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

**MATTHEW-101**. **FORGIVEN AND UNFORGIVING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven."*

*Matthew 18:22*

The disciples had been squabbling about pre-eminence in the kingdom which they thought was presently to appear. They had ventured to refer their selfish and ambitious dispute to Christ's arbitrament. He answered by telling them the qualifications of the greatest in the kingdom--that they are to be humble like little children; that they are to be placable; that they are to use all means to reclaim offenders; and that, even if the offence is against themselves, they are to ignore the personal element, and to regard the offender, not so much as having done them harm, as having harmed himself by his evil-doing.

Peter evidently feels that that is a very hard commandment for a man of his temperament, and so he goes to Jesus Christ for a little further direction, and proposes a question as to the limits of this disposition: How often shall my brother sin?The very question betrays that he does not understand what forgiveness means; for it is not real, if the forgivensin is stowed away safely in the memory. I can forgive, but I cannot forget, generally means, I do not quite forgive. We are not to take the pardoned offence, and carry it to a kind of suspense account, to be revived if another is committed, but we are to blot it out altogether. Peter thought that he had given a very wide allowance when he said seven times. Christ's answer lifts the whole subject out of the realm of hard and fast lines and limits, for He takes the two perfect numbers tenand seven, and multiplies them together, and then He multiplies that by sevenonce more; and the product is not four hundred and ninety, but is innumerableness. He does not mean that the four hundred and ninety-first offence is outside the pale, but He suggests indefiniteness, endlessness. So, as I say, He lifts the question out of the region in which Peter was keeping it, thereby betraying that he did not understand what he was talking about, and tells us that there are no limits to the obligation.

The parable which follows, and follows with a therefore, does not deal so much with Peter's question as to the limits of the disposition, but sets forth its grounds and the nature of its manifestations. If we understand why we ought to forgive, and what forgiveness is, we shall not say, How often?The question will have answered itself.

I turn to the parable rather than the words which I have read as our starting-point, to seek to bring out the lessons which it contains in regard to our relations to God, and to one another. There are three sections in it: the king and his debtor; the forgiven debtor and his debtor; and the forgiven debtor unforgiven because unforgiving. And if we look at these three points I think we shall get the lessons intended.

**I. The king and his debtor.**

A certain king has servants, whom he gathers together to give in their reckoning. And one of them is brought that owes him ten thousand talents. Now, it is to be noticed at the very outset that the analogy between debt and sin, though real, is extremely imperfect. No metaphor of that sort goes on all fours, and there has been a great deal of harm done to theology and to evangelical religion by carrying out too completely the analogy between money debts and our sins against God. But although the analogy is imperfect, it is very real. The first point that is to be brought out in this first part of the parable is the immense magnitude of every man's transgressions against God. Numismatists and arithmeticians may jangle about the precise amount represented by the thousand talents. It differs according to the talent which is taken as the basis of the calculation. There were several talents in use in the currency of ancient days. But the very point of the expression is not the specification of an exact amount, but the use of a round number which is to suggest an undefined magnitude. Ten thousand talents, according to one estimate, is some two millions and a quarter of pounds sterling.

But I would point out that the amount is stated in terms of talents, and any talent is a large sum; and there are ten thousand of these; and the reason why the account is made out in terms of talents, the largest denomination in the currency of the period, is because every sin against God is a great sin. He being what He is, and we being what we are, and sin being what it is, every sin is large, although the deed which embodies it may be, when measured by the world's foot-rule, very small. For the essence of sin is rebellion against God and the enthroning of self as His victorious rival; and all rebellion is rebellion, whether it is found in arms in the field, or whether it is simply sulkily refusing obedience and cherishing thoughts of treason. We are always apt to go wrong in our estimate of the great and small in human actions, and, although the terms of magnitude do not apply properly to moral questions at all, there is no more conspicuous misuse of language than when we speak of anything which has in it the virus of rebellion against God, and the breach of His law, as being a small sin. It may be a small act; it is a great sin. Little rattlesnakes are snakes; they have rattles and poison fangs as really as the most monstrous of the brood that coils and hisses in some cave. So the account is made out in terms of talents, because every sin is a great one. I need not dwell upon the numerousness that is suggested. Ten thousandis the natural current expression for a number that is not innumerable, but is only known to be very great. The psalmist says: They are more than the hairs of my head. How many hairs had you in your head, David? Do you know? No!And how many sins have you committed? Do you know? No!The number is beyond count by us, though it may be counted by Him against whom they are done. Do you believe that about yourself, my friend, that the debit side of your account has filled all the page and has to be carried forward on to another? Do we any of us realise, as we all of us ought to do, the infinite number, and the transcendent greatness, of our transgressions against the Father?

But the next point to be noticed is the stern legal right of the creditor. It sounds harsh, cruel, almost brutal, that the man and his wife and his children should be sold into slavery, and all that he had should be taken from him, in order to go some little way towards the reduction of the enormous debt that he owed. Christ puts in that harsh and apparently cruel conduct in the story, not to suggest that it was harsh and cruel, but because it was according to the law of the time. A recognised legal right was exercised by the creditor when he said, Take him; sell him for a slave, and bring me what he fetches in the open markets. So that we have here suggested the solemn thought of the right that divine justice, acting according to strict retributive law, has over each of us. Our own consciences attest it as perfectly within the scope of the divine retributive justice that our enormous sin should bring down a tremendous punishment.

I said that the analogy between sin and debt was a very imperfect one. It is imperfect in regard to one point--viz. the implication of other people in the consequences of the man's evil; for although it is quite true that the evil that men do lives after them, and spreads far beyond their sight, and involves many people, no other is amenable to divine justice for the sinner's debt. It is quite true that, when we do an evil action, we never can tell how far its wind-borne seeds may be carried, or where they may alight, or what sort of unwholesome fruit they may bear, or who may be poisoned by them; but, on the other hand, we, and we only, are responsible for our individual transgressions against God. If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself; and if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it.

The same imperfection in the analogy applies to the next point in the parable--viz. the bankrupt debtor's prayer, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Easy to promise! I wonder how long it would have taken a penniless bankrupt to scrape together two and a quarter millions of pounds? He said a great deal more than he could make good. But the language of his prayer is by no means the language that becomes a penitent at God's throne. We have not to offer to make future satisfaction. No! that is impossible. What I have written I have written, and the page, with all its smudges and blots and misshapen letters, cannot be made other than it is by any future pages fairly written. No future righteousness has any power to affect the guilt of past sin. There is one thing that does discharge the writing from the page. Do you remember Paul's words, blotting out the handwriting that was against us--nailing it to His Cross? You sometimes dip your pens into red ink, and run a couple of lines across the page of an account that is done with. Jesus Christ does the same across our account, and the debt is non-existent, because He has died.

But the prayer is the expression, if not of penitence yet of petition, and all the stern rigour of the law's requirement at once melts away, and the king who, in the former words, seemed so harsh, now is almost incredibly merciful. For he not only cancels the debt, but sets the man free. Thy ways are not as our ways; ... as the heavens are higher than the earth, so great is His mercy towardthe sinful soul.

**II. So much, then, for the first part of this parable. Now a word as to the second, the forgiven debtor and his debt.**

Our Lord uses in the 27th and 28th verses of our text the same expression very significantly and emphatically. The lord of that servant was moved with compassion. And then again, in the 28th verse, But that servant went out and found one of his fellow-servants. The repetition of the same phrase hooks the two halves together, emphasises the identity of the man, and the difference of his demeanour, on the two occasions.

The conduct described is almost impossibly disgusting and truculent. He found his fellow-servant, who owed him a hundred pence--some three pounds, ten shillings--and with the hands that a minute before had been wrung in agony, and extended in entreaty, he throttled him; and with the voice that had been plaintively pleading for mercy a minute before, he gruffly growled, Pay me that thou owest. He had just come through an agony of experience that might have made him tender. He had just received a blessing that might have made his heart glow. But even the repetition of his own petition does not touch him, and when the poor fellow-servant, with his paltry debt, says, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all, it avails nothing. He durst not sell his fellow-servant. God's rights over a man are more than any man's over another. But he does what he can. He will not do much towards recouping himself of his loan by flinging the poor debtor into prison, but if he cannot get his ducats he will gloat over his pound of flesh. So he hurries him off to gaol.

Could a man have done like that? Ah! brethren, the things that would be monstrous in our relations to one another are common in our relations to God. Every day we see, and, alas! do, the very same thing, in our measure and degree. Do you never treasure up somebody's slights? Do you never put away in a pigeon-hole for safe-keeping, endorsed with the doer's name on the back of it, the record of some trivial offence against you? It is but as a penny against a talent, for the worst that any of us can do to another is nothing as compared with what many of us have been doing all our lives toward God. I dare say that some of us will go out from this place, and the next man that we meet that rubs us the wrong way, or does us any harm, we shall score down his act against him with as implacable and unmerciful an unforgivingness as that of this servant in the parable. Do not believe that he was a monster of iniquity. He was just like us. We all of us have one human heart, and this man's crime is but too natural to us all. The essence of it was that having been forgiven, he did not forgive.

So, then, our Lord here implies the principle that God's mercy to us is to set the example to which our dealings with others is to be conformed. Even as I had mercy on theeplainly proposes that miracle of divine forgiveness as our pattern as well as our hope. The world's morality recognises the duty of forgiveness. Christ shows us God's forgiveness as at once the model which is the perfect realisation of the idea in its completeness and inexhaustibleness, and also the motive which, brought into our experience, inclines and enables us to forgive.

**III. And now I come to the last point of the text--the debtor who had been forgiven falling back into the ranks of the unforgiven, because he does not forgive.**

The fellow-servants were very much disgusted, no doubt. Our consciences work a great deal more rapidly, and rigidly, about other people's faults than they do about our own. And nine out of ten of these fellow-servants that were very sorry, and ran and told the king, would have done exactly the same thing themselves. The king, for the first time, is wroth. We do not read that he was so before, when the debt only was in question; but such unforgiving harshness, after the experience of such merciful forgiveness, rouses his righteous indignation. The unmercifulness of Christian people is a worse sin than many a deed that goes by very ugly names amongst men. And so the judgment that falls upon this evil-doer, who, by his truculence to his fellow-servant, had betrayed the baseness of his nature and the ingratitude of his heart, is, Put him back where he was! Tie the two and a quarter millions round his neck again! Let us see what he will do by way of discharging it now!Now, do not let any theological systems prevent you from recognising the solemn truth that underlies that representation, that there may be things in the hearts and conduct of forgiven Christians which may cancel the cancelling of their debt, and bring it all back again. No man can cherish the malicious disposition that treasures up offences against himself, and at the same moment feel that the divine love is wrapping him round in its warm folds. If we are to retain our consciousness of having been forgiven by God, and received into the amplitude of His heart, we must, in our measure and degree, imitate that on which we trust, and be mirrors of the divine mercy which we say has saved us.

Our parable lays equal stress on two things. First, that the foundation of all real mercifulness in men is the reception of forgiving mercy from God. We must have experienced it before we can exercise it. And, second, we must exercise it, if we desire to continue to experience it. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. That applies to Christian people. But behind that there lies the other truth, that in order to be merciful we must first of all have received the initial mercy of cancelled transgression.

So, dear friends, here are the two lessons for every one of us. First, to recognise our debt, and go to Him in whom God is well pleased, for its abolishment and forgiveness; and then to go out into the world, and live like Him, and show to others love kindled by and kindred to that to which we trust for our own salvation. Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as God also hath loved us.