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

**MATTHEW-054. CHRIST STIMULATING SLUGGISH DISCIPLESHIP by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"21.* *And another of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. 22. But Jesus said unto him, Follow Me; and let the dead bury their dead."*

*Matthew 8:21-22*

The very first words of these verses, And another of His disciples, show us that the incident recorded in them is only half of a whole. We have already considered the other half, and supplement our former remarks by a glance at the remaining portion now. The two men, whose treatment by Christ is narrated, are the antipodes of each other. The former is a type of well-meaning, lightly formed, and so, probably, swiftly abandoned purposes. This man is one of the people who always see something else to be done first, when any plain duty comes before them. Sluggish, hesitating, keenly conscious of other possibilities and demands, he needs precisely the opposite treatment from his light-hearted and light-purposed brother. Some plants want putting into a cold house to be checked, some into a greenhouse to be forwarded. Diversity of treatment, even when it amounts to opposition of treatment, comes from the same single purpose. And so here the spur is applied, whilst in the former incident it was the rein that was needed.

**I. Note, then, first of all, this apparently most laudable and reasonable request.**

Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Nature says Go, and religion enjoins it, and everything seems to say that it is the right thing for a man to do. The man was perfectly sincere in his petition, and perfectly sincere in the implied promise that, as soon as the funeral was over, he would come back. He meant it, out and out. If he had not, he would have received different treatment; and if he had not, he would have ceased to be the valuable example and lesson that he is to us. So we have here a disciple quite sincere, who believes himself to have already obeyed in spirit and only to be hindered from obeying in outward act by an imperative duty that even a barbarian would know to be imperative.

And yet Jesus Christ read him better than he read himself; and by His answer lets us see that the tone of mind into which we are all tempted to drop, and which is the characteristic natural tendency of some of us, that of being hindered from doing the plain thing that lies before us, because something else crops up, which we also think is imperative upon us, is full of danger, and may be the cover of a great deal of self-deception; and, at any rate, is not in consonance with Christ's supreme and pressing and immediate claims.

The temper which says, Suffer me first to go and bury my father, is full of danger. One never knows but that, after he has got his father buried, there will be something else turning up equally important. There was the will to be read afterwards, and if he was, as probably he was, the eldest son, he would most likely be the executor. There would be all sorts of affairs to settle up before he might feel that it was his duty to leave everything and follow the Master.

And so it always is. Suffer me first, and when we get to the top of that hill, there is another one beyond. And so we go on from step to step, getting ready to do the duties that we know are most imperative upon us, by sweeping preliminaries out of the way, and so we go on until our dying day, when somebody else buries us. Like some backwoodsman in the American forests who should say to himself, Now, I will not sow a grain of wheat until I have cleared all the land that belongs to me. I will do that first and then begin to reap, he would be a great deal wiser if he cleared and sowed a little bit first, and lived upon it, and then cleared a little bit more. Mark the plain lesson that comes out of this incident, that the habit, for it is a habit with some of us, of putting other pressing duties forward, before we attend to the highest claims of Christ, is full of danger, because there will be no end to them if we once admit the principle. And this is true not only in regard to Christianity, but in regard to everything that is worth doing in this world. Whenever some great and noble task presents itself with its solemn call for consecration, some dwarf of an apparent duty thrusts itself in between and perks up in our faces with its demand, Attend to me first, and then I will let you go on to that other.

But morally, this plea, however sincerely urged, is more or less unconscious self-deception. The person who says Suffer me first is usually hoodwinking conscience, and covering over, if not a determination not to do, at least a reluctance to determine to do, the postponed duty. And although we may think ourselves quite resolved in spirit, and only needing the fitting vacant space to show that we are ready to act, in the majority of cases the man who says Suffer me first means, though he often does not know it, I do not think I will do it, after all, even then. Now there are a great many good people who, when urged to some of the plain duties of discipleship--such as Christian work, Christian beneficence, the consecration of themselves to the service of their Master--have always something else very important, and of immediate, pressing urgency, that has to be done first. And then and then, ay? and then,--something else, and then--something else. And so some of you go on, and will go on, unless by God's grace you shake off the evil habit, to the end of your days, fancying yourselves disciples, and yet all the while delaying really to follow the Master until the close. And all your yesterdays will be but lighting you, with unfulfilled purposes, to dusty death.

**II. Now look at the apparently harsh and unreasonable refusal of this reasonable request.**

It is extremely unlike Jesus Christ in substance and in tone. It is unlike Him to put any barrier in the way of a son's yielding to the impulses of his heart and attending to the last duties to his father. It is extremely unlike Him to couch His refusal in words that sound, at first hearing, so harsh and contemptuous, and that seem to say, Let the dead world go as it will; never you mind it, do you not go after it at all or care about it.

But if we remember that it is Jesus Christ, who came to bring life into the dead world, who says this, then, I think, we shall understand better what He means. I do not need to explain, I suppose, that by the one dead here is meant the physical and natural dead, and by the other the morally and religiously dead; and that what Christ says, in the picturesque way that He so often affected in order to bring great truths home in concrete form to sluggish understandings, is in effect, Nay! For the men in the world that are separated from God, and so are dead in their selfhood and their sin, burying other dead people is appropriate work. But your business, as living by Me, is to carry life, and let the burying alone, to be done by the dead people that can do nothing else.

Now the spirit of our Lord's answer may be put thus:--It must always be Christ first, and every one else second; and it must therefore sometimes be Christ only, and no one else. Let me bury my father and then I will come. No, says Christ; first your duty to Me': first in order and time, because first in order of importance. And this is His habitual tone, He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.

Did you ever think of what a strange claim that is for a man to make upon others? This Jesus Christ comes to you and me, and to every man, and says, I demand, and I have a right to demand, thy supreme affection and thy first obedience. All other relations are subordinate to thy relation to Me. All other persons ought to be less dear to thee than I am. No other duty can be so imperative as the duty of following Me. What right has He to speak thus to us? On what does such a tremendous claim rest? Who is it that fronts humanity and says, He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me? He had a right to say it, because He is more than they, and has done more than they, because He is the Son of God manifest in the flesh, and because on the Cross He has died for all men. Therefore all other claims dwindle and sink into nothingness before His. Therefore His will is supreme, and our relation to Him is the dominant fact in our whole moral and religious character. He must be first, whoever comes second, and between the first and the second there is a great gulf fixed.

Remember that this postponing of all other duties, relationships, and claims to Christ's claims and relationships, and to our duties to Him, lifts them up, and does not lower them; exalts, and does not degrade, the earthly affections. They are nobler and loftier, being second, than when perversely, and, in the literal sense, preposterously, they assume to be first. The little hills in the foreground are never so green and fair as when they are looked at in connection with the great white Alps that tower behind them; and all earthly loves and relationships catch a tinge of more ethereal beauty, and are lifted into a loftier region, when they are rigidly subordinated to our love to Him. Being second, they are more than when they bragged that they were first.

Again, if it must be Christ first, and everybody and everything besides second, then to carry that out, it will often have to be Christ only, and no one else. There will come in every man's life the need for a sharp decision between conflicting allegiances. Life is full of harsh alternatives, and it is of no use to kick against the pricks. The divine order is Jesus first and all things second. But we sometimes break that order, and then it comes to be, Very well, then, if you cannot keep the lower in their right places, you must learn to do without them altogether; and if you will not have Him first and them second, you must not have them at all. If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, it would be far better for thee to keep it without offence. If thine hand offend thee, put it down on the block, and take the cleaver in the other hand, and off with it, it would be better for thee to go into life whole than maimed, but it is better to go into life maimed, than to go into destruction whole. The abandonment of the father's bier is second best; but it is sometimes imperative. When you find a taste, a pursuit, a study, an occupation, a recreation coming between you and Jesus Christ--when you do not know how it is, but, somehow or other, the sky that was blue a minute or two ago has a doleful veil of grey creeping all over it, be sure that something or other which ought to be under has got topmost, and you will have to get rid of it in order to come right again. If this man would certainly have come back had Jesus let him go, he would have been let go; but because Jesus knew that he would not come back, therefore He said, You must deny your natural affection, because it is coming between you and Me.

So, dear brethren, when we find that earthly duties, pursuits, occupations of any kind, affections, pure and beautiful as in themselves they may be, are hindering our following the Master, then, if they are things of which we can denude ourselves, though it be at a distinct sacrifice, we are bound to do so; or else we are not loving the Master more than all besides.

Let me remind you in closing of the variation in this story which the evangelist Luke gives us. He interprets Christ's commandment, Follow Me, and expands it into preach the Gospel, which was involved in it. There are many of you who are busily engaged in legitimate occupations, and devoting yourselves in various degrees to various forms of beneficence touching the secular condition of the people around us. May I hint to such, Let the dead bury their dead; preach thou the gospel? A Christian man's first business is to witness for Jesus Christ, and no amount of diligence in legitimate occupations or in work for the good of others will absolve him from the charge of having turned duties upside down, if he says, I cannot witness for Jesus Christ, for I am so busy about these other things. This command has a special application to us ministers. There are hosts of admirable things that we are tempted to engage in nowadays, with the enlarged opportunities that we have of influencing men, socially, politically, intellectually, and it wants rigid concentration for us to keep out of the paths which might hinder our usefulness, or, at all events, dissipate our strength. Let us hear that ringing voice ringing always in our ears, Preach thou the gospel of the kingdom.