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

**MATTHEW-044. JUDGING, ASKING, AND GIVING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Judge not, that ye be not judged. 2. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. 3. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? 4. Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye! 5. Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. 6. Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. 7. Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: 8. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. 9. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? 10. Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11. If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him? 12. Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."*

*Matthew 7:1-12*

**I. How can we help judging, and why should we not judge?**

The power of seeing into character is to be coveted and cultivated, and the absence of it makes simpletons, not saints. Quite true: but seeing into character is not what Jesus is condemning here. The judging of which He speaks sees motes in a brother's eye. That is to say, it is one-sided, and fixes on faults, which it magnifies, passing by virtues. Carrion flies that buzz with a sickening hum of satisfaction over sores, and prefer corruption to soundness, are as good judges of meat as such critics are of character. That Mephistophelean spirit of detraction has wide scope in this day. Literature and politics, as well as social life with its rivalries, are infested by it, and it finds its way into the church and threatens us all. The race of fault-finders we have always with us, blind as moles to beauties and goodness, but lynx-eyed for failings, and finding meat and drink in proclaiming them in tones of affected sorrow. How flagrant a breach of the laws of the kingdom this temper implies, and how grave an evil it is, though thought little of, or even admired as cleverness and a mark of a very superior person, Christ shows us by this earnest warning, embedded among His fundamental moral teachings.

He points out first how certainly that disposition provokes retaliation. Who is the Judge that judges us as we do others? Perhaps it is best to say that both the divine and the human estimates are included in the purposely undefined expression. Certainly both are included in fact. For a carping spirit of eager fault-finding necessarily tinges people's feelings towards its possessor, and he cannot complain if the severe tests which he applied to others are used on his own conduct. A cynical critic cannot expect his victims to be profoundly attached to him, or ready to be lenient to his failings. If he chooses to fight with a tomahawk, he will be scalped some day, and the bystanders will not lament profusely. But a more righteous tribunal than that of his victims condemns him. For in God's eyes the man who covers not his neighbour's faults with the mantle of charity has not his own blotted out by divine forgiveness.

This spirit is always accompanied by ignorance of one's own faults, which makes him who indulges in it ludicrous. So our Lord would seem to intend by the figure of the mote and the beam. It takes a great deal of close peering to see a mote; but the censorious man sees only the mote, and sees it out of scale. No matter how bright the eye, though it be clear as a hawk's, its beauty is of no moment to him. The mote magnified, and nothing but the mote, is his object; and he calls this one-sided exaggeration criticism, and prides himself on the accuracy of his judgment. He makes just the opposite mistake in his estimate of his own faults, if he sees them at all. We look at our neighbour's errors with a microscope, and at our own through the wrong end of a telescope. We see neither in their real magnitude, and the former mistake is sure to lead to the latter. We have two sets of weights and measures: one for home use, the other for foreign. Every vice has two names; and we call it by its flattering and minimising one when we commit it, and by its ugly one when our neighbour does it. Everybody can see the hump on his friend's shoulders, but it takes some effort to see our own. David was angry enough at the man who stole his neighbour's ewe lamb, but quite unaware that he was guilty of a meaner, crueller theft. The mote can be seen; but the beam, big though it is, needs to be considered. So it often escapes notice, and will surely do so, if we are yielding to the temptation of harsh judgment of others. Every one may be aware of faults of his own very much bigger than any that he can see in another, for each of us may fathom the depth of our own sinfulness in motive and unspoken, unacted thought, while we can see only the surface acts of others.

Our Lord points out, in verse 4, a still more subtle form of this harsh judgment, when it assumes the appearance of solicitude for the improvement of others, and He thus teaches us that all honest desire to help in the moral reformation of our neighbours must be preceded by earnest efforts at mending our own conduct. If we have grave faults of our own undetected and unconquered, we are incapable either of judging or of helping our brethren. Such efforts will be hypocritical, for they pretend to come from genuine zeal for righteousness and care for another's good, whereas their real root is simply censorious exaggeration of a neighbour's faults; they imply that the person affected with such a tender care for another's eyes has his own in good condition. A blind guide is bad enough, but a blind oculist is a still more ridiculous anomaly. Note, too, that the result of clearing our own vision is beautifully put as being, not ability to see, but ability to cure, our fellows. It is only the experience of the pain of casting out a darling evil, and the consciousness of God's pitying mercy as given to us, that makes the eye keen enough, and the hand steady and gentle enough, to pull out the mote. It is a delicate operation, and one which a clumsy operator may make very painful, and useless, after all. A rough finger or a harsh spirit makes success impossible.

**II. Verse 6 comes in singular juxtaposition with the preceding warning against uncharitable judgments.**

Christ's calling men dogs and swine does not sound like obeying His own precept. But the very shock which the words give at first hearing is part of their value. There are men whom Jesus, for all His gentleness, has to estimate thus. His pitying eyes were not blind to truth. It was no breach of infinite charity in Him to see facts, and to give them their right names; and His previous precept does not bid us shut our eyes, or give up the use of common sense. This verse limits the application of the preceding one, and inculcates prudence, tact, and discernment of character, as no less essential to His servants than the sweet charity, slow to suspect and sorrowful to expose a brother's fault. The fact that His gentle lips used such words may well make us shudder as we think of the deforming of human nature into pure animalism which some men achieve, and which is possible for all.

The inculcation of discretion in the presentation of the truth may easily be exaggerated into a doctrine of reserve which is more Jesuitical than Christian. Even when guarded and limited, it may seem scarcely in harmony with the commission to preach the gospel to every creature, or with the sublime confidence that God's word finds something to appeal to in every heart, and has power to subdue the animal in every man. But the divergence is only apparent. The most expansive zeal is to be guided by prudence, and the most enthusiastic confidence in the universal power of the gospel does not take leave of common sense. There are people who will certainly be repelled, and perhaps stirred to furious antagonism to the gospel and its messengers, if they are not approached with discretion. It is bad to hide the treasure in a napkin; it is quite as bad to fling it down before some people without preparation. Jesus Himself locked His lips before Herod, although the curious ruler asked many questions; and we have sometimes to remember that there are people who will not hear the word, and who must first be won without the word. Heavy rains run off hard-baked earth. It must first be softened by a gentle drizzle. Luther once told this fable: The lion made a great feast, and he invited all the beasts, and among the rest, a sow. When all manner of costly dishes were set before the guests, the sow asked, "Have you no bran?" Even so, said he, we preachers set forth the most dainty dishes,--the forgiveness of sins, and the grace of God; but they turn up their snouts, and grub for guilders.

This precept is one side of the truth. The other is the adaptation of the gospel to all men, and the obligation on us to preach it to all. We can only tell most men's disposition towards it by offering it to them, and we are not to be in a hurry to conclude that men are dogs and swine.

**III.** It may be a question whether, in verse 8, the emphasis is to be laid on every one or on that asketh, or, in other words, whether the saying is an assurance that the universal law will be followed in our case, or a statement of the universal condition without which no receiving is possible, and, least of all, the receiving of the gifts of the kingdom by its subjects. In either case, this verse gives the reason for the preceding exhortation. Then follows the tender illustration in which the dim-sighted love of earthly fathers is taken as a parable of the all-wise tenderness and desire to bestow which move the hand of the giving God. There is some resemblance between an Eastern loaf and a stone, and some between a fish and a serpent. However imperfect a father's love, he will neither be cruel enough to cheat his unsuspecting child with what looks like an answer to his wish but is useless or hurtful, nor foolish enough to make a mistake. All human relationships are in some measure marred by the faults of those who sustain them. What a solemn attestation of universal sinfulness is in these words of Christ's, and how calmly He separates Himself by His sinlessness from us! I do not know that there is anywhere a stronger scriptural proof of these two truths than this one incidental clause, ye, being evil. I wonder whether the people who pit the Sermon on the Mount against evangelical Christianity are ready to take this part of it into their creeds. It is noteworthy, also, that the emphasis is laid, not on the earthly father's willingness, but on his knowing how to give good gifts. Our Lord seems to think that He need not assure us of the plain truth that of course our Father in heaven is willing, just because He is our Father, to give us all good; but He heartens us with the assurance that His love is wisdom, and that He cannot make any mistakes. There are no stones mingled with our bread, nor any serpents among the fish. He gives good, and nothing but good.

**IV.** The great precept which closes the section is not only to be taken as an inference from the immediately preceding context, but as the summing up of all the duties to our neighbours, in which Christ has been laying down the law of the kingdom from Matthew 5:17. This general reference of the therefore is confirmed by the subsequent clause, this is the law and the prophets; the summing up of the whole past revelation of the divine will, and therefore in accordance with our Lord's previous exposition of the relation between His new law and that former one. As Luther puts it in his vigorous, homely way, With these words He now closes His instructions given in these three chapters, and ties it all up in a little bundle.

But a connection may also be traced with the preceding paragraph. There our desires were treated as securing God's corresponding gifts. Here our desires, when turned to men, are regarded, not as securing their corresponding conduct, but as obliging us to action. By taking our wishes as the rule of our dealings with others, we shall be like God, who in regard to His best gifts takes our wishes as the rule of His dealings with us. Our desires sent heavenward procure blessings for us; sent earthward, they prescribe our blessing of others. That is a startling turn to give to our claims on our fellows. It rests on the principle that every man has equal rights, therefore we ought not to look for anything from others which we are not prepared to extend to others. A. should give B. whatever A. thinks B. should give him. Our error is in making ourselves our own centre, and thinking more of our claims on others than of our obligations to them. Christ teaches us that these are one. Such a principle applied to our lives would wonderfully pull down our expectations and lift up our obligations. It is really but another way of putting the law of loving our neighbours as ourselves. If observed, it would revolutionise society. Nothing short of it is the law of the kingdom, and the duty of all who call themselves Christ's subjects.

This is the inmost meaning, says Jesus, of the law and the prophets. All former revelations of the divine will in regard to men's relations to men are summed in this. Of course, this does not mean, as some people would like to make it mean, that morality is to take the place of religion, but simply that all the precepts touching conduct to men are gathered up, for the subjects of the kingdom, in this one. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.