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

**MATTHEW-074**. **THE PHARISEES' SABBATH AND CHRIST'S by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the corn; and His disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat. 2. But when the Pharisees saw it they said unto Him, Behold, Thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day. 3. But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; 4. How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests! 5. Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless! 6. But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. 7. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. 8. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day 9. And when he was departed thence, He went into their synagogue: 10. And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked Him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days? that they might accuse Him. 11. And He said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? 12. How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days. 13. Then saith He to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. 14. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a counsel against Him, how they might destroy Him."*

*Matthew 12:1-14*

We have had frequent occasion to point out that this Gospel is constructed, not on chronological, but on logical lines. It groups together incidents related in subject, though separated in time. Thus we have the collection of Christ's sayings in the Sermon on the Mount, followed by the collection of doings in chapters viii. and ix., the collected charge to His ambassadors in chapter x., the collection of instances illustrative of the relations of different classes to the message of the Kingdom and its King in chapter xi., and now in this chapter a series of incidents setting forth the growing bitterness of antagonism on the part of the guardians of traditional and ceremonial religion. This is followed, in the next chapter, with a series of parables.

The present lesson includes two Sabbath incidents, in the first of which the disciples are the transgressors of the sabbatic tradition; in the second, Christ's own action is brought into question. The scene of the first is in the fields, that of the second is in the synagogue. In the one, Sabbath observance is set aside at the call of personal needs; in the other, at the call of another's calamity. So the two correspond to the old Puritan principle that the Sabbath law allowed of works of necessity and of mercy.

**I. The Sabbath and personal needs.**

This is a strange sort of King who cannot even feed His servants. What a glimpse into the penury of their usual condition the quiet statement that the disciples were hungry gives us, especially if we remember that it is not likely that the Master had fared better than they! Indeed, His reference to David and his band of hungry heroes suggests that He was an hungredas well as they that were with Him. As they traversed some field path through the tall yellowing corn, they gathered a few ears, as the merciful provision of the law allowed, and hastily began to eat the rubbed-out grains. As soon as they began, the eager Pharisees, who seem to have been at their heels, call Him to beholdthis dreadful crime, which, they think, requires His immediate remonstrance. If they had had as sharp eyes for men's necessities as for their faults, they might have given them food which it was lawfulto eat, and so obviated this frightful iniquity. But that is not the way of Pharisees. Moses had not forbidden such gleaning, but the casuistry which had spun its multitudinous webs over the law, hiding the gold beneath their dirty films, had decided that plucking the ears was of the nature of reaping, and reaping was work, and work was forbidden, which being settled, of course the inferential prohibition became more important than the law from which it was deduced. That is always the case with human conclusions from revelation; and the more questionable these are, the more they are loved by their authors, as the sickly child of a family is the dearest.

Our Lord does not question the authority of the tradition, nor ask where Moses had forbidden what His disciples were doing. Still less does He touch the sanctity of the Jewish Sabbath. He accepts His questionersposition, for the time, and gives them a perfect answer on their own ground. Perhaps there may be just a hint in the double Have ye not read?that they could not produce Scripture for their prohibition, as He would do for the liberty which He allowed. He quotes two instances in which ceremonial obligations gave way before higher law. The first, that of David and his followers eating the shew-bread, which was tabooed to all but priests, is perhaps chosen with some reference to the parallel between Himself, the true King, now unrecognised and hunted with His humble followers, and the fugitive outlaw with his band. It is but a veiled allusion at most; but, if it fell on good soil, it might have led some one to ask, If this is David, where is Saul, and where is Doeg, watching him to accuse him?This example serves our Lord's purpose of showing that even a divine prohibition, if it relates to mere ceremonial matter, melts, like wax, before even bodily necessities. What a thrill of holy horror would meet the enunciation of the doctrine that such a carnal thing as hunger rightfully abrogated a sacred ritual proscription! The law of right is rigid; that of external ceremonies is flexible. Better that a man should die than that the one should be broken; better that the other should be flung to the winds than that a hungry man should go unfed. It may reasonably be doubted whether all Christian communities have learned the sweep of that principle yet, or so judge of the relative importance of keeping up their appointed forms of worship, and of feeding their hungry brother. The brave Ahimelech, the son of Ahitub, was ahead of a good many people of to-day.

The second example comes still closer to the question in hand, and supplies the reference to the Sabbath law, which the former had not. There was much hard work done in the temple on the Sabbath--sacrifices to be slain, fires and lamps to be kindled, and so on. That was not Sabbath desecration. Why? Because it was done in the temple, and as a part of divine service. The sanctity of the place, and the consequent sanctity of the service, exempted it from the operation of the law. The question, no doubt, was springing to the lips of some scowling Pharisee, And what has that to do with our charge against your disciples?when it was answered by the wonderful next words, In this place--here among the growing corn, beneath the free heaven, far away from Jerusalem--is one greater than the temple. Profound words, which could only sound as blasphemy or nonsense to the hearers, but which touch the deepest truths concerning His person and His relations to men, and which involve the destruction of all temples and rituals. He is all that the temple symbolised. In Him the Godhead really dwells; He is the meeting-place of God and man, the place of the oracle, the place of sacrifice. Then, where He stands is holy ground, and all work done with reference to Him is worship. These poor followers of His are priests; and if, for His sake, they had broken a hundred Sabbath regulations, they were guiltless.

So far our Lord has been answering His opponents; now He attacks. The quotation from Hosea is often on His lips. Here He uses it to unmask the real motives of His assailants. Their murmuring came not from more religion, but from less love. If they had had a little more milk of human kindness in them, it would have died on their lips; if they had grasped the real meaning of the religion they professed, they would have learned that its soul was mercy--that is, of course, man's gentleness to man--and that sacrifice and ceremony were but the body, the help, and sometimes the hindrance, of that soul. They would have understood the relative importance of disposition and of external worship, as end and means, and not have visited a mere breach of external order with a heat of disapprobation only warranted by a sin against the former. Their judgment would have been liker God's if they had looked at those poor hungry men with merciful eyes and with merciful hearts, rather than with eager scrutiny that delighted to find them tripping in a triviality of outward observance. What mountains of harsh judgment by Christ's own followers on each other would have been removed into the sea if the spirit of these great words had played upon them!

The forat the beginning of verse 8 seems to connect with the last words of the preceding verse, I call them guiltless, for, etc. It states more plainly still the claim already put forward in verse 6. The Son of Man, no doubt, is equivalent to Messiah; but it is more, as revealing at once Christ's true manhood and His unique and complete manhood, in which the very ideal of man is personally realised. It can never be detached from His other name, the Son of God. They are the obverse and reverse of the same golden coin. He asserts His power over the Sabbath, as enjoined upon Israel. His is the authority which imposed it. It is plastic in His hands. The whole order of which it is part has its highest purpose in witnessing of Him. He brings the true rest.

**II. The Sabbath, and works of beneficence.**

Matthew appears to have brought together here two incidents which, according to Luke, were separated in time. The scene changes to a synagogue, perhaps that of Capernaum. Among the worshippers is a man with a withered hand, who seems to have been brought there by the Pharisees as a bait to try to draw out Christ's compassion. What a curious state of mind that was,--to believe that Christ could work miracles, and to want Him to do one, not for pity's sake, nor for confirmation of faith, but to have material for accusing Him! And how heartlessly careless of the poor sufferer they are, when they use him thus! He for his part stands silent. Desire and faith have no part in evoking this miracle. Deadly hatred and calculating malignity ask for it, and for once they get their wish. Having baited their hook, and set the man with his shrunken hand full in view, they get into their corners and wait the event. Matthew tells us that they ask our Lord the question which Luke represents Him as asking them. Perhaps we may say that He gave voice to the question which they were asking in their hearts. Their motive is distinctly given here. They wanted material for a legal process before a local tribunal. The whole thing was an attempt to get Jesus within the meshes of the law. Again, as in the former case, it is the traditional, not the written, law, which healing would have broken. The question evidently implies that, in the judgment of the askers, healing was unlawful. Talmudical scholars tell us that in later days the rabbis differed on the point, but that the prevalent opinion was, that only sicknesses threatening immediate danger to life could lawfully be treated on the Sabbath. The more rigid doctrine was obviously held by Christ's questioners. It is a significant instance of the absurdity and cruelty which are possible when once religion has been made a matter of outward observance. Nothing more surely and completely ossifies the heart and blinds common sense.

In His former answer Jesus had appealed to Scripture to bear out His teaching that Sabbath observance must bend to personal necessities. Here He appeals to the natural sense of compassion to confirm the principle that it must give way to the duty of relieving others. His question is as confident of an answer as the Phariseeshad been. But though He takes it for granted that His hearers could only answer it in one way, the microscopic and cold-blooded ingenuity of the rabbis, since His day, answers it in another. They say, Don't lift the poor brute out, but throw in a handful of fodder, and something for him to lie upon, and let him be till next day. A remarkable way of making thine ox and thine asskeep the Sabbath! There is a delicacy of expression in the question; the owner of one sheepwould be more solicitous about it than if he had a hundred; and our Shepherd looks on all the millions of His flock with a heart as much touched by their sorrow and needs as if each were His only possession. The question waits for no answer; but Christ goes on (as if there could be but one reply) to His conclusion, which He binds to His first question by another, equally easy to answer. Man's superiority to animals makes his claim for help more imperative. You would not do less for one another than for a sheep in a hole, surely. But the form in which our Lord put His conclusive answer to the Pharisees gives an unexpected turn to the reply. He does not say, It is lawful to heal, but, It is lawful to do well, thus at once showing the true justification of healing, namely, that it was a beneficent act, and widening the scope of His answer to cover a whole class of cases. To do wellhere means, not to do right, but to do good, to benefit men. The principle is a wide one: the charitable succour of men's needs, of whatever kind, is congruous with the true design of that day of rest. Have the churches laid that lesson to heart? On the whole, it is to be observed that our Lord here distinctly recognises the obligation of the Sabbath, that He claims power over it, that He permits the pressure of one's own necessities and of othersneed of help, to modify the manner of its observance, and that He leaves the application of these principles to the spiritual insight of His followers.

The cure which follows is done in a singular fashion. Without a whisper of request from the sufferer or any one else, He heals him by a word. His command has a promise in it, and He gives the power to do what He bids the man do. Give what Thou commandest, says St. Augustine, and command what Thou wilt. We get strength to obey in the act of obedience. But beyond the possible symbolical significance of the mode of cure, and beyond the revelation of Christ's power to heal by a word, the manner of healing had a special reason in the very cavils of the Pharisees. Not even they could accuse Him of breaking any Sabbath law by such a cure. What had He done? Told the man to put out his hand. Surely that was not unlawful. What had the man done? Stretched it forth. Surely that broke no subtle rabbinical precept. So they were foiled at every turn, driven off the field of argument, and baffled in their attempt to find ground for laying an information against Him. But neither His gentle wisdom nor His healing power could reach these hearts, made stony by conceit and pedantic formalism; and all that their contact with Jesus did was to drive them to intenser hostility, and to send them away to plot His death. That is what comes of making religion a round of outward observances. The Pharisee is always blind as an owl to the light of God and true goodness; keen-sighted as a hawk for trivial breaches of his cobweb regulations, and cruel as a vulture to tear with beak and claw. The race is not extinct. We all carry one inside us, and need God's help to cast him out.