, and all the while they were seeking grounds for killing Him. Was that Sabbath work? Whether would He, if He cured the shrunken arm, or they, if they gathered accusations with the intention of compassing His death, be the Sabbath-breakers?

It was a sharp, swift cut through their cloak of sanctity; but it has a wider scope than that. The question rests on the principle that good omitted is equivalent to evil committed. If we can save, and do not, the responsibility of loss lies on us. If we can rescue, and let die, our brother's blood reddens our hands. Good undone is not merely negative. It is positive evil done. If from regard to the Sabbath we refrained from doing some kindly deed alleviating a brother's sorrow, we should not be inactive, but should have done something by our very not doing, and what we should do would be evil. It is a pregnant saying which has many solemn applications.

No wonder that they held their peace. Unless they had been prepared to abandon their position, there was nothing to be said. That silence indicated conviction and obstinate pride and rooted hatred which would not be convinced, conciliated, or softened. Therefore Jesus looked on them with that penetrating, yearning gaze, which left ineffaceable remembrances on the beholders, as the frequent mention of it indicates.

The emotions in Christ's heart as He looked on the dogged, lowering faces are expressed in a remarkable phrase, which is probably best taken as meaning that grief mingled with His anger. A wondrous glimpse into that tender heart, which in all its tenderness is capable of righteous indignation, and in all its indignation does not set aside its tenderness! Mark that not even the most rigid prohibitions were broken by the process of cure. It was no breach of the fantastic restrictions which had been engrafted on the commandment, that Jesus should bid the man put out his hand. Nobody could find fault with a man for doing that. These two things, a word and a movement of muscles, were all. So He did heal on the Sabbath, and yet did nothing that could be laid hold of.

But let us not miss the parable of the restoration of the maimed and shrunken powers of the soul, which the manner of the miracle gives. Whatever we try to do because Jesus bids us, He will give us strength to do, however impossible to our unaided powers it is. In the act of stretching out the hand, ability to stretch it forth is bestowed, power returns to atrophied muscles, stiffened joints are suppled, the blood runs in full measure through the veins. So it is ever. Power to obey attends on the desire and effort to obey.