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

**ACTS-042. WHAT A GOOD MAN IS, AND HOW HE BECOMES SO by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith."*

*Acts 11:24*

A good man. How easily that title is often gained! There is, perhaps, no clearer proof that men are bad than the sort of people whom they consent to call good.

It is a common observation that all words describing moral excellence tend to deteriorate and to contract their meaning, just as bright metal rusts by exposure, or coins become light and illegible by use. So it comes to pass that any decently respectable man, especially if he has an easy temper and a dash of frankness and good humour, is christened with this title good. The Bible, which is the verdict of the Judge, is a great deal more chary in its use of the word. You remember how Jesus Christ once rebuked a man for addressing Him so, not that He repudiated the title, but that the giver had bestowed it lightly and out of mere conventional politeness. The word is too noble to be applied without very good reason.

But here we have a picture of Barnabas hung in the gallery of Scripture portraits, and this is the description of it in the catalogue, He was a good man.

You observe that my text is in the nature of an analysis. It begins at the outside, and works inwards. He was a good man. Indeed;--how came he to be so? He was full of the Holy Ghost. Full of the Holy Ghost, was he? How came he to be that? He was full of faith. So the writer digs down, as it were, till he gets to the bed-rock, on which all the higher strata repose; and here is his account of the way in which it is possible for human nature to win this resplendent title, and to be adjudged of God as good, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.

So these three steps in the exposition of the character and its secret will afford a framework for what I have to say now.

**I. Note, then, first, the sort of man whom the Judge will call good.**

Now, I suppose I need not spend much time in massing together, in brief outline, the characteristics of Barnabas. He was a Levite, belonging to the sacerdotal tribe, and perhaps having some slight connection with the functions of the Temple ministry. He was not a resident in the Holy Land, but a Hellenistic Jew, a native of Cyprus, who had come into contact with heathenism in a way that had beaten many a prejudice out of him. We first hear of him as taking a share in the self-sacrificing burst of brotherly love, which, whether it was wise or not, was noble. He, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the Apostles' feet. And, as would appear from a reference in one of Paul's letters, he had to support himself afterwards by manual labour.

Then the next thing that we hear of him is that, when the young man who had been a persecuting Pharisee, and the rising hope of the anti-Christian party, all at once came forward with some story of a vision which he had seen on the road to Damascus, and when the older Christians were suspicious of a trick to worm himself into their secrets by a pretended conversion, Barnabas, with the generosity of an unsuspicious nature, which often sees deeper into men than do suspicious eyes, was the first to cast the aegis of his recognition round him. In like manner, when Christianity took an entirely spontaneous and, to the Church at Jerusalem, rather unwelcome new development and expansion, when some unofficial believers, without any authority from headquarters, took upon themselves to stride clean across the wall of separation, and to speak of Jesus Christ to blank heathens, and found, to the not altogether gratified surprise of the Christians at Jerusalem, that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost, it was Barnabas who was sent down to look into this surprising new phenomenon, and we read that when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad. The reason why he rejoiced over the manifestation of the grace of God in such a strange form was because he was a good man, and his goodness recognised goodness in others and was glad at the work of the Lord. The new condition of affairs sent him to look for Paul, and to put him to work. Then we find him set apart to missionary service, and the leader of the first missionary band, in which he was accompanied by his friend Saul. He acquiesced frankly, and without a murmur, in the superiority of the junior, and yielded up pre-eminence to him quite willingly. The story of that missionary journey begins Barnabas and Saul, but very soon it comes to be Paul and Barnabas, and it keeps that order throughout. He was an older man than Paul, for when at Lystra the people thought that the gods had come down in the likeness of men; Barnabas was Jupiter, and Paul the quick-footed Mercury, messenger of the gods. He was in the work before Paul was thought of, and it must have taken a great deal of goodness to acquiesce in He must increase and I must decrease. Then came the quarrel between them, the foolish fondness for his runaway nephew John Mark, whom he insisted on retaining in a place for which he was conspicuously unfitted. And so he lost his friend, the confidence of the Church, and his work. He sulked away into Cyprus; he had his nephew, for whom he had given up all these other things. A little fault may wreck a life, and the whiter the character the blacker the smallest stain upon it.

We do not hear anything more of him. Apparently, from one casual allusion, he continued to serve the Lord in evangelistic work, but the sweet communion of the earlier days, and the confident friendship with the Apostle, seem to have come to an end with that sharp contention. So Barnabas drops out of the rank of Christian workers. And yet he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.

Now I have spent more time than I meant over this brief outline of the sort of character here pointed at. Let me just gather into one or two sentences what seem to me to be the lessons of it. The first is this, that the tap-root of all goodness is reference to God and obedience to Him. People tell us that morality is independent of religion. I admit that many men are better than their creeds, and many men are worse than their creeds; but I would also venture to assert that morality is the garment of religion; the body of which religion is the soul; the expression of religion in daily life. And although I am not going to say that nothing which a man does without reference to God has any comparative goodness in it, or that all the acts which are thus void of reference to Him stand upon one level of evil, I do venture to say that the noblest deed, which is not done in conscious obedience to the will of God, lacks its supreme nobleness. The loftiest perfection of conduct is obedience to God. And whatever excellence of self-sacrifice, whatsoever things lovely and of good report, there may be, apart from the presence of this perfect motive, those deeds are imperfect. They do not correspond either to the whole obligations or to the whole possibilities of man, and, therefore, they are beneath the level of the highest good. Good is measured by reference to God.

Then, further, let me remark that one broad feature which characterises the truest goodness is the suppression of self. That is only another way of saying the same thing as I have been saying. It is illustrated for us all through this story of Barnabas. Whosoever can say, I think not of myself, but of others; of the cause; of the help I can give to men; and I lay not goods only, nor prejudices only, nor the pride of position and the supremacy of place only at the feet of God, but I lay down my whole self; and I desire that self may be crucified, that God may live in me,--he, and only he, has reached the height of goodness. Goodness requires the suppression of self.

Further, note that the gentler traits of character are pre-eminent in Christian goodness. There is nothing about this man heroic or exceptional. His virtues are all of the meek and gracious sort--those which we relegate sometimes to an inferior place in our estimates. These things make but a poor show by the side of some of the tawdry splendours of what the vulgar world calls virtues. It requires an educated eye to see the harmony of the sober colouring of some great painter. A child, a clown, a vulgar person--and there are such in all ranks--will prefer flaring reds and blues and yellows heaped together in staring contrast. A thrush or a blackbird is but a soberly clad creature by the side of macaws and paroquets; but the one has a song and the others have only a screech. The gentle virtues are the truly Christian virtues--patience and meekness and long-suffering and sympathy and readiness to efface oneself for the sake of God and of men.

So there is a bit of comfort for us commonplace, humdrum people, to whom God has only given one or two talents, and who can never expect to make a figure before men. We may be little violets below a stone, if we cannot be flaunting hollyhocks and tiger lilies. We may have the beauty of goodness in us after Christ's example, and that is better than to be great.

Barnabas was no genius. He was not even a genius in goodness; he did not strike out anything original and out of the way. He seems to have been a commonplace kind of man enough; but he was a good man. And the weakest and the humblest of us may hope to have the same thing said of us, if we will.

And then, note further, that true goodness, thank God! does not exclude the possibility of falling and sinning. There is a black spot in this man's history; and there are black spots in the histories of all saints. Thank God! the Bible is, as some people would say, almost brutally frank in telling us about the imperfections of the best. Very often imperfections are the exaggerations of characteristic goodnesses, and warn us to take care that we do not push, as Barnabas did, our facility to the point of criminal complicity with weaknesses; and that we do not indulge, instead of strenuously rebuking when need is. Never let our gentleness fall away, like a badly made jelly, into a trembling heap, and never let our strength gather itself together into a repulsive attitude, but guard against the exaggeration of virtue into vice.

Remember that whilst there may be good men who sin, there is One entire and flawless, in whom all types of excellence do meet, and who alone of humanity can front the verdict of the world, and has fronted it now for nineteen centuries, with the question upon His lips, which none have dared to answer, Which of you convinceth Me of sin?

**II. Secondly, notice the divine Helper who makes men good.**

Luke, if he be the writer of the Acts, goes on with his analysis. He has done with the first fold, the outer garment, as it were; he strips it off and shows us the next fold, full of the Holy Ghost.

A divine Helper, not merely a divine influence, but a divine Person, who not only helps men from without, but so enters into a man as that the man's whole nature is saturated with Him--that is strange language. Mystical and unreal I dare say some of you may think it, but let us consider whether some such divine Helper is not plainly pointed as necessary, by the experience of every man that ever honestly tried to make himself good.

I have no doubt that I am speaking to many persons who, more or less constantly and courageously and earnestly, have laboured at the task of self-improvement and self-culture. I venture to think that, if their standard of what they wish to attain is high, their confession of what they have attained will be very low. Ah, brother! if we think of what it is that we need to make us good--viz. the strengthening of these weak wills of ours, which we cannot strengthen but to a very limited degree by any tonics that we can apply, or any supports with which we may bind them round; if we consider the resistance which ourselves, our passions, our tastes, our habits, our occupations offer, and the resistance which the world around us, friends, companions, and all the aggregate, dread and formidable, of material things present to our becoming, in any lofty and comprehensive sense of the term, good men and women, I think we shall be ready to listen, as to a true Gospel, to the message that says, You do not need to do it by yourself. You have got the wolf by the ears, perhaps, for a moment, but there is tremendous strength in the brute, and your hands and wrists will ache in holding him presently, and what will happen then? You do not need to try it yourself. There is a divine Helper standing at your sides and waiting to strengthen you, and that Helper does not work from outside; He will pass within, and dwell in your hearts and mould and strengthen your wills to what is good, and suppress your inclinations to evil, and, by His inward presence, teach your hands to war and your fingers to fight.

Surely, surely, the experience of the world from the beginning, confirmed by the consciousness and conscience of every one of us, tells us that of ourselves we are impotent, and that the good that is within the reach of our unaided efforts is poor and fragmentary and superficial indeed.

The great promise of the Gospel is precisely this promise. We terribly limit and misunderstand what we call the Gospel if we give such exclusive predominance to one part of it, as some of us are accustomed to do. Thank God I the first word that Jesus Christ says to any soul is, Thy sins be forgiven thee. But that first word has a second that follows it, Arise! and walk! and it is for the sake of the second that the first is spoken. The gift of pardon, the consciousness of acceptance, the fact of reconciliation with God, the closing of the doors of the place of retribution, the quieting of the stings of accusing conscience, all these are but meant to be introductory to that which Jesus Christ Himself, in the Gospel of John, emphatically calls more than once the gift of God, which He symbolised by living water, which whosoever drank should never thirst, and which whosoever possessed would give it forth in living streams of holy life and noble deeds. The promise of the Gospel is the promise of new life, derived from Christ and maintained in us by the indwelling Spirit, which will come like fresh reinforcements to an all but beaten army in some hard-fought field, which will stand like a stay behind a man, to us almost blown over by the gusts of temptation, which will strengthen what is weak, raise what is low, illumine what is dark, and will make us who are evil good with a goodness given by God through His Son.

Surely there is nothing more congruous with that divine character than that He who Himself is good, and good from Himself, should rejoice in making us, His poor children, into His own likeness. Surely He would not be good unless He delighted to make us good. Surely it is something very like presumption in men to assert that the direct communication of the Spirit of God with the spirits whom God has made is an impossibility. Surely it is flying in the face of Scripture teaching to deny that such communication is a promise. Surely it is a flagrant contradiction of the depths of Christian experience to falter in the belief that it is a very solid reality.

Full of the Holy Ghost, as a vessel might be to its brim of golden wine; Christian men and women! does that describe you? Full? A dribbling drop or two in the bottom of the jar. Whose fault is it? Why, with that rushing mighty wind to fill our sails if we like, should we be lying in the sickly calms of the tropics, with the pitch oozing out of the seams, and the idle canvas flapping against the mast? Why, with those tongues of fire hovering over our heads, should we be cowering over grey ashes in which there lives a little spark? Why, with that great rushing tide of the river of the water of life, should we be like the dry watercourses of the desert, with bleached and white stones baking where the stream should be running? O! Thou that art named the House of Israel, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?

**III. And so, lastly, we are shown how that divine Helper comes to men.**

Full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith. There is no goodness without the impulse and indwelling of the divine Spirit, and there is no divine Spirit to dwell in a man's heart without that man's trusting in Jesus Christ. The condition of receiving the gift that makes us good is simply and solely that we should put our trust in Jesus Christ the Giver. That opens the door, and the divine Spirit enters.

True! there are convincing operations which He effects upon the world; but these are not in question here. These come prior to, and independent of, faith. But the work of the Spirit of God, present within us to heal and hallow us, has as condition our trust in Jesus Christ, the Great Healer. If you open a chink, the water will come in. If you trust in Jesus Christ, He will give you the new life of His Spirit, which will make you free from the law of sin and death. That divine Spirit which they that believe in Him should receive delights to enter into every heart where His presence is desired. Faith is desire; and desires rooted in faith cannot be in vain. Faith is expectation; and expectations based upon the divine promise can never be disappointed. Faith is dependence, and dependence that reckons upon God, and upon God's gift of His Spirit, will surely be recompensed.

The measure in which we possess the power that makes us good depends altogether upon ourselves. Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it. You may have as much of God as you want, and as little as you will. The measure of your faith will determine at once the measure of your goodness, and of your possession of the Spirit that makes good. Just as when the prophet miraculously increased the oil in the cruse, the golden stream flowed as long as they brought vessels, and stayed when there were no more, so as long as we open our hearts for the reception, the gift will not be withheld, but God will not let it run like water spilled upon the ground that cannot be gathered up. If we will desire, if we will expect, if we will reckon on, if we will look to, Jesus Christ, and, beside all this, if we will honestly use the power that we possess, our capacity will grow, and the gift will grow, and our holiness and purity will grow with it.

Some of you have been trying more or less continuously, all your lives, to mend your own characters and improve yourselves. Brethren, there is a better way than that. A modern poet says--

Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,

These three alone lift life to sovereign power.

Taken by itself that is pure heathenism. Self cannot improve self. Put self into God's keeping, and say, I cannot guard, keep, purge, hallow mine own self. Lord, do Thou do it for me! It is no use to try to build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven. A ladder has been let down on which we may pass upwards, and by which God's angels of grace and beauty will come down to dwell in our hearts. If the Judge is to say of each of us, He was a good man, He must also be able to say, He was full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.