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

**MALACHI-002. BLEMISHED OFFERINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord of Hosts."*

*Malachi 1:8*

A word of explanation may indicate my purpose in selecting this, I am afraid, unfamiliar text. The Prophet has been vehemently rebuking a characteristic mean practice of the priests, who were offering maimed and diseased animals in sacrifice. They were probably dishonest as well as mean, because the worshippers would bring sound beasts, and the priests, for their own profit, slipped in a worthless animal, and kept the valuable one for themselves. They had become so habituated to this piece of economical religion, that they saw no harm in it, and when they offered the lame and the sick and the blind for sacrifice they said to themselves, It is not evil. And so Malachi, with the sudden sharp thrust of my text, tries to rouse their torpid consciences. He says to them: Take that diseased creature that you are not ashamed to lay on God's altar, and try what the governor--the official appointed by the Persian Kings to rule over the returned exiles--will think about it. Will an offering of that sort be considered a compliment or an insult? Do you think it will smooth your way or help your suit with him? Surely God deserves as much reverence as the deputy of Artaxerxes. Surely what is not good enough for a Persian satrap is not good enough for the Lord of Hosts. Offer it to the governor, will he be pleased with it? Will he accept thy person?'

Now, it seems to me that this cheap religion of the priests, and this scathing irony of the Prophet's counsel need little modification to fit us very closely. You will bear me witness, I think, that I do not often speak to you about money. But I am going to try to bring out something about the great subject of Christian administration of earthly possessions from this text, because I believe that the Christian consciousness of this generation does need a great deal of rousing and instructing about this matter.

**I. We note the startling and strange contrast which the text suggests.**

The diseased lamb was laid without scruple or hesitation on God's altar, and not one of these tricky priests durst have taken it to Court in order to secure favour there. Generalise that, and it comes to this--the gifts that we lavish on men are the condemnation of the gifts that we bring to God; and further, we should be ashamed to offer to men what we are not in the least ashamed to bring to God. Let me illustrate in one or two points.

Let us contrast in our own consciences, for instance, the sort of love that we give to one another with the sort of love that we bring to Him. How strong, how perennially active, how delighting in sacrifice and service, what a felt source of blessedness is the love that knits many husbands and wives, many parents and children, many lovers and friends together! And in dreadful contrast, how languid, how sporadic and interrupted, how reluctant when called upon for service and sacrifice, how little operative in our lives is the love we bring to God! We durst not lay upon the altar of family affection, of wedded love, of true friendship, a love of such a sort as we take to God and expect Him to he satisfied with. It would be an insult if offered to the governor, but we think it good enough for the King of kings. Here a gushing flood, there a straitened trickle coming drop by drop; here a glowing flame that fills life with warmth and light, there a few dying embers. Measure and contrast the love that is lavished by men upon one another, and the love that is coldly brought to Him. And I think we must all bow our heads penitently.

Contrast the trust that we put in one another, and the trust that we direct to Him. In the one case it is absolute. I am as sure as I am of my own existence that so-and-so will always be as true as steel to me, and will never fail me, and whatever he, or she, does, or fails to do, no shadow of suspicion, or mist of doubt, will creep across the sunshine of our sky. And in contrast to the firm grasp with which we clasp an infirm human hand, there is a tremulous touch, scarcely a grasp at all, which we lay upon the one Hand that is strong enough always to be outstretched for our defence and our blessing. Contrast your confidence in men, and your confidence in God. Are we not all committing the absurdity of absolutely trusting that which has no stability or stay, and refusing so to trust that which is the Rock of Ages? God's faithfulness is absolute, our faith in it is tremulous. Men's faithfulness is uncertain, our faith in it is entire.

We might contrast the submission and obedience with which we follow those who have secured our confidence and evoked our love, as contrasted with the rebellion, the reluctance, the self-will, which come in to break and mar our submission to God. Men that will not take Jesus Christ for their Master, and refuse to follow Him when He speaks, will bind themselves to some human teacher, and enrol themselves as disciples in some school of thought or science or philosophy, with a submission so entire, that it puts to shame the submission which Christians render to the Incarnate Truth Himself.

And so I might go on, all round the horizon of our human nature, and signalise the difference that exists between the blemished sacrifices which each part of our being dares to bring to God and expects Him to accept, and the sacrifices, unblemished and spotless, which we carry to one another.

But let me say a word more directly about the subject of which Malachi is speaking. It seems to me that we may well take a very condemnatory contrast between what we offer to God in regard to our administration of earthly good, and what we offer on other altars. Contrast what you give, for directly beneficent and Christian purposes, with what you spend, without two thoughts, on your own comfort, indulgence, recreation, tastes--sometimes doubtful tastes--and the like. Contrast England's drink bill and England's missionary contribution. We spend ?10,000,000 on some wretched war, and some of you think it is cheap at the price, and the whole contributions of English Christians to missionary purposes in a twelvemonth do not amount to a tenth of that sum. You offer that to the spread of Christ's kingdom. Offer it to your Government, and try to compound for your share of the ten millions that you are going to spend in shells and gunpowder by the amount you give to Christian missions, and you will very soon have the tax-gatherer down on you. Will he be pleased with it?'

This one Missionary Society with which we are nominally connected has an income of ?70,000 a year. I suppose that is about a shilling per head from the members of our congregations. Of this congregation there are many that never give us a farthing, except, perhaps, the smallest coin in their pockets when the collecting-box comes round. I do not suppose that there is one of us that applies the underlying principle in our text, of giving God our best, to this work. I am not going to urge you. It is my business now simply to state, as boldly and strongly as I can, the fact; and I say with all sadness, with self-condemnation, as well as bringing an indictment against my brethren, but with the clearest conviction that I am not exaggerating in the smallest degree, that the contrast between what we lavish on other things and what we give for God's work in the world, is a shameful contrast, like that other which the Prophet gibbeted with his indignant eloquence.

**II. And now let me come to another point--viz., that we have here suggested and implied the true law and principle on which all Christian giving of all sorts is to be regulated.**

And that is--give the best. The diseased animal was no more fit for the altar of God than it was for the shambles of the viceroy. It was the entire and unblemished one that would be accepted in either case. But for us Christian people that general principle has to be expanded. Let me do it in two or three sentences.

The foundation of all is the unspeakable Gift. Jesus Christ has given Himself, God has given His Son. And Jesus Christ and God, in giving, gave up that we might receive. Do you believe that? Do you believe it about yourself? If you do, then the next step becomes certain. That gift, truly received by any man, will infallibly lead to a kindred (though infinitely inferior) self-surrender. If once we come within the circle of the attraction of that great Sun, if I might so say, it will sweep us clean out of our orbit, and turn us into satellites reflecting His light. To have self for our centre is death and misery, to have Christ for our centre is life and blessedness. And the one power that decentralises a man, and sweeps him into an orbit around Jesus, is the faithful acceptance of His great gift. Just as some little State will give up its independence in order to be blessedly absorbed into a great Empire, on the frontiers of which it maintains a precarious existence, so a man is never so strong, never so blessed, never so truly himself, as when the might of Christ's sacrifice has melted down all his selfishness, and has made it flow out in rivers of self-surrender, self-absorption, self-annihilation, and so self-preservation. He that loseth his life shall find it.

Then the next step is that this self-surrender, consequent upon my faithful acceptance of the Lord's surrender for me, changes my whole conception as to what I call my possessions. If I, in the depths of my soul, have yielded myself to Jesus Christ, which I shall have done if I have truly accepted Him as yielding Himself for me, then the yielding of self draws after it, necessarily, and without a question, a new relation between me and all that I have and all that I can do. Capacities, faculties, means, opportunities, powers of brain and heart and mind, and everything else--they all belong to Him. As in old times a nobleman came and put his hands between the King's hands, and kneeling before him surrendered his lands, and all his property, to the over-lord, and got them back again for his own, so we shall do, in the measure in which we have accepted Christ as our Saviour and our Guide. And so, because am His, I shall feel that I am His steward to administer what He gives me, not for myself, but for men and for God.

Then there follows another thing, and that is, that Christian giving, not of money only, but of money in a very eminent degree, is only right and truly Christian when you give yourself with your gift. A great many of us put our sixpence, or our half-crown, or our sovereign, into the plate, and no part of ourselves goes with it, except a little twinge of unwillingness to part with it. That is how they fling bones to dogs. That is not how you have to give your money and your efforts to God and God's cause. Farmers nowadays sow their seed-corn out of a machine with a number of little conical receptacles at the back of it and a small hole in the bottom of each, and as the thing goes bumping along over the furrows, out they fall. That drill does as well as, and better than, the hand of the sower scattering the seed, but it does not do near as well in the Christian agriculture in sowing the seed of the Kingdom. Machine-work will not do there; we have to have the sower's hand, and the sower's heart with his hand, as he scatters the seed. Brethren! apply the lesson to yourselves, and let your sympathies and your prayers and your wishes to help go along with your gifts, if you intend them to be of any good.

And there is another thing, and that is that, somehow or other, if not in the individual gifts, at all events in their aggregate, there must be present the fact of sacrifice. I will not offer unto the Lord burnt offerings of that which doth cost me nothing, said the old king. And we do not give as we ought, unless our gifts involve some measure of sacrifice. From many a subscription list some of the biggest donations would disappear, like the top-writing in one of those old manuscripts where the Gospel has been half-erased and written over with some foolish legend, which vanishes when the detergent liquid is applied to the parchment, if that thought were brought to bear upon it. God asks how much is kept, not how much is given.

Now, dear friends, these are all threadbare, elementary, A.B.C. truths. Are they the alphabet of our stewardship and administration of our possessions?

**III. One last suggestion I would make on this text is that it brings before us the possible blessing and possible grave results of right or wrong Christian giving.**

Will he be pleased with it? Or will he accept thy person? Will the governor think the hobbling creature, blind of an eye, and infected with some sickness, to be a beautiful addition to his flock? Will it help your suit with him? No!

It is New Testament teaching that our faithfulness in the administration of earthly possessions of all sorts has a bearing on our spiritual life. Remember our Lord's triple illustration of this principle, when He speaks about faithfulness in that which is least, leading on to the possession of that which is the greatest; when He speaks of faithfulness in regard to the unrighteous Mammon leading on to being intrusted with the true riches; when He speaks of faithfulness in our administration of that which is another's--alien to ourselves, and which may pass into the possession of a thousand more--leading on to our firmer hold, and our deeper and fuller possession of the riches which, in the deepest sense of the word, are our own. One very important element in the development and advance of the religious life is our right use of these earthly things. I have seen many a case in which a man was far better when he was a poor man than he was when a rich one, in which slowly, stealthily, certainly, the love of wealth has closed round a man like an iron band round a sapling, and has hindered the growth of his Christian character, and robbed him of the best things. And, God be thanked! one has seen cases, too, in which, by their Christian use of outward possessions, men have weakened the dominion of self upon themselves, have learned the subordinate value of the wealth that can be counted and detached from its possessor, and have grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Dear friends, God has given all of us something in charge, the faithful use of which is a potent factor in the growth of our Christian characters.

It is New Testament teaching that our faithful administration of earthly possessions has a bearing on the future. Remember what Jesus Christ said, That when ye fail they may receive you into everlasting habitations. Remember what His Apostle says, Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life. Let no fear of imperilling the great truth of salvation by faith lead us to forget that the faith which saves manifests its vitality and genuineness, by its effects upon our lives, and that no small part of our lives is concerned with the right acquisition and right use of these perishable outward gifts. And let us take care that we do not, in our dread of damaging the free grace of God, forget that although we do not earn blessedness, here or hereafter, by gifts whilst we are living or legacies when we are dead, the administration of money has an important part to play in shaping Christian character, and the Christian character which we acquire here settles our hereafter.

Brethren! we all need to revise our scale of giving, especially in regard to missionary operations. And if we will do that at the foot of the Cross, then we shall join the chorus, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive riches, and we shall come to Him bringing our silver and our gold with us, rejoicing that He gives us the possibility of sharing His blessedness, according to the word of the Lord Jesus which He spake, It is more blessed to give than to receive.