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

**MATTHEW-058**. **SOUL-HEALING FIRST: BODY HEALING SECOND by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then saith He to the sick of the palsy), Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house."*

*Matthew 9:6*

The great example of our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is followed, in this and the preceding chapter, by a similar collection of His works of healing. These are divided into three groups, each consisting of three members. This miracle is the last of the second triad, of which the other two members are the miraculous stilling of the tempest and the casting out of the demons from the men in the country of the Gergesenes.

One may discern a certain analogy in these three members of this central group. In all of them our Lord appears as the peace-bringer. But the spheres are different. The calm which was breathed over the stormy lake is peace of a lower kind than that which filled the soul of the demoniacs when the power that made discord within had been cast out. Even that peace was lower in kind than that which brought sweet repose in the assurance of pardon to this poor paralytic. Forgiveness speaks of a loftier blessing than even the casting out of demons. The manifestation of power and love steadily rises to a climax.

The most important part of this story, then, is not the mere healing of the disease, but the forgiveness of sins which accompanies it. And the large teaching which our Lord gives as to the relation between His miracles and His standing work, His ordinary work which He has been doing all through the ages, which He is doing to-day, which He is ready to do for you and me if we will let Him, towers high above the mere miracle, which is honoured by being the signal attestation of that work.

Therefore I would turn to this story now, not for the sake of dealing with the mere miraculous event, but in order to draw the important lessons from it which lie upon its very surface.

**I. The first thought that is suggested here is that our deepest need is forgiveness.**

How strangely irrelevant and beside the mark, at first sight, seems the answer which Christ gives to the eager zeal and earnestness of the man and his bearers. Christ's word is Son, or as the original might more literally and even more tenderly be rendered, Child--be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. That seemed far away from their want. It was far from their wish, but yet it was the shortest road to its accomplishment. Christ here goes straight to the heart of the necessity, when, passing by the disease for the moment, He speaks the great word of pardon. The palsy was probably the result of the sufferer's vice, and probably, too, he felt, whatever may have been his friendswishes for him, that he needed forgiveness most. Such a conclusion as to his state of mind seems a fair inference from our Lord's words to him, for Christ would never have offered forgiveness to an impenitent or indifferent heart.

So we may learn that our chief and prime need is forgiveness. Amid all our clamours and hungry needs, that is our deepest. Is not a man's chief relation in this world his relation to God? Is not that the most important thing about all of us? If that be wrong, will not everything be wrong? If that be right, will not everything come right? And is it not true that for you and me, and for all our fellows, whatever be the surface diversities of character, civilisation, culture, taste and the like, there is one deep experience common to every human spirit, and that is the fact, and in some sense more or less acutely the consciousness of the fact, that we have sinned, and come short of the glory of God?

There is the fontal source of all sorrow, for even to the most superficial observation ninety per cent., at any rate, of man's misery comes either from his own or from otherswrongdoing, and for the rest, it is regarded in the eye of faith as being sorrow that is needful because of sin, in order to discipline and to purify. But here stands the fact, that king and clown, philosopher and fool, men of culture and men of ignorance, all of us, through all the ages, manifest the unity of our nature in this--I was going to say most chiefly--that lapses from the path of rectitude, and indulgence in habits, thoughts, feelings, and actions, which even our consciences tell us are wrong, characterise us all.

Hence the profound wisdom of Christ and of His Gospel in that, when it begins the task of healing, it does not peddle and potter on the surface, but goes straight to the heart, with true instinct flies at the head, like a wise physician pays little heed to secondary and unimportant symptoms, but grapples with the disease, makes the tree good, and leaves the good tree to make, as it will, the fruit good.

The first thing to do to heal men's misery, is to make them pure; and the first step in the great method by which a man can be made pure, is to assure him of a divine forgiveness for the past. So the sneers that we often hear about Christian philanthropists taking tracts to people when they want soup, and the like, are excessively shallow sneers, and indicate nothing more than this, that the critic has superficially diagnosed the disease, and is woefully wrong about the remedy. God forbid that I should say one word that would seem to depreciate the value of other forms of beneficence, or to cast doubt upon the purity of motives, or even to be lacking in admiration for the enthusiasm that fills and guides many an earnest man and woman, working amongst the squalid vice of our great cities and of our complex and barbarous civilisation to-day. I would recognise all their work as good and blessed; but, oh! dear brethren, it deals with the surface, and you will have to go a great deal deeper down than aesthetic, or intellectual, or economical, or political reformation and changes reach, before you touch the real reason why men and women are miserable in this world. And you will only effectually cure the misery, but you certainly then will do it, when you begin where the misery begins, and deal first with sin. The true saviour of societyis the man that can go to his brother, and as a minister declaratory of the divine heart can say--Brother, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And then, after that, the palsy will go out of his limbs, and a new nervous energy will come into them, and he will rise, take up his bed, and walk.

**II. Now, in the next place, notice, as coming out of this incident before us, the thought that forgiveness is an exclusively divine act.**

There was, sitting by, with their jealous and therefore blind eyes, a whole crowd of wise men and religious formalists of the first water, collected together as a kind of ecclesiastical inquisition and board of triers, as one of the other evangelists tells us, out of every corner of the land. They had no care for the dewy pity that was in Christ's looks, or for the nascent hope that began to swim up into the poor, dim eye of the paralytic. But they had keen scent for heresy, and so they fastened with true feline instinct upon the one thing, This man speaketh blasphemies. Who can forgive sins but God alone?Ah! if you want to get people blind as bats to the radiant beauty of some lofty character, and insensible as rocks to the wants of a sad humanity, commend me to your religious formalists, whose religion is mainly a bundle of red tape tied round men's limbs to keep them from getting at things that they would like. These are the people who will be as hard as the nether millstones, and utterly blind to all enthusiasm and to all goodness.

But yet these Pharisees are right; perfectly right. Forgiveness is an exclusively divine act. Of course. For sin has to do with God only; vice has to do with the laws of morality; crime has to do with the laws of the land. The same act may be vice, crime, and sin. In the one aspect it has to do with myself, in the other with my fellows, in the last with God. And so evil considered as sin comes under God's control only, and only He against whom it has been committed can forgive.

What is forgiveness? The sweeping aside of penalties? the shutting up of some more or less material hell? By no means: penalties are often left; when sins are crimes they are generally left; when sins are vices they are always left, thank God! But in so far as sin is sin, considered as being the perversion and setting wrong of my relation to Him, its consequences, which are its penalties, are swept away by forgiveness; for forgiveness, in its essence and deepest meaning, is neither more nor less than that the love of the person against whom the wrong has been done shall flow out, notwithstanding the wrong. Pardon is love rising above the ice-dam which we have piled in its course, and pouring into our hearts.

When you fathers and mothers forgive your children, what does it mean? Does it not mean that your love is neither deflected nor embittered any more, by reason of their wrongdoing, but pours upon them as of old? So God's forgiveness is at bottom--Child! there is nothing in my heart to thee, but pure and perfect love. We fill the sky with mists, through which the sun itself has to look like a red ball of lurid fire. But it shines on the upper side of the mists all the same, and all the time, and thins them away and scatters them utterly, and shines forth in its own brightness on the rejoicing heart. Pardon is God's love, unchecked and unembittered, granted to the wrongdoer. And that is a divine act, and a divine act alone. Pharisees and Scribes were perfectly right. No man can forgive sins but God only.

And I might add, though it is somewhat aside from my direct purpose, God can forgive sin; which some people nowadays say is impossible. The apparent impossibility arises only from shallow and erroneous notions of what forgiveness is. God does not--it might be too bold to say God cannot, if we believe in miracles--but as a matter of fact, God does not, usually interfere to hinder men from reaping, as regards this life, what they have sown. But as I say, that is not forgiveness; and is there any reason conceivable why it should be impossible for the divine love to pour down upon a sinful man who has forsaken his sin, and is trusting in God's mercy in Christ, just as if his sin was non-existent, in so far as it could condition or interfere with the flow of the divine mercy?

And I may say, further, we need a definite divine assurance of pardon. Ah! if you have ever been down into the cellars of your own hearts, and seen the ugly things that coil there, you will know that a vague trust in a vague God and a vague mercy is not enough to still the conscience that has once been stung into action. My brothers, you want neither priests nor ceremonies on the one hand, nor a mere peradventure of Oh! God is merciful!on the other, in order to deal with that deepest need of your heart. Nothing but the King's own sign-manual on the pardon makes it valid; and unless you and I can, somehow or other, come to close grips with God, and get into actual contact with Him, and hear, somehow, with infallible certitude, as from His own lips, the assurance of forgiveness, there is not enough for our needs.

**III. So I come to say, in the next place, that the incident before us teaches us that Jesus Christ claims and exercises this divine prerogative of forgiveness.**

Mark His answer to these cavillers. He admits their promises absolutely. They said, No man can forgive sins but God only. If Christ was only a man, like us, standing in the same relation to the divine pardon that other teachers, saints, and prophets have stood, and had nothing more to do with it than simply, as I might do, to say to a troubled heart, My brother, be quite sure that God has forgiven you; if Christ's relation to the divine forgiveness was nothing more than ministerial and declaratory, why, in the name, not of common sense only, but of veracity, did He not turn round to these men and say so? He was bound, by all the obligations of a religious teacher, to disclaim, as you or I would have done under similar circumstances, the misapprehension of His words: I use blasphemies? No! I am not speaking blasphemies. I know that God only can forgive sins, and I am doing no more than telling my poor brother here that his sins are forgiven by God. But that is not His answer at all. What He says in effect is--Yes; you are quite right. No man can forgive sins, but God only. I forgive sins. Whom think ye, then, that I, the Son of Man am? It is easy to say "Thy sins be forgiven thee"--far easier to say that than to say "Take up thy bed and walk," because one can verify and check the accomplishment of the saying in the one case, and one cannot in the other. The sentences are equally easy to pronounce, the things are equally difficult for a man to do, but the difference is that one of them can be verified and the other of them cannot. I will do the visible impossibility, and then I leave you to judge whether I can do the invisible one or not.

Now, dear brethren, I have only one word to say about that, and it is this. We are here brought sharp up to a fork in the road. I know that it is not always a satisfactory way of arguing to compel a man to take one horn or other of an alternative, but it is quite fair to do go in the present case; and I would press it upon some of you who, I think, urgently need to consider the dilemma. Either the Pharisees were quite right, and Jesus Christ, the meek, the humble, the Pattern of all lowly gentleness, the Teacher whom nineteen centuries confess that they have not exhausted, was an audacious blasphemer, or He was God manifest in the flesh. The whole context forbids us to take these words, Thy sins be forgiven thee, as anything less than the voice of divine love wiping out the man's transgressions; and if Jesus Christ pretended or presumed to do that, there is no hypothesis that I know of which can save His character for the reverence of man, but that which sees in Him God revealed in manhood; the world's Judge, from whom the world may receive divine forgiveness.

**IV. Jesus Christ here brings visible facts into the witness-box as the attesters of His invisible powers.**

Of course the miracle was such a witness in a special way, inasmuch as it and forgiveness were equally divine prerogatives and acts. I need not dwell now upon what I have already observed in my introductory remarks, that our Lord here teaches us the relative importance of the attesting miracle and the thing attested, and regards the miracle as subordinate to the higher and spiritual work of bringing pardon.

But we may widen out this into the thought that the subsidiary effects of Christian faith in individuals, and of the less complete Christian faith which is diffused over society, do stand as very strong evidences of the reality of Christ's professions and claims to exercise this invisible power of pardon. Or, to put it into a concrete form, and to take an illustration which may need large deductions.--Go into a Salvation Army meeting. Admit the extravagance, the coarseness, and all the rest which we educated and superfine Christians cannot stand. But when you have blown away the froth, is there not something left in the cup which looks uncommonly like the wine of the Kingdom? Are there not visible results of that, as of every earnest effort to carry the message of forgiveness to men, which create an immense presumption in favour of its reality and divine origin? Men reclaimed, passions tamed, homes that were pandemoniums made Bethels, houses of God. Wherever Christ's forgiving power really comes into a heart, life is beautified, is purified, is ennobled; and secondary and material benefits follow in the train.

I claim all the difference between Christendom and Heathendom as attestation of the reality of Christ's divine and atoning work. I say, and I believe it to be a valid and a good argument as against much of the doubt of this day, If you seek His monument, look around. His own answer to the question, Art thou He that should come?is valid still: Go and tell John the things that ye see and hear; the dead are raised, the deaf ears are opened; faculties that lie dormant are quickened, and in a thousand ways the swift spirit of life flows from Him and vitalises the dead masses of humanity.

Let any system of belief or of no belief do the like if it can. This rod has budded at any rate, let the magicians do the same with their enchantments.

Now, Christian men and women, ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord. The world takes its notions of Christianity, and its belief in the power of Christianity, a great deal more from you than it does from preachers and apologists. You are the Bibles that most men read. See to it that your lives represent worthily the redeeming and the ennobling power of your Master.

And as for the rest of you, do not waste your time trying to purify the stream twenty miles down from the fountainhead, but go to the source. Do not believe, brother, that your palsy, or your fever, your paralysis of will towards good, or the unwholesome ardour with which you are impelled to wrong, and the consequent misery and restlessness, can ever be healed until you go to Christ--the forgiving Christ--and let Him lay His hand upon you; and from His own sweet and infallible lips hear the word that shall come as a charm through all your nature: Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened; then shall the lame man leap as an hart;--then limitations, sorrows, miseries, will pass away, and forgiveness will bear fruit in joy and power, in holiness, health and peace.