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

**MATTHEW-027. THE LAW OF LOVE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"43. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 44. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; 45. That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. 46. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? 47. And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others! do not even the publicans so? 48. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."*

*Matthew 5:43-48*

The last of the five instances of our Lord's extending and deepening and spiritualising the old law is also the climax of them. We may either call it the highest or the deepest, according to our point of view. His transfiguring touch invests all the commandments with which He has been dealing with new inwardness, sweep, and spirituality, and finally He proclaims the supreme, all-including commandment of universal love. It hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour--that comes from Lev. xix. 18; but where does and hate thine enemy come from? Not from Scripture, but in the passage in Leviticus neighbour is co-extensive with children of thy people, and the hatred and contempt of all men outside Israel which grew upon the Jews found a foothold there. Who is my neighbour? was apparently a well-discussed question in the schools of the Rabbis, and, whether any of these teachers ever committed themselves to plainly formulating the principle or not, practically the duty of love was restricted to a narrow circle, and the rest of the wide world left out in the cold. But not only was the circumference of love's circle drawn in, but to hate an enemy was elevated almost into a duty. It is the worst form of retaliation. An eye for an eye is bad enough, but hate for hate plunges men far deeper in the devil's mire. To flash back from the mirror of the heart the hostile looks which are flung at us, is our natural impulse; but why should we always leave it to the other man to pitch the keynote of our relations with him? Why should we echo only his tones? Cannot we leave his discord to die into silence and reply to it by something more musical? Two thunder-clouds may cast lightnings at each other, but they waste themselves in the process. Better to shine meekly and victoriously on as the moon does on piled masses of darkness till it silvers them with its quiet light. So Jesus bids us do. We are to suppress the natural inclination to pay back in the enemy's own coin, to give him as good as he gave us, to show proper spirit, and all the other fine phrases with which the world whitewashes hatred and revenge. We are not only to allow no stirring of malice in our feelings, but we are to let kindly emotions bear fruit in words blessing the cursers, and in deeds of goodness, and, highest of all, in prayers for those whose hate is bitterest, being founded on religion, and who are carrying it into action in persecution. We cannot hate a man if we pray for him; we cannot pray for him if we hate him. Our weakness often feels it so hard not to hate our enemies, that our only way to get strength to keep this highest, hardest commandment is to begin by trying to pray for the foe, and then we gradually feel the infernal fires dying down in our temper, and come to be able to meet his evil with good, and his curses with blessings. It is a difficult lesson that Jesus sets us. It is a blessed possibility that Jesus opens for us, that our kindly emotions towards men need not be at the mercy of theirs to us. It is a fair ideal that He paints, which, if Christians deliberately and continuously took it for their aim to realise, would revolutionise society, and make the fellowship of man with man a continual joy. Think of what any community, great or small, would be, if enmity were met by love only and always. Its fire would die for want of fuel. If the hater found no answering hate increasing his hate, he would often come to answer love with love. There is an old legend spread through many lands, which tells how a princess who had been changed by enchantment into a loathly serpent, was set free by being thrice kissed by a knight, who thereby won a fair bride with whom he lived in love and joy. The only way to change the serpent of hate into the fair form of a friend is to kiss it out of its enchantment.

No doubt, partial anticipations of this precept may be found, buried under much ethical rubbish, elsewhere than in the Sermon on the Mount, and more plainly in Old Testament teaching, and in Rabbinical sayings; but Christ's originality as a moral teacher lies not so much in the absolute novelty of His commandments, as in the perspective in which He sets them, and in the motives on which He bases them, and most of all in His being more than a teacher, namely, the Giver of power to fulfil what He enjoins. Christian ethics not merely recognises the duty of love to men, but sets it as the foundation of all other duties. It is root and trunk, all others are but the branches into which it ramifies. Christian ethics not merely recognises the duty, but takes a man by the hand, leads him up to his Father God, and says: There, that is your pattern, and a child who loves his Father will try to copy his ways and be made like Him by his love. So Morality passes into Religion, and through the transition receives power beyond its own. The perfection of worship is imitation, and when men call Him Father whom they adore, imitation becomes the natural action of a child who loves.

A dew-drop and a planet are both spheres, moulded by the same law of gravitation. The tiny round of our little drops of love may be not all unlike the colossal completeness of that Love, which owns the sun as His sun, and rays down light and distils rain over the broad world. God loves all men apart altogether from any regard to character, therefore He gives to all men all the good gifts that they can receive apart from character, and if evil men do not get His best gifts, it is not because He withholds, but because they cannot take. There are human love-gifts which cannot be bestowed on enemies or evil persons. It is not possible, nor fit, that a Christian should feel to such as he does to those who share his faith and sympathies; but it is possible, and therefore incumbent, that he should not only negatively clear his heart of malice and hatred, but that he should positively exercise such active beneficence as they will receive. That is God's way, and it should be His children's.

The thought of the divine pattern naturally brings up the contrast between it and that which goes by the name of love among men. Just because Christians are to take God as their example of love, they must transcend human examples. Here again Jesus strikes the note with which He began His teaching of His disciples righteousness; but very significantly He does not now point to Pharisees, but to publicans, as those who were to be surpassed. The former, no doubt, were models of righteousness after a rigid, whitewashed-sepulchre sort, but the latter had bigger hearts, and, bad as they were and were reputed to be, they loved better than the others. Jesus is glad to see and point to even imperfect sparks of goodness in a justly condemned class. No doubt, publicans in their own homes, with wife and children round them, let their hearts out, and could be tender and gentle, however gruff and harsh in public. When Jesus says even the publicans, He is not speaking in contempt, but in recognition of the love that did find some soil to grow on, even in that rocky ground. But is not the bringing in of the reward as a motive a woeful downcome? and is love that loves for the sake of reward, love at all? The criticism and questions forget that the true motive has just been set forth, and that the thought of reward comes in, only as secondary encouragement to a duty which is based upon another ground. To love because we shall gain something, either in this world or in the next, is not love but long-sighted selfishness; but to be helped in our endeavours to widen our love so as to take in all men, by the vision of the reward, is not selfishness but a legitimate strengthening of our weakness. Especially is that so, in view of the fact that the reward contemplated is nothing else than the growth of likeness to the Father in heaven, and the increase of filial consciousness, and the clearer, deeper cry, Abba, Father. If longing for, and having regard to, that recompense of reward is selfishness, and if the teaching which permits it is immoral, may God send the world more of such selfishness and of teachers of it!

But the reference to the shrunken love-streams that flow among men passes again swiftly to the former thought of likeness to God as the great pattern. Like a bird glancing downwards for a moment to earth, and then up again and away into the blue, our Lord's words re-soar, and settle at last by the throne of God. The command, Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect, may be intended to refer only to the immediately preceding section, but one is inclined to regard it rather as the summing up of the whole of the preceding series of commandments from verse 20 onwards. The sum of religion is to imitate the God whom we worship. The ideal which draws us to aim at its realisation must be absolutely perfect, however imperfect may be all our attempts to reproduce it. We sometimes hear it said that to set up perfection as our goal is to smite effort dead and to enthrone despair. But to set up an incomplete ideal is the surest way to take the heart out of effort after it. It is the Christian's prerogative to have ever gleaming before him an unattained aim, to which he is progressively approximating, and which, unreached, beckons, feeds hope of endless approach, and guarantees immortality.