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

**PROVERBS-014. THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing; there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches."*

*Proverbs 13:7*

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One, that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another, that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps, more common in the days when this collection of Proverbs was put together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives. We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soapsuds, and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer's mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus Christ. There, too, there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet--or one might, perhaps, say therefore--hath great riches. It is from that point of view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with recalling to your mind,

**I. Our universal poverty.**

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which ought to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which the various systems of thinking have given. These lie apart from my present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator. People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that, however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only continued because of the continued operation on every living thing, just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on every existing thing, of the Divine Power. In Him we live, and the life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself in whom all things consist, according to the profound word of the Apostle. Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed long, long ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like, are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word gift implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of the matter when, speaking of the artistic and aesthetic skill of the workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, the Spirit of the Lord taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength of Samson--surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed--it says that when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, into his giant hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion's jaws asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have simply because He has given them. What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself? So there is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and traces it all to God, when it says, They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house, for from God comes all that sustains us; Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures, for from God comes all that gladdens us; with Thee is the fountain of life, for from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live; in Thy light shall we see light, for every power of perceiving, and all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then, might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only holds, as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the riches that we have received. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own--

If any power we have, it is to will.

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves so far away from God, in whom we live and move and have our being, that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways. Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The electricity comes from the central powerstation, but it depends on us what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances--what they call nowadays environment, by which formidable word some people seem to think that they have explained away a great many difficulties--make all allowances you like for inheritance--what they now call heredity, by which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin--allow as much as you like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible consciousness in every man, I did it, and it was my fault that I did it; and the moral guilt remains.

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and--they had nothing to pay. We are like bankrupts that begin business with a borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is--

**II. The poor rich man.**

There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing. That describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his true condition. There is nothing more tragic--and so it would be seen to be if it were not so common--than that a man, laden, as we each of us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. The deceitfulness of sin is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that obstinate self-complacency which approves of a thing because it is mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and appraisement of your own moral and religious character. You durst not, for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent. Then you have far too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, I never knew that my voice sounded like that. And I am quite sure that many of you, if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as in a mirror, you would say, I had no notion that I looked like that. There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions of life. If a student says to himself, Oh! I know all that subject, the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further chance is that he will be ploughed when the examination-day comes. If the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, Well done, that is the realisation of my ideal! he will paint no more anything worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says Lo! I have attained, then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition. The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection. And the man that says I am rich is condemning himself to poverty and pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to show for man's judgment and for God s, and have not been convinced of your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular religion--and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular preaching--there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty, that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us--

**III. The rich poor man.**

There is that maketh himself poor and yet--or, as varied, the expression is, therefore hath great riches. Jesus Christ has lifted the thoughts in my text into the very region into which I am trying to bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are called, He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Poor, and therefore an owner of a kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started, the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true, that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord's parable, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes ... I pray ... I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that wretched publican over there. Yes, this is the fit attitude for us,--He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course, it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is nothing more than that, he is tortured with the sorrow that worketh death. Judas went out and hanged himself; Peter went out and wept bitterly. The one was sent to his own place, wherever that was; the other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!--the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not break through nor steal. Blessed be God! the more we have the riches of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing, and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in yourself, and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth which He freely gives to all who sue in forma pauperis? He does not ask you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness, forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you rich toward God. I beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the strain of this text: Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich. And then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are rich through faith, and heirs of the Kingdom.