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

**ACTS-063. A GOOD MAN'S FAULTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"37.* *And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. 38. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work."*

*Acts 15:37-38*

Scripture narratives are remarkable for the frankness with which they tell the faults of the best men. It has nothing in common with the cynical spirit in historians, of which this age has seen eminent examples, which fastens upon the weak places in the noblest natures, like a wasp on bruises in the ripest fruit, and delights in showing how all goodness is imperfect, that it may suggest that none is genuine. Nor has it anything in common with that dreary melancholy which also has its representatives among us, that sees everywhere only failures and fragments of men, and has no hope of ever attaining anything beyond the common average of excellence. But Scripture frankly confesses that all its noblest characters have fallen short of unstained purity, and with boldness of hope as great as its frankness teaches the weakest to aspire, and the most sinful to expect perfect likeness to a perfect Lord, It is a plane mirror, giving back all images without distortion.

We recall how emphatically and absolutely it eulogised Barnabas as a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith--and now we have to notice how this man, thus full of the seminal principle of all goodness, derived into his soul by deep and constant communion through faith, and showing in his life practical righteousness and holiness, yet goes sadly astray, tarnishes his character, and mars his whole future.

The two specific faults recorded of him are his over-indulgence in the case of Mark, and his want of firmness in opposition to the Judaising teachers who came down to Antioch. They were neither of them grave faults, but they were real. In the one he was too facile in overlooking a defect which showed unfitness for the work, and seems to have yielded to family affection and to have sacrificed the efficiency of a mission to it. Not only was he wrong in proposing to condone Mark's desertion, but he was still more wrong in his reception of the opposition to his proposal. With the firmness which weak characters so often display at the wrong time, he was resolved, come what would, to have his own way. Temper rather than principle made him obstinate where he should have been yielding, as it had made him in Antioch yielding, where he should have been firm. Paul's remonstrances have no effect. He will rather have his own way than the companionship of his old friend, and so there come alienation and separation. The Church at Antioch takes Paul's view--all the brethren are unanimous in disapproval. But Barnabas will not move. He sets up his own feeling in opposition to them all. The sympathy of his brethren, the work of his life, the extension of Christ's kingdom, are all tossed aside. His own foolish purpose is more to him in that moment of irritation than all these. So he snaps the tie, abandons his work, and goes away without a kindly word, without a blessing, without the Church's prayers--but with his nephew for whom he had given up all these. Paul sails away to do God's work, and the Church recommends him to the grace of God, but Barnabas steals away home to Cyprus, and his name is no more heard in the story of the planting of the kingdom of Christ.

One hopes that his work did not stop thus, but his recorded work does, and in the band of friends who surrounded the great Apostle, the name of his earliest friend appears no more. Other companions and associates in labour take his place; he, as it appears, is gone for ever. One reference (1 Cor. ix. 6) at a later date seems most naturally to suggest that he still continued in the work of an evangelist, and still practised the principle to which he and Paul had adhered when together, of supporting himself by manual labour. The tone of the reference implies that there were relations of mutual respect. But the most we can believe is that probably the two men still thought kindly of each other and honoured each other for their work's sake, but found it better to labour apart, and not to seek to renew the old companionship which had been so violently torn asunder.

The other instance of weakness was in some respects of a still graver kind. The cause of it was the old controversy about the obligations of Jewish law on Gentile Christians. Paul, Peter, and Barnabas all concurred in neglecting the restrictions imposed by Judaism, and in living on terms of equality and association in eating and drinking with the heathen converts at Antioch. A principle was involved, to which Barnabas had bean the first to give in his adhesion, in the frank recognition of the Antioch Church. But as soon as emissaries from the other party came down, Peter and he abandoned their association with Gentile converts, not changing their convictions but suppressing the action to which their convictions should have led. They pretended to be of the same mind with these narrow Jews from Jerusalem. They insulted their brethren, they deserted Paul, they belied their convictions, they imperilled the cause of Christian liberty, they flew in the face of what Peter had said that God Himself had showed him, they did their utmost to degrade Christianity into a form of Judaism--all for the sake of keeping on good terms with the narrow bigotry of these Judaising teachers.

Now if we take these two facts together, and set them side by side with the eulogy pronounced on Barnabas as a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith, we have brought before us in a striking form some important considerations.

**I. The imperfect goodness of good men.**

A good man does not mean a faultless man. Of course the power which works on a believing soul is always tending to produce goodness and only goodness. But its operation is not such that we are always equally, uniformly, perfectly under its influence. Power in germ is one thing, in actual operation another. There may be but a little ragged patch of green in the garden, and yet it may be on its way to become a flower-bed. A king may not have established dominion over all his land. The actual operation of that transforming Spirit at any given moment is limited, and we can withdraw ourselves from it. It does not begin by leavening all our nature.

So we have to note--

The root of goodness.

The main direction of a life.

The progressive character of goodness.

The highest style of Christian life is a struggle.

So we draw practical inferences as to the conduct of life.

This thought of imperfection does not diminish the criminality of individual acts.

It does not weaken aspiration and effort towards higher life.

It does alleviate our doubts and fears when we find evil in ourselves.

**II. The possible evil lurking in our best qualities.**

In Barnabas, his amiability and openness of nature, the very characteristics that had made him strong, now make him weak and wrong.

How clearly then there is brought out here the danger that lurks even in our good! I need not remind you how every virtue may be run to an extreme and become a vice. Liberality is exaggerated into prodigality; firmness, into obstinacy; mercy, into weakness; gravity, into severity; tolerance, into feeble conviction; humility, into abjectness.

And these extremes are reached when these graces are developed at the expense of the symmetry of the character.

We are not simple but complex, and what we need to aim at is a character, not an excrescence. Some people's goodness is like a wart or a wen. Their virtues are cases of what medical technicality calls hypertrophy. But our goodness should be like harmonious Indian patterns, where all colours blend in a balanced whole.

Such considerations enforce the necessity for rigid self-control. And that in two directions.

**(a)** Beware of your excellences, your strong points.

**(b)** Cultivate sedulously the virtues to which you are not inclined.

The special form of error into which Barnabas fell is worth notice. It was over-indulgence, tolerance of evil in a person; feebleness of grasp, a deficiency of boldness in carrying out his witness to a disputed truth. In this day liberality, catholicity, are pushed so far that there is danger of our losing the firmness of our grasp of principles, and indulgence for faults goes so far that we are apt to lose the habit of unsparing, though unangry, condemnation of unworthy characters. This generation is like Barnabas; very quick in sympathy, generous in action, ready to recognise goodness where-ever it is beheld. But Barnabas may be a beacon, warning us of the possible evils that dog these excellences like their shadows.

**III. The grave issues of small faults.**

Comparatively trivial as was Barnabas's error, it seems to have wrecked his life, at least to have marred it for long years, and to have broken his sweet companionship with Paul. I think we may go further and say, that most good men are in more danger from trivial faults than from great ones. No man reaches the superlative degree of wickedness all at once. Few men spring from the height to the abyss, they usually slip down. The erosive action of the sand of the desert is said to be gradually cutting off the Sphinx's head. The small faults are most numerous. We are least on our guard against them. There is a microscopic weed that chokes canals. Snow-flakes make the sky as dark as an eclipse does. White ants eat a carcase quicker than a lion does.

So we urge the necessity for bringing ordinary deeds and small actions to be ruled and guided by God's Spirit.

How the contemplation of the imperfection, which is the law of life, should lead us to hope for that heaven where perfection is.

How the contemplation of the limits of all human goodness should lead us to exclusive faith in, and imitation of, the one perfect Lord. He stands stainless among the stained. In Him alone is no sin, from Him alone like goodness may be ours.