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

**MALACHI-001. A DIALOGUE WITH GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6. A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a Father, where is Mine honour? and if I be a master, where is My fear? saith the Lord of Hosts unto you, O priests, that despise My Name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised Thy Name? 7. Ye offer polluted bread upon Mine altar. And ye say, Wherein have we polluted Thee?"*

*Malachi 1:6-7*

A charactistic of this latest of the prophets is the vivacious dialogue of which our text affords one example. God speaks and the people question His word, which in reply He reiterates still more strongly. The other instances of its occurrence may here be briefly noted, and we shall find that they cover all the aspects of the divine speech to men, whether He charges sin home upon them or pronounces threatenings of judgment, or invites by gracious promises the penitent to return. His charges of sin are repelled in our text and in the following verse by the indignant question, Wherein have we polluted Thee? And similarly in the next chapter the divine accusation, Ye have wearied the Lord with your words, is thrown back with the contemptuous retort, Wherein have we wearied Him? And in like manner in the third chapter, Ye have robbed Me, calls forth no confession but only the defiant answer, Wherein have we robbed Thee? And in a later verse, the accusation, Your words have been stout against Me, is traversed by the question, What have we spoken so much against Thee? Similarly the threatening of judgment that the Lord will cut off the men that profane the holiness of the Lord calls forth only the rebutting question, Wherefore? (2:14). And even the gracious invitation, Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, evokes not penitence, but the stiff-necked reply, Wherein shall we return? (3:7). In this sermon we may deal with the first of these three cases, and consider, God's Indictment, and man's plea of Not guilty.

**I. God's Indictment.**

The precise nature of the charge is to be carefully considered. The Name is the sum of the revealed character, and that Name has been despised. The charge is not that it has been blasphemed, but that it has been neglected, or under-estimated, or cared little about. The pollution of the table of the Lord is the overt act by which the attitude of mind and heart expressed in despising His Name is manifested; but the overt act is secondary and not primary--a symptom of a deeper-lying disease. And herein our Prophet is true to the whole tenor of the Old Testament teaching, which draws its indictment against men primarily in regard to their attitude, and only as a manifestation of that, to their acts. The same deed may be, if estimated in relation to human law, a crime: if estimated in relation to godless ethics, a wrong; and if estimated in the only right way, namely, the attitude towards God which it reveals, a sin. The despising of His Name may be taken as the very definition of sin. It is usual with men to-day to say that Sin is selfishness; but that statement does not go deep enough unless it be recognised that self-regard only becomes sin when it rears its puny self in opposition to, or in disregard of, the plain will of God. The New Theology, of course, minimises, even where it does not, as it to be consistent should, deny the possibility of sin: for, if God is all and all is God, there can be no opposition, there can be no divine will to be opposed, and no human will to oppose it. But the fact of sin certified by men's own consciences is the rock on which Pantheism must always strike and sink. A superficial view of human history and of human nature may try to explain away the fact of sin by shallow talk about heredity and environment, or about ignorance and mistakes; but after all such euphemistic attempts to rechristen the ugly thing by beguiling names, the fact remains, and conscience bears sometimes unwilling witness to its existence, that men do set their own inclinations against God's commands, and that there is in them that which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. The root of all sin is the despising of His Name.

And as sin has but one root, it has many branches, and as working backwards from deed to motive, we find one common element in all the various acts; so working outwards from motive to deed, we have to see one common character stamped upon a tragical variety of acts. The poison-water is exhibited in many variously coloured and tasted draughts, but however unlike each other they may be, it is always the same.

The great effort of God's love is to press home this consciousness of despising His Name upon all hearts. The sorrows, losses, and disappointments which come to us all are not meant only to make us suffer, but through suffering to lead us to recognise how far we have wandered from our Father, and to bring us back to His heart and our home. The beginning of all good in us is the contrite acknowledgment of our evil. Christ's first preaching was the continuation of John's message, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; and His tenderest revelation of the divine love incarnated in Himself was meant to arouse the penitent confession, I am no more worthy to be called Thy son, and the quickening resolve, I will arise and go to my Father. There is no way to God but through the narrow gate of repentance. There is no true reception of the gift of Christ which does not begin with a vivid and heart-broken consciousness of my own sin. We can pass into, and abide in, the large room of joyous acceptance and fellowship, but we must reach it by a narrow path walled in by gloomy rocks and trodden with bleeding feet. The penitent knowledge of oar sin is the first step towards the triumphant knowledge of Christ's righteousness as ours. Only they who have called out in the agony of their souls, Lord, save us, we perish, have truly learned the love of God, and truly possess the salvation that is in Christ.

**II. Man's plea of Not Guilty.**

That such an answer should be given to such a charge is a strange, solemn fact, which tragically confirms the true indictment. The effect of all sin is to make us less conscious of its presence, as persons in an unventilated room are not aware of its closeness. It is with profound truth that the Apostle speaks of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. It comes to us in a cloud and enfolds us in obscure mist. Like white ants, it never works in the open, but makes a tunnel or burrows under ground, and, hidden in some piece of furniture, eats away all its substance whilst it seems perfectly solid. The man's perception of the standard of duty is enfeebled. We lose our sense of the moral character of any habitual action, just as a man who has lived all his life in a slum sees little of its hideousness, and knows nothing of green fields and fresh air. Conscience is silenced by being neglected. It can be wrongly educated and perverted, so that it may regard sin as doing God's service; and the only judgment in which it can be absolutely trusted is the declaration that it is right to do right, while all its other decisions as to what is right may be biassed by self-interest; but the force with which it pronounces its only unalterable decision depends on the whole tenor of the life of the man. The sins which are most in accordance with our characters, and are therefore most deeply rooted in us, are those which we are least likely to recognise as sins. So, the more sinful we are, the less we know it; therefore there is need for a fixed standard outside of us. The light on the deck cannot guide us; there must be the lighthouse on the rock. This sad answer of the heart untouched by God's appeal prevents all further access of God's love to that heart. That love can only enter when the reply to its indictment is, I have despised Thy name.

Let us not forget the New Testament modification of the divine accusation. In Christ is the Name of God fully and finally revealed to men. For us who live in the blaze of the ineffable brightness of the revelation, our attitude towards Him who brings it is the test of our hallowing of the Name which He brings. He Himself has varied Malachi's indictment when He said, He that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me. Our sin is now to be measured by our under-estimate and neglect of Him, and chiefly of His Cross. That Cross prevents our consciousness of sin from becoming despair of pardon. Judas went out, and with bitter weeping, himself ended his traitorous life. If God's last word to us were, Ye have despised My Name, and it sank into our souls, there would be no hope for any of us. But the message which begins with the universal indictment of sin passes into the message which holds forth forgiveness and freedom as universal as the sin, and God hath concluded all in unbelief that He may have mercy upon all.