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

**MARK-044**. **RECEIVING AND FORBIDDING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"33.* *And He came to Capernaum: and being in the house He asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? 34. But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. 35. And He sat down, and called the Twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. 36. And He took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when He had taken him in His arms, He said unto them, 37. Whosoever shall receive one of such children in My name, receiveth Me: and whosoever shall receive Me, receiveth not Me, but Him that sent Me. 38. And John answered Him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in Thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us. 39. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in My name, that can lightly speak evil of Me. 40. For he that is not against us is on our part. 41. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in My name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. 42. And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in Me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea."*

*Mark 9:33-42*

Surely the disciples might have found something better to talk about on the road from Caesarea, where they had heard from Jesus of His sufferings, than this miserable wrangle about rank! Singularly enough, each announcement of the Cross seems to have provoked something of the sort. Probably they understood little of His meaning, but hazily thought that the crisis was at hand when He should establish the kingdom; and so their ambition, rather than their affection, was stirred. Perhaps, too, the dignity bestowed on Peter after his confession, and the favour shown to the three witnesses of the Transfiguration, may have created jealousy. Matthew makes the quarrel to have been about future precedence; Mark about present. The one was striven for with a view to the other. How chill it must have struck on Christ's heart, that those who loved Him best cared so much more for their own petty superiority than for His sorrows!

**I. Note the law of service as the true greatness (verses 33-35).**

When He was in the house, He asked them. He had let them talk as they would on the road, walking alone in front, and they keeping, as they thought, out of ear-shot; but, when at rest together in the house (perhaps Peter's) where He lived in Capernaum, He lets them see, by the question and still more by the following teaching, that He knew what He asked, and needed no answer. The tongues that had been so loud on the road were dumb in the house--silenced by conscience. His servants still do and say many things on the road which they would not do if they saw Him close beside them, and they sometimes fancy that these escape Him. But when they are in the housewith Him, they will find that He knew all that was going on; and when He asks the account of it, they, too, will be speechless. A thing which does not appear wrong by itself shows its true character when brought to the judgment of God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. (Bengel).

Christ deals with the fault with much solemnity, seating Himself, as Teacher and Superior, and summoning the whole Twelve to hear. We do not enter on the difficult question of the relation of Mark's report of our Lord's words to those of the other Evangelists, but rather try to bring out the significance of their form and connection here. Note, then, that here we have not so much the nature of true greatness, as the road to it. If any man would be first, he is to be least and servant, and thereby he will reach his aim. Of course, that involves the conception of the nature of true greatness as service, but still the distinction is to be kept in view. Further, last of allis not the same as servant of all. The one phrase expresses humility; the other, ministry. An indolent humility, so very humble that it does nothing for others, and a service which if not humble, are equally incomplete, and neither leads to or is the greatness at which alone a Christian ought to aim. There are two paradoxes here. The lowest is the highest, the servant is the chief; and they may be turned round with equal truth--the highest is the lowest, and the chief is the servant. The former tells us how things really are, and what they look like, when seen from the centre by His eye. The latter prescribes the duties and responsibilities of high position. In fact and truth, to sink is the way to rise, and to serve is the way to rule--only the rise and the rule are of another sort than contents worldly ambition, and the Christian must rectify his notions of what loftiness and greatness are. On the other hand, distinguishing gifts of mind, heart, leisure, position, possessions, or anything else, are given us for others, and bind us to serve. Both things follow from the nature of Christ's kingdom, which is a kingdom of love; for in love the vulgar distinctions of higher and lower are abolished, and service is delight. This is no mere pretty sentiment, but a law which grips hard and cuts deep. Christ's servants have not learned it yet, and the world heeds it not; but, till it governs all human society, and pulls up ambition, domination, and pride of place by the roots, society will groan under ills which increase with the increase of wealth and culture in the hands of a selfish few.

**II. Note the exhibition of the law in a life.**

Children are quick at finding out who loves them, and there would always be some hovering near for a smile from Christ. With what eyes of innocent wonder the child would look up at Him, as He gently set him there, in the open space in front of Himself! Mark does not record any accompanying words, and none were needed, The unconsciousness of rank, the spontaneous acceptance of inferiority, the absence of claims to consideration and respect, which naturally belong to childhood as it ought to be, and give it winningness and grace, are the marks of a true disciple, and are the more winning in such because they are not of nature, but regained by self-abnegation. What the child is we have to become. This child was the example of one-half of the law, being least of all, and perfectly contented to be so; but the other half was not shown in him, for his little hands could do but small service. Was there, then, no example in this scene of that other requirement? Surely there was; for the child was not left standing, shy, in the midst, but, before embarrassment became weeping, was caught up in Christ's arms, and folded to His heart. He had been taken as the instance of humility, and he then became the subject of tender ministry. Christ and he divided the illustration of the whole law between them, and the very inmost nature of true service was shown in our Lord's loving clasp and soothing pressure to His heart. It is as if He had said, Look! this is how you must serve; for you cannot help the weak unless you open your arms and hearts to them. Jesus, with the child held to His bosom, is the living law of service, and the child nestling close to Him, because sure of His love, is the type of the trustful affection which we must evoke if we are to serve or help. This picture has gone straight to the hearts of men; and who can count the streams of tenderness and practical kindliness of which it has been the source? Christ goes on to speak of the child, not as the example of service, but of being served. The deep words carry us into blessed mysteries which will recompense the lowly servants, and lift them high in the kingdom. Observe the precision of the language, both as regards the persons received and the motive of reception. One of such little childrenmeans those who are thus lowly, unambitious, and unexacting. In My namedefines the motive as not being simple humanity or benevolence, but the distinct recognition of Christ's command and loving obedience to His revealed character. No doubt, natural benevolence has its blessings for those who exercise it; but that which is here spoken of is something much deeper than nature, and wins a far higher reward.

That reward is held forth in unfathomable words, of which we can but skim the surface. They mean more than that such little ones are so closely identified with Him that, in His love, He reckons good done to them as done to Him. That is most blessedly true. Nor is it true only because He lovingly reckons the deed as done to Him, though it really is not; but, by reason of the derived life which all His children possess from Him, they are really parts of Himself; and in that most real though mystic unity, what is done to them is, in fact, done to Him. Further, if the service be done in His name, then, on whomsoever it may be done, it is done to Him. This great saying unveils the true sacredness and real recipient of all Christian service. But more than that is in the words. When we receiveChrist's little ones by help and loving ministry, we receive Him, and in Him God, for joy and strength. Unselfish deeds in His name open the heart for more of Christ and God, and bring on the doer the blessing of fuller insight, closer communion, more complete assimilation to his Lord. Therefore such service is the road to the true superiority in His kingdom, which depends altogether on the measure of His own nature which has flowed into our emptiness.

**III. The Apostles conscience-stricken confession of their breach of the law (verses 38-40).**

Peter is not spokesman this time, but John, whose conscience was more quickly pricked. At first sight, the connection of his interruption with the theme of the discourse seems to be merely the recurrence of the phrase, in Thy name; but, besides that, there is an obvious contrast between receivingand forbidding. The Apostle is uneasy when he remembers what they had done, and, like an honest man, he states the case to Christ, half-confessing, and half-asking for a decision. He begins to think that perhaps the man whom they had silenced was one such little child, and had deserved more sympathetic treatment. How he came to be so true a disciple as to share in the power of casting out devils, and yet not to belong to the closer followers of Jesus, we do not know, and need not guess. So it was; and John feels, as he tells the story, that perhaps their motives had not been so much their Master's honour as their own. He followeth not us, and yet he is trenching on our prerogatives. The greater fact that he and they followed Christ was overshadowed by the lesser that he did not follow them. There spoke the fiery spirit which craved the commission to burn up a whole village, because of its inhospitality. There spoke the spirit of ecclesiastical intolerance, which in all ages has masqueraded as zeal for Christ, and taken following usand following Himto be the same thing. But there spoke, too, a glimmering consciousness that gagging men was not precisely receivingthem, and that if in Thy nameso sanctified deeds, perhaps the unattached exorcist, who could cast out demons by it, was a little oneto be taken to their hearts, and not an enemy to be silenced. Pity that so many listen to the law, and do not, like John, feel it prick them! Christ forbids such forbidding, and thereby sanctions irregularitiesand unattachedwork, which have always been the bugbears of sticklers for ecclesiastical uniformity, and have not seldom been the life of Christianity. That authoritative, unconditional forbid him notought, long ago, to have rung the funeral knell of intolerance, and to have ended the temptation to idolise conformity, and to confound union to organised forms of the Christian community with union to Christ. But bigotry dies hard. The reasons appended serve to explain the position of the man in question. If he had wrought miracles in Christ's name, he must have had some faith in it; and his experience of its power would deepen that. So there was no danger of his contradicting himself by speaking against Jesus. The power of faith in the Nameto hallow deeds, the certainty that rudimentary faith will, when exercised, increase, the guarantee of experience as sure to lead to blessing from Jesus, are all involved in this saying. But its special importance is as a reason for the disciplesaction. Because the man's action gives guarantees for his future, they are not to silence him. That implies that they are only to forbid those who do speak evil of Christ; and that to all others, even if they have not reached the full perception of truth, they are to extend patient forbearance and guidance. The mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped; but the mouth that begins to stammer His name is to be taught and cherished.

Christ's second reason still more plainly claims the man for an ally. Commentators have given themselves a great deal of trouble to reconcile this saying with the other--He that is not with Me is against Me. If by reconciling is meant twisting both to mean the same thing, it cannot be done. If preventing the appearance of contradiction is meant, it does not seem necessary. The two sayings do not contradict, but they complete, each other. They apply to different classes of persons, and common-sense has to determine their application. This man did, in some sense, believe in Jesus, and worked deeds that proved the power of the Name. Plainly, such work was in the same direction as the Lord's and the disciples'. Such a case is one for the application of tolerance. But the principle must be limited by the other, else it degenerates into lazy indifference. He that is not against us is for us, if it stood alone, would dissolve the Church, and destroy distinctions in belief and practice which it would be fatal to lose. He that is not with Me is against Me, if it stood alone, would narrow sympathies, and cramp the free development of life. We need both to understand and get the good of either.

**IV. We have the reward of receiving Christ's little ones set over against the retribution that seizes those who cause them to stumble (verses 41, 42).**

These verses seem to resume the broken thread of verse 37, whilst they also link on to the great principle laid down in verse 40. He that is not againstis for, even if he only gives a cup of waterto Christ's disciple because he is Christ's. That shows that there is some regard for Jesus in him. It is a germ which may grow. Such an one shall certainly have his reward. That does not mean that he will receive it in a future life, but that here his deed shall bring after it blessed consequences to himself. Of these, none will be more blessed than the growing regard for the Name, which already is, in some degree, precious to him. The faintest perception of Christ's beauty, honestly lived out, will be increased. Every act strengthens its motive. The reward of living our convictions is firmer and more enlightened conviction. Note, too, that the person spoken of belongs to the same class as the silenced exorcist, and that this reads the disciples a further lesson. Jesus will look with love on the acts which even a John wished to forbid. Note, also, that the disciples here are the recipients of the kindness. They are no longer being taught to receive the little ones, but are taught that they themselves belong to that class, and need kindly succour from these outsiders, whom they had proudly thought to silence.

The awful, reticent words, which shadow forth and yet hide the fate of those who cause the feeblest disciple to stumble, are not for us to dilate upon. Jesus saw the realities of future retribution, and deliberately declares that death is a less evil than such an act. The little onesare sacred because they are His. The same relation to Him which made kindness to them so worthy of reward, makes harm to them so worthy of punishment. Under the one lies an incipient love to Him; under the other, a covert and perhaps scarcely conscious opposition. It is devil's work to seduce simple souls from allegiance to Christ. There are busy hands to-day laying stumbling-blocks in the way, especially of young Christians--stumbling-blocks of doubt, of frivolity, of slackened morality, and the like. It were better, says One who saw clearly into that awful realm beyond, if a heavy millstone were knotted about their necks, and they were flung into the deepest place of the lake that lay before Him as he spoke. He does not speak exaggerated words; and if a solemn strain of vehemence, unlike His ordinary calm, is audible here, it is because what He knew, and did not tell, gave solemn earnestness to His veiled and awe-inspiring prophecy of doom. What imagination shall fill out the details of the worse thanwhich lurks behind that better?