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

**JOHN-031**. **HOW TO WORK THE WORK OF GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"28.* *Then said they unto Him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? 29. Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye, believe on Him whom He hath sent."*

*John 6:28-29*

The feeding of the five thousand was the most popularof Christ's miracles. The Evangelist tells us, with something between a smile and a sigh, that when the people saw it, they said, This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world, and they were so delighted with Him and with it, that they wanted to get up an insurrection on the spot, and make a King of Him. I wonder if there are any of that sort of people left. If two men were to come into Manchester to-morrow morning, and one of them were to offer material good, and the other wisdom and peace of heart, which of them, do you think, would have the larger following? We need not cast a stone at the unblushing, frank admiration that these men had for a Prophet who could feed them, for that is exactly the sort of prophet that a great number of us would like best if they spoke out.

So Jesus Christ had to escape from the inconvenient enthusiasm of these mistaken admirers of His; and they followed Him in their eagerness, but were met with words which lift them into another region and damp their zeal. He tries to turn away their thoughts from the miracle to a far loftier gift. He contrasts the trouble which they willingly took in order to get a meal with their indifference as to obtaining the true bread from heaven, and He bids them work for it just as they had shown themselves ready to work for the other.

They put to Him this question of my text, so strangely blending as it does right and wrong, You have bid us work; tell us how to work? What must we do that we may work the works of God?Christ answers, in words that illuminate their confusions and clear the whole matter, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.

**I. Faith, then, is a work.**

You know that the commonplace of evangelical teaching opposes faith to works; and the opposition is perfectly correct, if it be rightly understood. But I have a strong impression that a great deal of our preaching goes clean over the heads of our hearers, because we take for granted, and they fancy that they understand, the meaning of terms because the terms themselves are so familiar. And I believe that many people go to churches and chapels all their lives long, and hear this doctrine dinned into them, that they are to be saved by faith, and not by works, and never approach a definite understanding of what it means.

So let me just for a moment try to clear up the terms of this apparently paradoxical statement that faith is a work. What do we mean by faith? What do you mean by saying that you have faith in your friend, in your wife, in your husband, in your guide? You simply mean, and we mean, that you trust the person, grasping him by the act of trust. On trust the whole fabric of human society depends, as well as in another aspect of the same expression does the whole fabric of Manchester commerce. Faith, confidence, the leaning of myself on one discerned to be true, trusty, strong, sufficient for the purpose in hand, whatever it may be--that, and nothing more mysterious, nothing further away from daily life and the common emotions which knit us to one another, is, as I take it, what the New Testament means when it insists upon faith.

Ah, we all exercise it. You put it forth in certain low levels and directions. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, is the short summary of the happy lives of many, I have no doubt, of my present hearers. Have you none of that confidence to spare for God? Is it all meant to be poured out upon weak, fallible, changeful creatures like ourselves, and none of it to rise to the One in whom absolute confidence may eternally be fixed?

But then, of course, as we may see by the exercise of the same emotion in regard to one Another, the under side (as I have been accustomed to say to you) of this confidence in God or Christ is diffidence of myself. There is no real exercise of confidence which does not involve, as an essential part of itself, the going out from myself in order that I may lay all the weight and the responsibility of the matter in hand upon Him in whom I trust. And so Christian faith is compounded of these two elements, or rather, it has these two sides which correspond to one another. The same figure is convex or concave according as you look at it from one side or another. If you look at faith from one side, it rises towards God; if from the other, it hollows itself out into a great emptiness. And so the under side of faith is distrust; and he that puts his confidence in God thereby goes out of himself, and declares that in himself there is nothing to rest upon.

Now that two-sided confidence and diffidence, trust and distrust, which are one, is truly a work. It is not an easy one either; it is the exercise of our own inmost nature. It is an effort of will. It has to be done by coercing ourselves. It has to be maintained in the face of many temptations and difficulties. The contrast between faith and work is between an inward act and a crowd of outward performances. But the faith which knits me to God is my act, and I am responsible for it.

But yet it is not a work, just because it is a ceasing from my own works, and going out from myself that He may enter in. Only remember, when we say, Not by works of righteousness, but by the faith of Christ, we are but proclaiming that the inward man must exercise that act of self-abnegation and confession of its own impotence, and ceasing from all reliance on anything which it does, whereby, and whereby alone, it can be knit to God. Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto eternal life ... . This is the work of God, that ye believe. You are responsible for doing that, or for not doing it.

**II. Secondly, faith, and not a multitude of separate acts, is what pleases God.**

Mark the difference between the form of the question and that of the answer. The people say, What are we to do that we may work the works of God?Christ answers in the singular: This is the work. They thought of a great variety of observances and deeds. He gathers them all up into one. They thought of a pile, and that the higher it rose the more likely they were to be accepted. He unified the requirement, and He brought it all down to this one act, in which all other acts are included, and on which alone the whole weight of a man's salvation is to rest. What shall we do that we might work the works of God?is a question asked in all sorts of ways, by the hearts of men all round about us; and what a babble of answers comes! The priest says, Rites and ceremonies. The thinker says, Culture, education. The moralist says, Do this, that, and the other thing, and enumerates a whole series of separate acts. Jesus Christ says, One thing is needful ... . This is the work of God. He brushes away the sacerdotal answer and the answer of the mere moralist, and He says, No! Not do; but trust. In so far as that is act, it is the only act that you need.

That is evidently reasonable. The man is more than his work; motive is more important than action; character is deeper than conduct. God is pleased, not by what men do, but by what men are. We must be first, and then we shall do. And it is obviously reasonable, because we can find analogies to the requirement in all other relations of life. What would you care for a child that scrupulously obeyed, and did not love or trust? What would a prince think of a subject who was ostentatious in acts of loyalty, and all the while was plotting and nurturing treason in his heart?

If doing separate acts of righteousness be the way to work the works of God, then no man has ever done them. For it is a plain fact that every man falls below his own conscience--which conscience is less scrupulous than the divine law. The worst of us knows a great deal more than the best of us does; and our lives, universally, are, at the best, lives of partial effort after unreached attainments of obedience and of virtue.

But, even supposing that we could perform, far more completely than we do, the requirements of our own consciences, and conform to the evident duties of our position and relations, do you think that without faith we should be therein working the works of God? Suppose a man were able fully to realise his own ideal of goodness, without any confidence in God underlying all his acts; do you think that these would be acts that would please God? It seems to me that, however lovely and worthy of admiration, looked at with human eyes only, many lives are, which have nobly and resolutely fought against evil, and struggled after good, if they have lacked the crowning grace of doing this for God's sake, they lack, I was going to say, almost everything; I will not say that, but I will say that they lack that which makes them acceptable, well-pleasing to Him. The poorest, the most imperfect realisation of our duty and ideal of conduct which has in it a love towards God and a faith in Him that would fain do better if it could, is a nobler thing, I venture to say, in the eyes of Heaven--which are the truth-seeing eyes--than the noblest achievements of an untrusting soul. It does not seem to me that to say so is bigotry or narrowness or anything else but the plain deduction from this, that a man's relation to God is the deepest thing about him, and that if that be right, other things will come right, and if that be wrong nothing is as right as it might be.

Here we have Jesus Christ laying the foundation for the doctrine which is often said to be Pauline, as if that meant something else than coming from Jesus Christ. We often hear people say, Oh, your evangelical teaching of justification by faith, and all that, comes out of Paul's Epistles, not out of Christ's teaching, nor out of John's Gospel. Well, there is a difference, which it is blindness not to recognise, between the seeds of teaching in our Lord's words, and the flowers and fruit of these seeds, which we get in the more systematised and developed teaching of the Epistles. I frankly admit that, and I should expect it, with my belief as to who Christ is, and who Paul is. But in that saying, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent, is the germ of everything that Paul has taught us about the works of the law being of no avail, and faith being alone and unfailing in its power of uniting men to God, and bringing them into the possession of eternal life. The saying stands in John's Gospel, and so Paul and John alike received, though in different fashions, and wrought out on different lines of subsequent teaching, the germinal impulse from these words of the Master. Let us hear no more about salvation by faith being a Pauline addition to Christ's Gospel, for the lips of Christ Himself have declared this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.

**III. Thirdly, this faith is the productive parent of all separate works of God.**

The teaching that I have been trying to enforce has, I know, been so presented as to make a pillow for indolence, and to be closely allied to immorality. It has been so presented, but it has not been so presented half as often as its enemies would have us believe. For I know of but very few, and those by no means the most prominent and powerful of the preachers of the great doctrine of salvation by faith, who have not added, as its greatest teacher did: Let ours also be careful to maintain good works for necessary uses. But the true teaching is not that trust is a substitute for work, but that it is the foundation of work. The Gospel is, first of all, Trust; then, set yourselves to do the works of faith. It works by love, it is the opening of the heart to the entrance of the life of Christ, and, of course, when that life comes in, it will act in the man in a manner appropriate to its origin and source, and he that by faith has been joined to Jesus Christ, and has opened his heart to receive into that heart the life of Christ, will, as a matter of course, bring forth, in the measure of his faith, the fruits of righteousness.

We are surely not despising fruits and flowers when we insist upon the root from which they shall come. A man may take separate acts of partial goodness, as you see children in the springtime sticking daisies on the spikes of a thorn-twig picked from the hedges. But these will die. The basis of all righteousness is faith, and the manifestation of faith is practical righteousness. Show Me thy faith by thy worksis Christ's teaching quite as much as it is the teaching of His sturdy servant James. And so, dear friends, we are going the shortest way to enrich lives with all the beauties of possible human perfection when we say, Begin at the beginning. The longest way round is the shortest way home; trust Him with all your hearts first, and that will effloresce into "whatsoever things are lovely and whatever things are of good report."In the beautiful metaphor of the Apostle Peter, in his second Epistle, Faith is the damsel who leads in the chorus of consequent graces; and we are exhorted to add to our faith virtue, and all the others that unfold themselves in harmonious sequence from that one central source.

If I had time I should be glad to turn for a moment to the light which such considerations cast upon subjects that are largely occupying the attention of the Christian Church to-day. I should like to insist that, before you talk much about applied Christianity, you should be very sure that in men there is a Christianity to apply. I venture to profess my own humble belief that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, Christian ministers and churches will do no more for the social, political, and intellectual and moral advancement of men and the elevation of the people by sticking to their own work and preaching this Gospel--This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.

**IV. Lastly, this faith secures the bread of life.**

The bread of life is the starting-point of the whole conversation. In the widest possible sense it is whatsoever truly stills the hunger of the immortal soul. In a deeper sense it is the person of Jesus Christ Himself, for He not only says that He will give, but that He is the Bread of Life. And, in the deepest sense of all, it is His flesh broken for us in His sacrifice on the Cross. That bread is a gift. So the paradox results which stands in our text--work for the bread which God will give. If it be a gift, that fact determines what sort of work must be done in order to possess it. If it be a gift, then the only work is to accept it. If it be a gift, then we are out of the region of quid pro quo; and have not to bring, as Chinese do, great strings of copper cash that, all added up together, do not amount to a shilling, in order to buy what God will bestow upon us. If it be a gift, then to trust the Giver and to accept the gift is the only condition that is possible.

It is not a condition that God has invented and arbitrarily imposed. The necessity of it is lodged deep in the very nature of the case. Air cannot get to the lungs of a mouse in an air-pump. Light cannot come into a room where all the shutters are up and the keyhole stopped. If a man chooses to perch himself on some little stool of his own, with glass legs to it, and to take away his hand from the conductor, no electricity will come to him. If I choose to lock my lips, Jesus Christ does not prise open my clenched teeth to put the bread of life into my unwilling mouth. If we ask, we get; if we take, we get.

And so the paradox comes, that we work for a gift, with a work which is not work because it is a departure from myself. It is the same blessed paradox which the prophet spoke when he said, Buy ... without money and without price. Oh! what a burden of hopeless effort and weary toil--like that of the man that had to roll the stone up the hill, which ever slipped back again--is lifted from our shoulders by such a word as this that I have been poorly trying to speak about now! Thou art careful and troubled about many things, poor soul! trying to be good; trying to fight yourself, and the world, and the devil. Try the other plan, and listen to Him saying, Give up self-imposed effort in thine own strength. Take, eat, this is My body, which is broken for you.