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

**MATTHEW-119**. **TRADERS FOR THE MASTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"14.* *For the kingdom of heaven la as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. 15. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. 16. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. 17. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. 18. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. 19. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. 20. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. 21. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 22. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. 23. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. 24. Then to which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: 25. And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. 26. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: 27. Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. 28. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. 29. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. 30. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

*Matthew 25:14-30*

The parable of the Ten Virgins said nothing about their working whilst they waited. This one sets forth that side of the duties of the servants in their master's absence, and so completes the former. It is clearly in its true historical connection here, and is closely knit to both the preceding and following context. It is a strange instance of superficial reading that it should ever have been supposed to be but another version of Luke's parable of the pounds. The very resemblances of the two are meant to give force to their differences, which are fundamental. They are the converse of each other. That of the pounds teaches that men who have the same gifts intrusted to them may make a widely different use of these, and will be rewarded differently, in strictly graduated proportion to their unlike diligence. The lesson of the parable before us, on the other hand, is that men with dissimilar gifts may employ them with equal diligence; and that, if they do, their reward shall be the same, however great the endowments of one, and slender those of another. A reader who has missed that distinction must be very shortsighted, or sworn to make out a case against the Gospels.

**I. We may consider the lent capital and the business done with it.**

Masters nowadays do not give servants their money to trade with, when they leave home; but the incident is true to the old-world relations of master and slave. Our Lord's consciousness of His near departure, which throbs in all this context, comes out emphatically here. He is preparing His disciples for the time when they will have to work without Him, like the managers of some branch house of business whose principal has gone abroad. What are the talentswith which He will start them on their own account? We have taken the word into common language, however little we remember the teaching of the parable as to the hand that gives men of talenttheir endowments. But the natural powers usually called by the name are not what Christ means here, though the principles of the parable may be extended to include them. For these powers are the abilityaccording to which the talents are given. But the talents themselves are the spiritual knowledge and endowments which are properly the gifts of the ascended Lord to His Church. Two important lessons as to these are conveyed. First, that they are distributed in varying measure, and that not arbitrarily, by the mere will of the giver, but according to his discernment of what each servant can profitably administer. The abilitywhich settles their amount is not more closely defined. It may include natural faculty, for Christ's gifts usually follow the line of that; and the larger the nature, the more of Him it can contain. But it also includes spiritual receptiveness and faithfulness, which increase the absorbing power. The capacity to receive will also be the capacity to administer, and it will be fully filled.

The second lesson taught is that spiritual gifts are given for trading with. In other words, they are here considered not so much as blessings to the possessor as his stock-in-trade, which he can employ for the Master's enrichment. We are all tempted to think of them mostly as given us for our own blessing and joy; and the reminder is never unseasonable that a Christian receives nothing for himself alone. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others the light of the knowledge which has flashed glad day into our darkness. The Master intrusts us with a portion of His wealth, not for expending on ourselves, but for trading with.

A third principle here is that the right use of His gifts increases them in our hands. Money makes money. The five talents grow to ten, the two to four. The surest way to increase our possession of Christ's grace is to try to impart it. There is no better way of strengthening our own faith than to seek to make others share in it. Christian convictions, spoken, are confirmed, but muffled in silence are weakened. There is that scattereth and yet increaseth. Seed heaped and locked up in a granary breeds weevils and moths; flung broadcast over the furrows, it multiplies into seed that can be sown again, and bread that feeds the sower. So we have in this part of the parable almost the complete summary of the principles on which, the purposes for which, and the results to faithful use with which, Christ gives His gifts.

The conduct of the slenderly endowed servant who hides his talent will be considered farther on.

**II. We note the faithful servants balance-sheet and reward.**

Our Lord again sounds the note of delay--After a long time--an indefinite phrase which we know carries centuries in its folds, how many more we know not nor are intended to know. The two faithful servants present their balance-sheet in identical words, and receive the same commendation and reward. Their speech is in sharp contrast with the idle one's excuse, inasmuch as it puts a glad acknowledgment of the lord's giving in the forefront, as if to teach that the thankful recognition of his liberality underlies all joyful and successful service, and deepens while it makes glad the sense of responsibility. The cords of love are silken; and he who begins with setting before himself the largeness of Christ's gifts to him, will not fail in using these so as to increase them. In the light of that day, the servant sees more clearly than when he was at work the results of his work. We do not know what the year's profits have been till stock-taking and balancing-time comes. Here we often say, I have laboured in vain. There we shall say, I have gained five talents.

The verbatim repetition of the same words to both servants teaches the great lesson of this parable as contrasted with that of the pounds, that where there has been the same faithful work, with different amounts of capital, there will be the same reward. Our Master does not care about quantity, but about quality and motive. The slave with a few shillings, enough to stock meagrely a little stall, may show as much business capacity, diligence, and fidelity, as if he had millions to work with. Christ rewards not actions, but the graces which are made visible in actions; and these can be as well seen in the tiniest as in the largest deeds. The light that streams through a pin-prick is the same that pours through the widest window. The crystals of a salt present the same facets, flashing back the sun at the same angles, whether they be large or microscopically small. Therefore the judgment of Christ, which is simply the utterance of fact, takes no heed of the extent but only of the kind of service, and puts on the same level of recompense all who, with however widely varying powers, were one in spirit, in diligence, and devotion. The eulogium on the servants is not successfulor brilliant, but faithful, and both alike get it.

The words of the lord fall into three parts. First comes his generous and hearty praise,--the brief and emphatic monosyllable Well, and the characterisation of the servants as good and faithful. Praise from Christ's lips is praise indeed; and here He pours it out in no grudging or scanty measure, but with warmth and evident delight. His heart glows with pleasure, and His commendation is musical with the utterance of His own joy in His servants. He rejoices over them with singing; and more gladly than a fond mother speaks honeyed words of approval to her darling, of whose goodness she is proud, does He praise these two. When we are tempted to disparage our slender powers as compared with those of His more conspicuous servants, and to suppose that all which we do is nought, let us think of this merciful and loving estimate of our poor service. For such words from such lips, life itself were wisely flung away; but such words from such lips will be spoken in recognition of many a piece of service less high and heroic than a martyr's. Good and faithfulrefers not to the more general notion of goodness, but to the special excellence of a servant, and the latter word seems to define the former. Fidelity is the grace which He praises,--manifested in the recognition that the capital was a loan, given to be traded with for Him, and to be brought back increased to Him. He is faithful who ever keeps in view, and acts on, the conditions on which, and the purposes for which, he has received his spiritual wealth; and he who is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much.

The second part of the lord's words is the appointment to higher office, as the reward of faithfulness. Here on earth, the tools come, in the long run, to the hands that can use them, and the best reward of faithfulness in a narrower sphere is to be lifted to a wider. Promotion means more to do; and if the world were rightly organised, the road to advancement would be diligence; and the higher a man climbed, the wider would be the horizon of his labour. It is so in Christ's kingdom, and should be so in His visible Church. It will be so in heaven. Clearly this saying implies the active theory of the future life, and the continuance in some ministry of love, unknown to us, of the energies which were trained in the small transactions of earth. If five talents are "a few things," how great the "many things" will be!In the parable of the pounds, the servant is made a ruler; here being set overseems rather still to point to the place of a steward or servant. The sphere is enlarged, but the office is unaltered. The manager who conducted a small trade rightly will be advanced to the superintendence of a larger business.

We doubt not that for one so true

There must be other, nobler work to do,

and that in that work the same law will continue to operate, and faithfulness be crowned with ever-growing capacities and tasks through a dateless eternity.

The last words of the lord pass beyond our poor attempts at commenting. No eye can look undazzled at the sun. When Christ was near the Cross, He left His disciples a strange bequest at such a moment,--His joy; and that is their brightest portion here, even though it be shaded with many sorrows. The enthroned Christ welcomes all who have known the fellowship of His sufferingsinto the fulness of His heavenly joy, unshaded, unbroken, unspeakable; and they pass into it as into an encompassing atmosphere, or some broad land of peace and abundance. Sympathy with His purposes leads to such oneness with Him that His joy is ours, both in its occasions and in its rapture. Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures, and the lord and the servant drink from the same cup.

**III. The excuse and punishment of the indolent servant.**

His excuse is his reason. He did think hardly of his lord, and, even though he had His gift in his hand to confute him, he slandered Him in his heart as harsh and exacting. To many men the requirements of religion are more prominent than its gifts, and God is thought of as demanding rather than as the giving God. Such thoughts paralyse action. Fear is barren, love is fruitful. Nothing grows on the mountain of curses, which frowns black over against the sunny slopes of the mountain of blessing with its blushing grapes. The indolence was illogical, for, if the master was such as was thought, the more reason for diligence; but fear is a bad reasoner, and the absurd gap between the premises and the conclusion is matched by one of the very same width in every life that thinks of God as rigidly requiring obedience, which, therefore, it does not give! Still another error is in the indolent servant's words. He flings down the hoarded talent with Lo, thou hast thine own. He was mistaken. Talents hid are not, when dug up, as heavy as they were when buried. This gold does rust, and a life not devoted to God is never carried back to Him unspoiled.

The lord's answer again falls into three parts, corresponding to that to the faithful servants. First comes the stern characterisation of the man. As with the othersgoodness, his badness is defined by the second epithet. It is slothfulness. Is that all? Yes; it does not need active opposition to pull down destruction on one's head. Simple indolence is enough, the negative sin of not doing or being what we ought. Ungirt loins, unlit lamps, unused talents, sink a man like lead. Doing nothing is enough for ruin.

The remarkable answer to the servant's charge seems to teach us that timid souls, conscious of slender endowments, and pressed by the heavy sense of responsibility, and shrinking from Christian enterprises, for fear of incurring heavier condemnation, may yet find means of using their little capital. The bankers, who invest the collective contributions of small capitalists to advantage, may, or may not, be intended to be translated into the Church; but, at any rate, the principle of united service is here recommended to those who feel too weak for independent action. Slim houses in a row hold each other up; and, if we cannot strike out a path for ourselves, let us seek strength and safety in numbers.

The fate of the indolent servant has a double horror. It is loss and suffering. The talent is taken from the slack hands and coward heart that would not use it, and given to the man who had shown he could and would. Gifts unemployed for Christ are stripped off a soul yonder. How much will go from many a richly endowed spirit, which here flashed with unconsecrated genius and force! We do not need to wait for eternity to see that true possession, which is use, increases powers, and that disuse, which is equivalent to not possessing, robs of them. The blacksmith's arm, the scout's eye, the craftsman's delicate finger, the student's intellect, the sensualist's passions, all illustrate the law on its one side; and the dying out of faculties and tastes, and even of intuitions and conscience, by reason of simple disuse, are melancholy instances of it on the other. But the solemn words of this condemnation seem to point to a far more awful energy in its working in the future, when everything that has not been consecrated by employment for Jesus shall be taken away, and the soul, stripped of its garb, shall be found naked. How far that process of divesting may affect faculties, without touching the life, who can tell? Enough to see with awe that a spirit may be cut, as it were, to the quick, and still exist.

But loss is not all the indolent servant's doom. Once more, like the slow toll of a funeral bell, we hear the dread sentence of ejection to the mirk midnightwithout, where are tears undried and passion unavailing. There is something very awful in the monotonous repetition of that sentence so often in these last discourses of Christ's. The most loving lips that ever spoke, in love, shaped this form of words, so heart-touching in its wailing, but decisive, proclamation of blackness, homelessness, and sorrow, and cannot but toll them over and over again into our ears, in sad knowledge of our forgetfulness and unbelief,--if perchance we may listen and be warned, and, having heard the sound thereof, may never know the reality of that death in life which is the sure end of the indolent who were blind to His gifts, and therefore would not listen to His requirements.