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

**LUKE-024**. **THWARTING GOD'D PURPOSES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of Him."*

*Luke 7:30*

Our Lord has just been pouring unstinted praise on the head of John the Baptist. The eulogium was tenderly timed, for it followed, and was occasioned by the expression, through messengers, of John's doubts of Christ's Messiahship. Lest these should shake the people's confidence in the Forerunner, and make them think of him as weak and shifting, Christ speaks of him in the glowing words which precede my text, and declares that he is no reed shaken with the wind.

But what John was was of less moment to Christ's listeners than was what they had done with John's message. So our Lord swiftly passes from His eulogium upon John to the sharp thrust of the personal application to His hearers. In the context He describes the twofold treatment which that message had received; and so describes it as, in the description, to lay bare the inmost characteristics of the reception or rejection of the message. As to the former, He says that the mass of the common people, and the outcast publicans, justified God; by which remarkable expression seems to be meant that their reception of John's message and baptism acknowledged God's righteousness in accusing them of sin and demanding from them penitence.

On the other hand, the official class, the cultivated people, the orthodox respectable people--that is to say, the dead formalists--rejected the counsel of God against themselves.

Now the word rejectedwould be more adequately rendered frustrated, thwarted, made void, or some such expression, as indeed it is employed in other places of Scripture, where it is translated disannulled, made void, and the like. And if we take that meaning, there emerge from this great word of the Master's two thoughts, that to disbelieve God's word is to thwart God's purpose, and that to thwart His purpose is to harm ourselves.

**I. And I remark, first, that the sole purpose which God has in view in speaking to us men is our blessing.**

I suppose I need not point out to you that counselhere does not mean advice, but intention. In regard to the matter immediately in hand, God's purpose or counsel in sending the Forerunner was, first of all, to produce in the minds of the people a true consciousness of their own sinfulness and need of cleansing; and so to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, who should bring the inward gift which they needed, and so secure their salvation. The intention was, first, to bring to repentance, but that was a preparation for bringing to them full forgiveness and cleansing. And so we may fairly widen the thought into the far greater and nobler one which applies especially to the message of God in Jesus Christ, and say that the only design which God has in view, in the gospel of His Son, is the highest blessing--that is, the salvation--of every man to whom it is spoken.

Now, by the gospel, which, as I say, has thus one single design in the divine mind, I mean, what I think the New Testament means, the whole body of truths which underlie and flow from the fact of Christ's Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, which in brief are these--man's sin, man's helplessness, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Death of Christ as the sacrifice for the world's sin; Faith, as the one hand by which we grasp the blessing, and the gift of a Divine Spirit which follows upon our faith, and bestows upon us sonship and likeness to God, purity of life and character, and heaven at last. That, as I take it, is in the barest outline what is meant by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And now I want to press upon you, dear friends, that that great and sublime body of truths made known to us, as I believe, from God Himself, has one sole object in view and none beside--viz. that every man who hears it may partake of the salvation and the hope which it brings. It has a twofold effect, alas! but the twofold effect does not imply a twofold purpose. There have been schemes of so-called Christian theology which have darkened the divine character in this respect, and have obscured the great thought that God has one end in view, and one only, when He speaks to us in all good faith, desiring nothing else but only that we shall be gathered into His heart, and made partakers of His love. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth.

If so, the question comes very sharp and direct to each of us, Is that gospel fulfilling its purpose in me? There are many subordinate good things flowing from the Christian revelation, such as blessings for social outward life, which are as flowers that spring up in its path; but unless it has effected its one purpose in regard to you and me, it has failed altogether. God meant His word to save your soul. Has it done so? It is a question that any man can answer if he--will be honest with himself.

Further, this single purpose of the divine speech embraces in its intention each of the hearers of that message. I want to gather the wide-flowing generality, God so loved the world that He sent His Son that whosoever believeth, into this sharp point, God so loved me, that He sent His Son that I, believing, might have life eternal. We shall never understand the universality of Christianity until we have appreciated the personality and the individuality of its message to each of us. God does not lose thee in the crowd, do not thou lose thyself in it, nor fail to apprehend that thou art personally meant by His broadest declarations. It is thy salvation that Christ had in view when He became man and died on the Cross; and it is thy salvation that He had in view when He said to His servants, Go into all the world--there is universality--and preach the Gospel to every creature--there is individuality.

Then, further, God is verily seeking to accomplish this purpose even now, by my lips, in so far as I am true to my Master and my message. The outward appearance of what we are about now is that I am trying, lamely enough, to speak to you. You may judge this service by rules of rhetoric, or anything else you like. But you have not got to the bottom of things unless you feel, as I am praying that every one of you may feel, that even with all my imperfections on my head--and I know them better than you can tell me them--I, like all true men who are repeating God's message as they have caught it, neither more nor less, and have sunk themselves in it, may venture to say, as the Apostle said: Now, then, we are ambassadors for God, as though God did beseech by us, we pray in Christ's stead. John's voice was a revelation of God's purpose, and the voice of every true preacher of Jesus Christ is no less so.

**II. Secondly, this single divine purpose, or counsel, may be thwarted.**

They frustrated the counsel of God. Of all the mysteries of this inexplicable world, the deepest, the mother-mystery of all, is, that given an infinite will and a creature, the creature can thwart the infinite. I said that was the mystery of mysteries: Our wills are ours we know not how,--No! indeed we don't!--Our wills are ours to make them Thine. But that purpose necessarily requires the possibility of the alternative that our wills are ours, and we refuse to make them Thine. The possibility is mysterious; the reality of the fact is tragic and bewildering. We need no proof except our own consciousness; and if that were silenced we should have the same fact abundantly verified in the condition of the world around us, which sadly shows that not yet is God's willdone on earth as it is in heaven, but that men can and do lift themselves up against God and set themselves in antagonism to His most gracious purposes. And whosoever refuses to accept God's message in Christ and God's salvation revealed in that message is thus setting himself in battle array against the infinite, and so far as in him lies (that is to say, in regard to his own personal condition and character) is thwarting God's most holy will.

Now, brethren, I said that there was only one thought in the divine heart when He sent His Son, and that was to save you and me and all of us. But that thought cannot but be frustrated, and made of none effect, as far as the individual is concerned, by unbelief. For there is no way by which any human being can become participant of the spiritual blessings which are included in that great word salvation, except by simple trust in Jesus Christ. I cannot too often and earnestly insist upon this plain truth, which, plain as it is, is often obscured, and by many people is never apprehended at all, that when the Apostle says It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, he is laying down no limitation of the universality or of the adequacy of that power, but is only setting forth the plain condition, inherent in the very nature of things and in the nature of the blessings bestowed, that if a man does not trust God he cannot get them, and God cannot give him them, though His heart yearns to give him them He cannot do it. How can any man get any good out of a medicine if he locks his teeth and won't take it? How can any truth that I refuse to believe produce any effect upon me? How is it possible for the blessings of forgiveness and cleansing to be bestowed upon men who neither know their need of forgiveness nor desire to be washed from their sins? How can there be the flowing of the Divine Spirit into a heart which is tightly barred against His entrance? In a word, how a man can be saved with the salvation that the Gospel offers, except on condition of his simple trust in Christ the Giver, I, for my part, fail to see. And so I remind you that the thwarting of God's counsel is the awful prerogative of unbelief.

Then, note that, in accordance with the context, you do not need to put yourselves to much effort in order to bring to nought God's gracious intention about you. They thwarted the counsel of God, being not baptized of Him. They did not do anything. They simply did nothing, and that was enough. There is no need for violent antagonism to the counsel. Fold your hands in your lap, and the gift will not come into them. Clench them tightly, and put them behind your back, and it cannot come. A negation is enough to ruin a man. You do not need to do anything to slay yourselves. In the ocean, when the lifebelt is within reach, simply forbear to put out your hand to it, and down you will go, like a stone, to the very bottom. They rejected the counsel, being not--and that was all.

Further, the people who are in most danger of frustrating God's gracious purpose are not blackguards, not men and women steeped to the eyebrows in the stagnant pool of sensuous sin, but clean, respectable church-and-chapel-going, sermon-hearing, doctrine-criticising Pharisees. The man or woman who is led away by the passions that are lodged in his or her members is not so hopeless as the man into whose spiritual nature there has come the demon of self-complacent righteousness, or who, as is the case with many a man and woman sitting in these pews now, has listened to, or at all events, has heard, men preaching, as I am trying to preach, ever since childhood, and has never done anything in consequence. These are the hopeless people. The Pharisees--and there are hosts of their great-great-grandchildren in all our congregations--the Pharisees ... frustrated the counsel of God.

**III. Lastly, this thwarting brings self-inflicted harm.**

A little skiff of a boat comes athwart the bows of a six thousand ton steamer, with triple-expansion engines, that can make twenty knots an hour. What will become of the skiff, do you think? You can thwart God's purpose about yourself, but the great purpose goes on and on. And Who hath hardened himself against Him and prospered?You can thwart the purpose, but it is kicking against the pricks.

Consider what you lose when you will have nothing to do with that divine counsel of salvation. Consider not only what you lose, but what you bring upon yourself; how you bind your sin upon your hearts; how you put out your hands, and draw disease and death nearer to yourselves; how you cannot turn away from, or be indifferent to, the gracious, sweet, pleading voice that speaks to you from the Cross and the Throne, without doing damage--in many more ways than I have time to enlarge upon now--to your own character and inward nature. And consider how there lie behind dark and solemn results about which it does not become me to speak, but which it still less becomes me--believing as I do--to suppress. After death the judgment; and what will become of the thwarters of the divine counsel then?

These wounds, many, deep, deadly as they are, are self-inflicted. There do follow, on God's message and unbelief of it, awful consequences; but these are not His intention. They are the results of our misuse of His gracious word. Oh, Israel!wailed the prophet, thou hast destroyed thyselfMan's happiness or woe is his own making, and his own making only. There is no creature in heaven or earth or hell that is chargeable with your loss but yourself. We are our own betrayers, our own murderers, our own accusers, our own avengers, and--I was going to say, and it is true --our own hell.

Dear friends! this message comes to you once more now, that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, and that if you will trust Him as your Saviour, and obey Him as your Sovereign, you will he saved with an everlasting salvation. Even through my lips God speaks to you. What are you going to do with His message? Are you going to receive it, and justifyHim, or are you going to reject it, and thwart Him? You thwart Him if you treat my words now as a mere sermon to be criticised and forgotten; you thwart Him if you do anything with His message except take it to your heart and rest wholly upon it. Unless you do you are suicides; and neither God, nor man, nor devil is responsible for your destruction. He can say to you, as His servant said: Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. Jesus Christ is calling to every one of us, Turn ye! turn ye! Why will ye die? As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.