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

**EXODUS-019. THE DECALOGUE: PART 2. - MAN AND MAN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12.* *Honour thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. 13. Thou shalt not kill. 14. Thou shalt not commit adultery. 15. Thou shalt not steal. 16. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. 17. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. 18. And all the people saw the thunderings and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and, when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. 19. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. 20. And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that His fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. 21. And the people stood afar off: and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was."*

*Exodus 20:12-21*

**I.** The broad distinction between the two halves of the Decalogue is that the former deals with man's relations to God, and the latter with His relations to men. This double division is recognised in the New Testament summary of all the law, as found in two commandments, and is probably implied in the two tables on which it was inscribed. Commentators have been much exercised, however, about how to divide the commandments between these two parts. The fifth, which is the first in this division, belongs in substance to the second half, but its form connects it with the first table. It is like the preceding ones in having a reason appended, and in naming the Lord thy God; while the following are all bare, curt prohibitions. The fact seems to be that it is a transition commandment, and meant to cast special sacredness round the parental relationship, by paralleling it, in some sense, with that to God, of which it is a reflection. Other duties to other men stand on a different level from duties to parents. Honour, which is to be theirs, is not remote from the reverence due to God. They are, as it were, His shadows to the child. The fatherhood of God is dimly revealed in that parting off the commandment from the second table, and assimilating it in form to the laws of the first.

**II.** The connection of the two halves of the Decalogue teaches some important truth. Josephus said a wise thing when he remarked that, whereas other legislators had made religion a department of virtue, Moses made virtue a department of religion. No theory of morals is built upon the deepest foundation which does not recognise the final ground of the obligation of duty in the voice of God. Duty is debitum-debt. Who is the creditor? Myself? An impersonal law? Society? No, God. The practice of morality depends, like its theory, on religion. In the long-run, and on the wide scale, nations and periods which have lost the latter will not long keep the former in any vigour or purity. He who begins by erasing the first commandment will sooner or later make a clean sweep of all the ten. And, on the other hand, wherever there is true worship of the one God, there all fair charities between man and man will flourish and fruit. The two tables are one law. Duties to God come first, and those to man, who is made in the image of God, flow from these.

**III.** The order of these human duties is significant. We have, next after the law of parental reverence, three commandments, which, in a descending series of importance, forbid crimes against life, marriage, and property. Then the law passes from deeds to the more subtle, and, as men think, less grave, offences of the tongue. Next it crosses the boundary which divides human from divine law, and crimes from sins, to take cognisance of unspoken and unacted desires. So the order of progress in the first table is exactly the reverse of that in the second. There we begin with inward devotion, and travel outwards by deed and word to the sabbatical institution; here we begin with overt acts, and travel inwards, through words, to the hidden desire. The end touches the beginning. For that which we covet is our God; and the first commandment is only obeyed when our hearts hunger after Him, and not after earth. The sequence here corresponds to the order of progress in our knowledge and practice of our human duties. The first thing that the rudest state of society has to do is to establish some kind of security for life and property and woman's honour. The worst men know that much as their duty, however foul may be their lips, and hot their passions. Then the recognition of the sanctity of the great gift of speech, and the supreme obligations of veracity, grow upon men as they get above the earlier stage. Most children pass through a phase when they tell lies as pastime, and most rude societies and half-moralised men have a similar epoch. Last of all, when actions have been bridled and the tongue taught the law of truth, comes the full recognition that the work is not done till the silent longing of a hungry heart is stilled, and that unselfish love of our neighbour is only perfect when we can rejoice in his good and wish none of it for ourselves. The second table is a chart of moral progress.

**IV.** The scope of these laws has often been violently stretched so as to include all human duty; but without tugging at them so as to make them cover everything, we may note briefly how far they extend. We are scarcely warranted in taking any of them but the last, as going deeper than overt acts, for, though our Lord has taught in the Sermon on the Mount that hatred is murder, and impure desire adultery, that is His deepening of the commandment. But it is quite fair to bring out the positive precept which, in each case, underlies the stern, short prohibition.

The fifth commandment shares with the fourth the distinction of being a positive command. It enjoins honour, not love, partly because, in olden times, the father was a prince in his house in a sense that has long since ceased to be true, partly because there was less need to enjoin the affection which is in some degree instinctive, than the submission and respect which the children are tempted to withhold, partly in order to suggest the analogy with reverence to God. A strange change has passed over the relations of parents and children, even within a generation. There is more, perhaps, of frank familiar intercourse, which, no doubt, is an improvement on the old style. But there is a great deal less of what the commandment enjoins. City life, education, the general impairing of the idea of authority, which we see everywhere, have told upon many families; and many a father who, by indulgence or by too much engrossment in business, lets the children twitch the reins out of his hands, might lament, as his grown-up children spurn control, If then I be a father, where is mine honour? There is no one of the commandments which it is more needful to preach in England than this.

The promise attached to it has another side of threatening. It is a plain fact that when the paternal relation is corrupted, a powerful solvent has been introduced which rapidly tends to disintegrate society. The most ancient empire in the world today, China, has, amid many vices and follies, been preserved mainly by the profound reverence to ancestors which is largely its real working religion. The most vigorous power in the old world, Rome, owed its iron might not only to its early simplicity of life and its iron tenacity, but to the strength of paternal authority and the willingness of filial obedience. No more serious damage can be inflicted on society or on individuals than the weakening of the honour paid to fathers and mothers.

Thou shalt not kill forbids not only the act of murder, but all that endangers life. It enjoins all care, diligence, and effort to preserve it. A man who looks on while another drowns, or who sends a ship out half manned and overloaded, breaks it as really as a red-handed murderer. But the commandment was not intended to touch the questions of capital punishment or of war. These were allowed under the Jewish code, and cannot therefore be supposed to be prohibited here. How far either is consistent with the deepest meaning of the law, as expanded and reconsecrated in Christianity, is another question. Their defenders have to execute some startling feats of gymnastics to harmonise either with the New Testament.

Curus kind o Christian dooty,

This 'ere cuttin folks's throats.

The ground of the commandment is not given, seeing that conscience is expected to admit its force as soon as stated. But its place at the head of the second table brings it into connection with the first commandment, and suggests that man's life is sacred because he is the image of God. As Christians, we are bound to interpret it on the lines which Christ has laid down; according to which, hatred is murder, and love is the fulfilling of this as of all other laws. So Luther's comprehensive summing up of the duties enjoined may be accepted: Patience, gentleness, kindliness, peaceableness, pity, and, of all things, a sweet, friendly heart, without any hate, anger, bitterness, toward any, even enemies.

In like manner, the seventh commandment sanctifies wedded life, and is the first step in that true reverence of woman which marked the Jewish people through all their history, and was in such contrast to her position in all other ancient societies. Purity in all the relations of the sexes, the control of passion, the reverence for marriage, are subjects difficult to speak of in public. But modern society sorely needs some plain speaking on these subjects--abundance of bread and idleness, facilities for divorce, the filth which newspapers lay down on every breakfast-table, the insidious sensuality of much fiction and art, the licence of the stage. The opportunities for secret profligacy in great cities conspire to loosen the bonds of morality. I would venture to ask public teachers seriously to consider their duty in this matter, and to seek for opportunities wisely to warn budding youth of the pitfalls in its path.

What is stealing'? As Luther says, It is the smallest part of the thieves that are hung. If we are to hang them all, where shall we get rope enough? We must make all our belts and straps into halters.

Theft is the taking or keeping what is not mine. But what do we mean by mine'? Communists tell us that property is theft. But that is the exaggeration of the scriptural teaching that all property is trust property, that possessions are mine on conditions and for purposes, that I cannot do what I will with mine own, but am a steward, set to dispense it to those who want. The Christian doctrine of stewardship extends this commandment over much ground which we seldom think of as affected by it. All sharp practice in business, the shopkeeper's false weights and the merchant's equivalents of these, adulterations, pirating trademarks, imitating a rival's goods, infringing patents, and the like, however disguised by fine names, are neither more nor less than stealing. Many a prosperous gentleman says solemnly every Sunday of his life, Incline our hearts to keep this law, who would have to live in a much more modest fashion if his prayer were, by any unfortunate accident, answered.

False witness is not only given in court. The sins of the tongue against the law of love are more subtle and common than those of act. Come, let us enjoy ourselves, and abuse our neighbours, is the real meaning of many an invitation to social intercourse. If some fairy could treat our newspapers as the Russian censors do, and erase all the lies about the opposite side, which they report and coin, how many blank columns there would be! If all the words of ill-natured calumny, of uncharitable construction of their friends which people speak, could be made inaudible, what stretches of silence would open out in much animated talk! A man that beareth false witness against his neighbour is a maul, and a sword, and a sharp arrow.

But deed and word will not be right unless the heart be right; and the heart will be wrong unless it be purged of the bitter black drop of covetousness. The desire to make my neighbour's goods mine is the parent of all breaches of neighbourly duty, even as its converse love is the fulfilling of it all; for such desire implies that I am ruled by selfishness, and that I would willingly deprive another of goods, for my own gratification. Such a temper, like a wild boar among vineyards, will trample down all the rich clusters in order to slake its own thirst. Find a man who yields to his desires after his neighbour's goods, and you find a man who will break all commandments like a hornet in a spider's web. Be he a Napoleon, and glorified as a conqueror and hero, or be he some poor thief in a jail, he has let his covetousness get the upper hand, and so all wrong-doing is possible. Nor is it only the second table which covetousness dashes to fragments. It serves the first in the same fashion; for, as St. Paul puts it, the covetous man is an idolater, and is as incapable of loving God as of loving his neighbour. This final commandment, overleaping the boundary between conduct and character, and carrying the light of duty into the dark places of the heart, where deeds are fashioned, sets the whole flock of bats and twilight-loving creatures in agitation. It does what is the main work of the law, in compelling us to search our hearts, and in convincing of sin. It is the converse of the thought that all the law is contained in love; for it closes the list of sins with one which begets them all, and points us away from actions and words which are its children to selfish desire as in itself the transgression of all the law, whether it be that which prescribes our relations to God or that which enjoins our duties to man.