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

**MATTHEW-081**. **TO HIM THAT HATH SHALL BE GIVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath."*

*Matthew 13:12*

There are several instances in the Gospels of our Lord's repetition of sayings which seem to have been, if we may use the expression, favourites with Him; as, for instance, There are first which shall be last, and there are last which shall be first; or, again, The servant is not greater than his master, nor the disciple than his lord. My text is one of these. It is here said as part of the explanation why He chose to speak in parables, in order that the truth, revealed to the diligent and attentive, might be hidden from the careless. Again, we find it in two other Gospels, in a somewhat similar connection, though with a different application, where Jesus enunciates it as the basis of His warning, Take heed how--or, in another version, what--ye hear. Again He employs it in this Gospel in the parable of the talents, as explaining the principle on which the retribution to the slothful servant was meted out. And we find it yet once more in the parable of the pounds in Luke's Gospel, which, though entirely different in conception and purpose from that of the talents, is identical in the portion connected with the slothful servant.

So there are two very distinct directions in which this saying looks, as it was used by our Lord--one in reference to the attitude of men towards the Revelation of God, and one in reference to the solemn subject of future retribution. I wish, now, mainly to try and illustrate the great law which is set forth here, and to follow out the various spheres of its operation, and estimate the force of its influence. For I think that large and very needful lessons for us all may be drawn therefrom. The principle of my text shapes all life. It is a paradox, but it is a deep truth. It sounds harsh and unjust, but it contains the very essence of righteous retribution. The paradox is meant to spur attention, curiosity, and inquiry. The key to it lies here--to use is to have. There is a possession which is no possession. That I have rights of property in a thing, as contradistinguished to your rights, does not make it in any deep and real sense mine. What I use I have; and all else is, as one of the other evangelists has it, but seemingto have.

So much, then, by way of explanation of our text. Now, let me ask you to look with me into two or three of the regions where we shall find illustrations of its working.

**I. Take the application of this principle to common life.**

The lowest instance is in regard to material possessions. It is a complaint that is made against the present social arrangements and distribution of wealth, that money makes money; that wealth has a tendency to clot; the rich man to get richer, and the poor man to get poorer. Just as in a basin of water when the plug is out, and circular motion is set up, the little bits of foreign matter that may be there all tend to get together, so it is in regard to these external possessions. To him that hath shall be given; and people grumble about that and say, It never rains but it pours, and the man that needs more money least gets it most easily. Of course. Treasure used grows; treasure hoarded rusts and dwindles. The millionaire will double his fortune by a successful speculation. The man with half a dozen large shops drives the poor little tradesman out of the field. So it is all round: To him that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not shall be taken even that he hath.

Next, go a step higher. Look at how this law works in regard to powers of body. That is a threadbare old illustration. The blacksmith's arm we have all heard about; the sailor's eye, the pianist's wrist, the juggler's fingers, the surgeon's deft hand--all these come by use. To him that hath shall be given. And the same man who has cultivated one set of organs to an almost miraculous fineness or delicacy or strength will, by the operation of the other half of the same principle, have all but atrophied another set. So with the blacksmith's arm, which has grown muscular at the expense of his legs. Part of the physical frame has monopolised what might have been distributed throughout the whole. Use is strength; use makes growth. We have what we employ. And even in regard to our bodily frame the organs that we do not use we carry about with us rather as a weight attached to us than as a possession.

Again, come a little higher. This great principle largely goes to determine our position in the world and our work. The man that can do a thing gets it to do. In the long run the tools come to the hand that can use them. So here is one medical man's consulting-room crammed full of patients, and his neighbour next door has scarcely one. The whole world runs to read A's, B's, or C's books. The briefless barrister complains that there is no middle course between having nothing to do and being overwhelmed with briefs. To him that hath shall be given--the man can do a thing, and he gets it to do--and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath, That law largely settles every man's place in the world.

Let us come still higher. The same law has much--not all, but much--to do in making men's characters. For it operates in its most intense fashion, and with results most blessed or most disastrous, in the inner life. The great example that I would adduce is conscience. Use it, obey it, listen for its voice, never thwart it, and it grows and grows and grows, and becomes more and more sensitive, more and more educated, more and more sovereign in its decisions. Neglect it, still more, go in its teeth, and it dwindles and dwindles and dwindles; and I suppose it is possible--though one would fain hope that it is a very exceptional case--for a man, by long-continued indifference to the voice within that says Thou shaltor Thou shalt not, to come at last to never hearing it at all, or to its never speaking at all. It is seared as with a hot iron, says one of the Apostles; and in seared flesh there is no feeling any more. Are any of you, dear friends, bringing about such a state? Are you doing what you know you ought not to do? Then you will be less and less troubled as the days go on; and, by neglecting the voice, you will come at last to be like the profligate woman in the book of Proverbs, who, after her sin, wipes her mouth and says, I have done no harm. Do you think that is a desirable state--to put out the eyes of your soul, to stifle what is the truest echo of God's voice that you will ever hear? Do you not think that it would be wiser to get the blessed half of this law on your side, instead of the dreadful one? Listen to that voice. Never, as you value yourselves, neglect it. Cultivate the habit of waiting for its monitions, its counsels prohibitory or commendatory, and then you will have done much to secure that your spirit shall be enriched by the operations of this wide-spread law.

Take another illustration. People who, by circumstances, are placed in some position of dependence and subordination, where they have seldom to exercise the initiative of choice, but just to do what they are bid, by degrees all but lose the power of making up their minds about anything. And so a slave set free is proverbially a helpless creature, like a bit of driftwood; and children who have been too long kept in a position of pupilage and subordination, when they are sent into the world are apt to turn out very feeble men, for want of a good, strong backbone of will in them. So, many a woman that has been accustomed to leave everything in her husband's hands, when the clods fall on his coffin finds herself utterly helpless and bewildered, just because in the long, happy years she never found it necessary to exercise her own judgment or her own will about practical matters.

So do not get into the habit of letting circumstances settle what you are to do, or you will lose the power of dominating them, before very long. And if a man for years leaves himself, as it were, to be guided by the stream of circumstances, like long green weeds in a river, he will lose the power of determining his own fate, and the Will will die clean out of him. Cultivate it, and it will grow.

Again, this same principle largely settles our knowledge, our convictions, the operations and the furniture of our understandings. If a man holds any truth slackly, or in the case of truths that are meant to influence life and conduct, does not let it influence these, then that is a kind of having truth that is sure to end in losing it. If you want to lose your convictions grasp them loosely--do not act upon them, do not take them for guides of your life--and they will soon relieve you of their unwelcome presence. If you wish mind and knowledge to grow, grip with a grip of iron what you do know, and let it dominate you, as it ought. He that truly has his learning will learn more and pile by slow degrees stone upon stone, until the building is complete.

So, dear friends, here, in these illustrations, which might have been indefinitely enlarged, we see the working of a principle which has much to do in making men what they are. What you use you increase, what you leave unused you lose. There are grey heads in my present audience who, when they were young men, had dreams and aspirations that they bitterly smile at now. There are men here who began life with possibilities that have never blossomed or fruited, but have died on the stem. Why? Because they were so much occupied with the vulpine craft of making their position and their pilethat generous emotions and noble sympathies and lofty aspirations, intellectual or otherwise, were all neglected, and so they are dead; and the men are the poorer incalculably, because of what has thus been shed away from them. You make your characters by the parts of yourselves that you choose to cultivate and employ. Do you think that God gave us whatever of an intellectual and emotional and moral kind is in us, in order that it might be all used up in our daily business? A very much scantier outfit would have done for all that is wanted for that. But there are abortive and dormant organs in your spiritual nature, as there are in the corporeal, which tell you what you were meant for, and which it is your sin to leave undeveloped. Brethren, the law of my text shapes us in the two ways, that whatever we cultivate, be it noble or be it bestial, will grow, and whatever we repress or neglect will die. Choose which of the two halves of yourselves you will foster, and on which you will frown.

So much, then, for the first general application of these words. Now let me turn for a moment to another.

**II. I would note, secondly, the application of this two-fold law in regard to God's revelation of Himself.**

That is the bearing of it in the immediate context from which our text is taken. Our Lord explains that teaching by parable--a transparent veil over a truth--was adopted in order that the veiled truth might be a test as well as a revelation. And although I do not believe that the Christian revelation has been made in any degree less plain and obvious than it could have been made, I cannot but recognise the fact that the necessities of the case demand that, when God speaks to us, He should speak in such a fashion as that it is possible to say, Tush! It is not God that is speaking; it is only Eli!and so to turn about the young Samuel's mistake the other way. I do not believe that God has diminished the evidence of His Revelation in order to try us; but I do maintain that the Revelation which He has made does come to us, and must come to us, in such a form as that, not by mathematical demonstration but by moral affinity, we shall be led to recognise and to bow to it. He that will be ignorant, let him be ignorant, and he that will come asking for truth, it will flood his eyeballs with a blessed illumination. The veil will but make more attractive to some eyes the outlines of the fair form beneath it, whilst others are offended at it and say, Unless we see the truth undraped, we will not believe that it is truth at all.

So, brethren, let me remind you--what is really but a repetition in reference to another subject of what I have already said,--that in regard to God's speech to men, and especially in regard to what I, for my part, believe to be the complete and ultimate and perfect speech of God to men, in Jesus Christ our Saviour, the principle of my text holds good.

To him that hath shall be given. If you will make that truth your own by loyal faith and honest obedience, if you will grapple it to your heart, then you will learn more and more. Whatever tiny corner of the great whole you have grasped, hold on by that and draw it into yourselves, and you will by degrees get the entire, glorious, golden web to wrap round you. If any man wills to do His will he shall know. That is Christ's promise; and it will be fulfilled to us all. To him that hath shall be given.

If, on the other hand, you haveChristian truth and Christ, who is the Truth, in the fashion in which so many of us have it and Him, as a form, as a mere intellectual possession, so that we can, when we go to church, repeat the creed without feeling that we are telling a lie, but that when we go to market we do not carry the Commandments with us--if that is our Christianity, then it will dribble away into nothing. We shall not be much the poorer for the loss of such a sham possession, but it will go. It drops out of the hands that are not clasped to hold it. It is just that a thing so neglected shall some day be a thing withdrawn. So in regard to Revelation and a man's perception and reception of it, my text holds good in both its halves.

**III. Lastly, look at the application of these words in the future.**

That is our Lord's own application of them, twice out of the five times in which the saying appears in the three Gospels: in the parable of the talents and in the parallel portion of the parable of the pounds. I do not venture into the regions of speculation about that future, but from the words before us there come clearly enough two aspects of it. The man with the ten talents received more; the man that had hid the talent or the pound in the ground was deprived of that which he had not used.

Now, with regard to the former there is no difficulty in translating the representations of the parables, sustained as they are by distinct statements of other portions of Scripture. They come to this, that, for the life beyond, indefinite progress in all that is noble and blessed and Godlike in heart and character, in intellect and power, are certain; that faith, hope, love, here cultivated but putting forth few blossoms and small fruitage, there, in that higher house where these be planted, will flourish in the courts of the Lord, and will bear fruit abundantly; that here the few things faithfully administered will be succeeded yonder by the many things royally ruled over; that here one small coin, as it were, is put into our palm--namely the present blessedness and peace and strength and purity of a Christian life; and that yonder we possess the inheritance of which what we have here is but the earnest. It used to be the custom when a servant was hired for the next term-day to give him one of the smallest coins of the realm as what was called arles--wages in advance, to seal the bargain. Similarly, in buying an estate a bit of turf was passed over to the purchaser. We get the earnest here of the broad acres of the inheritance above. To him that hath shall be given.

And the other side of the same principle works in some terrible ways that we cannot speak about. From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. I have spoken of the terrible analogy to this solemn prospect which is presented us by the imperfect experiences of earth. And when we see in others, or discover in ourselves, how it is possible for unused faculties to die entirely out, I think we shall feel that there is a solemn background of very awful truth, in the representation of what befell the unfaithful servant. Hopes unnourished are gone; opportunities unimproved are gone, capacities undeveloped are gone; fold after fold, as it were, is peeled off the soul, until there is nothing left but the naked self, pauperised and empty-handed for evermore. Take it from him; he never was the better for it; he never used it; he shall have it no longer.

Brethren, cultivate the highest part of yourselves, and see to it that, by faith and obedience, you truly have the Saviour, whom you have by the hearing of the ear and by outward profession. And then death will come to you, as a nurse might to a child that came in from the fields with its hands full of worthless weeds and grasses, to empty them in order to fill them with the flowers that never fade. You can choose whether Death--and Life too, for that matter--shall be the porter that will open to you the door of the treasure-house of God, or the robber that will strip you of misused opportunities and unused talents.