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

**MATTHEW-076**. **MAKE THE TREE GOOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"* *... Make the tree good, and his fruit good...."*

*Matthew 12:33*

In this Gospel we find that our Lord twice uses this image of a tree and its fruit. In the Sermon on the Mount He applies it as a test to false teachers, who hide, beneath the wool of the sheep's clothing, the fangs and paws of ravening wolves. He says, By their deeds ye shall know them; for as is the tree so is its fruit. That is a rough and ready test, which applies rather to the teacher than to his doctrine, but it applies, to some extent, to the doctrine too, on the hypothesis that the teacher's life fairly represents it. Of course, it is not the only thing that we have to take into account; but it may prick many a bladder, and unmask many an error, and it is the way by which the masses generally judge of systems and of their apostles. A saintly life has more power than dusty volumes of controversy.

But in our text Christ applies the same thoughts in rather a deeper fashion. Here the lesson that He would have us draw is of the connection between character and conduct; how what we do is determined by what we are, and how, not of course with the same absolute regularity and constancy, but still somewhat in the same fashion as the fruit is true to the tree, so, after all allowance made for ups and downs, for the irregular play of will and conscience, for the strife that is waged within a man, for the temptations of external circumstances, and the like--still, in general, as is the inner man, so is the outward manifestation. The facts of a life are important mainly as registering and making visible the inner condition of the doer. Now, that seems very elementary. Everybody believes that out of the heart are the issues of life, as a wise man said long ago, but it is one of the truths that, if grasped and worked into our consciousness, and out in our lives, would do much to revolutionise them. And so, though it is a very old story, and though we all admit it, I wish now to come face to face with the consequences of this thought, that behind action lies character, and that Doing is the second step, and Being is the first.

**I. I would ask you to notice how here we are confronted with the great problem for every man.**

Make the tree good. It takes a good man to do good things. So how shallow is all that talk, do, do, do, this, that, and the other thing. All right, but be; that is the first thing; or, as Christ said, Make the tree good, and the fruitwill take care of itself. So do you not see how, if that is true about us, we are each brought full front up to this, Am I trying to make my tree good? And what kind of success am I having in the attempt?The water that rises from some spring will bring up with it, in solution, a trace of a bed of salt through which it has come, and of all the minerals in the soil through which it has passed. And as its sparkling waters come out into the light, if one could analyse them completely, one might register a geological section of the strata through which it has risen. So, our acts bear in them a revelation of all the hidden beds through which they have risen; and sometimes they are bitter and salt, but they are always true to the self whose apocalypse they are to the world, or at all events to God.

Therefore, brethren, I have to urge this, that we shall not be doing our true work as men and women, if we are simply trying to better our actions, important as these are. By this saying the centre of gravity is shifted, and in one aspect, the deeds are made less important. The condition of the hidden man of the heart is the all-important thing. Christ's word comes to each of us as the briefest statement of all that it is our highest duty and truest wisdom to aim at in life--Make the tree good.

If you have ever tried it honestly, and have not been contented with the superficial cleaning up of outsides, which consists in shifting the dirt into another place only, not in getting rid of it, I know what met you almost as soon as you began, like some great black rock that rises in a mountain-pass, and forbids all farther advance--the consciousness that you were not good met you. I am not going to talk theological technicalities. Never mind about phrases--they have been the ruin of a great deal of earnest preaching--call it what you like, here is a fact, that whenever a man sets himself, with anything like resolute determination and rigid self-examination, to the task of getting himself right, he finds that he is wrong. That being the case, each of us has to deal with a tremendous problem; and the more earnestly and honestly we try to deal with it, the more we shall feel how grave it is. You can cure a great deal, I know. God forbid that I should say one word that seems to deny a man's power to do much in the direction of self-improvement, but after all that is done, again you are brought short up on this fact, the testimony of conscience. And so I see men labouring at a task as vain as that of those who would twist the sands into ropes, according to the old fable. I see men seeking after higher perfection of purity than they will ever attain. That is the condition of us all, of course, for our ideal must always outrun our realisation, else we may as well lie down and die. But there is a difference between the imperfect approximation, which we feel to be imperfect, and yet feel to be approximation, and the despairing consciousness, that I am sure a great many of my audience have had, more or less, that I have a task set for me that is far beyond my strength. Talk about making the tree good! I cannot do it. So men fold their hands, and the foiled endeavour begets despair. Or, as is the case with some of you, it begets indifference, and you do not care to try any more, because you have tried so often, and have made nothing of it.

There is the problem, how make the tree good, the tree being bad, or, at all events, if you do not like that broad statement, the tree having an element of badness, if I may so say, in and amongst any goodness that it has. I do not care which of the two forms of statement you take, the fact remains the same.

**II. Note the universal failure to solve the problem.**

Make the tree good.

Yes. And there are a whole set of would-be arboriculturists who tell you they will do it if you will trust to them. Let us look at them. First comes one venerable personage. He says, I am Law, and I prescribe this, and I forbid that, and I show reward and punishment, and I tell you--be a good man. Well! what then? It is not for want of telling that men are bad. The worst man in the world knows his duty a great deal more than the best man in the world does it. And whether it is the law of the land, or whether it is the law of society, or the law written in Scripture, or the law written in a man's own heart, they all come under the same fatal disability. They tell us what to do, and they do not put out a finger to help us to do it. A lame man does not get to the city because he sees a guide-post at the turning which tells him which road to take. The people who do not believe in certain modern agitations about the restrictions of the liquor traffic say, You cannot make people sober by Act of Parliament, which is absolutely true, although it does not bear, I think, the inference that they would draw from it, and it just puts into a rough form the fatal weakness of this would-be gardener and improver of the nature of the trees. He tells us our duty, and there an end.

Do you remember how the Apostle put the weakness of law in words, the antique theological terminology of which should not prevent us from seeing the large truth in them? If there had been a law given which could have given life, then righteousness should have been by the law, which being translated into modern English is just this, If Law could impart a power to obey its behests, then it is all that we want to make us right. But until it can do that it fails in two points. It deals with conduct, and we need to have character dealt with; and it does not lift the burden that it lays on me with one of its fingers. So we may rule Law out of court.

And then comes another, and he says, I am Culture, and intellectual acquirement; or my name is Education, and I am going to make the tree good in the most scientific fashion, because what makes men bad is that they do not know, and if they only knew they would do the right. Now, I thoroughly believe that education diminishes crime. I believe it weans from certain forms of evil. I believe that, other things being equal, an educated man, with his larger interests and his cultivated tastes, has a certain fastidiousness developed which keeps him from being so much tempted by the grosser forms of transgression. I believe that very largely you will empty your gaols in proportion as you fill your schools. And let no man say that I am an obscurantist, or that I am indifferent to the value of education and the benefits of intellectual culture, when I declare that all these may be attained, and the nature of the tree remain exactly what it was. You may prune, you may train along the wall, you may get bigger fruit, you will not get better fruit. Did you ever hear the exaggerated line that describes one of the pundits of science as the greatest, wisest, meanest of mankind? The plain fact is that the cultivation of the understanding has little to do with the purifying of the depths of the heart.

And then comes another, and says, I am the genius of Beauty and Art. And my recipe is pictures and statues, and all that will refine the mind, and lift the taste. That is the popular gospel of this day, in a great many quarters. Yes, and have we never heard of a period in European history which was, as they call it, the Renaissanceof art and the death of morality? Do we not know that side by side there have been cultivated in all ages, and are being cultivated to-day, the most exclusive devotion to the beauty that can be expressed by art, and the most intense indifference to the beauty of holiness? Ah! brethren, it wants something far deeper-going than pictures to purge the souls of men. And whilst, as before, I thankfully acknowledge the refining influence of this new cult, I would protest against the absurdity of putting it upon a pedestal as the guide and elevator of corrupted humanity.

And then come others, and they say, Environment is the thing that is to blame for it all. How can you get decent lives in the slums?No, I know you cannot; and God bless every effort made to get the people out of the slums, I say. Only do not let us exaggerate. You cannot change a man, as deeply as we need to be changed, by any change of his circumstances. Take the bitter tree, as I remember an old Jewish saying has it, take the bitter tree and plant it in Eden, and water it with the rivers there; and let the angel Gabriel be the gardener, and the tree will still bear bitter fruit. Are all the people who live in good houses good? Will a living wage--eight shillings a day and eight hoursplay--will these change a man's character? Will these go deep enough down to touch the springs of evil? You cannot alter the nature of a set of objects by arranging them in different shapes, parallelograms, or squares, or circles, or any others. As long as you have the elements that are in human nature to deal with, you may do as you like about the distribution of wealth, and the relation of Capital to Labour, and the various cognate questions which are all included in the vague word Socialism; and human nature will be too strong for you, and you will have the old mischiefs cropping out again. Brethren, you cannot put out Vesuvius by bringing to bear on it the squirts of all the fire engines in creation. The water will go up in steam, and do little or nothing to extinguish the fire. And whilst I would thankfully help in all these other movements, and look for certain limited results of good from them, I, for my part, believe, and therefore I am bound to declare, that neither singly, nor all of them in combination, will they ever effect the change on human nature which Jesus Christ regarded as the only possible means for securing that human nature should bear good fruit.

For, if there were no other reason, there are two plain ones which I only touch. God is the source of all good, of all creatural purity as well as all creatural blessedness. And if a life has a blank wall turned to Him, and has cut itself off from Him, I do not care how you educate it, fill it full of science, plunge it into an atmosphere of art, make the most perfect arrangements for social and economical and political circumstances, that soul is cut off from the possibility of good, because it is cut off from the fontal source of all good. And there is another reason which is closely connected with this, and that is that the true bitter tang in us all is self-centring regard. That is the mother-tincture that, variously coloured and compounded, makes in all the poisonous element that we call sin, and until you get something that will cast that evil out of a man's heart, you may teach and refine and raise him and arrange things for him as you like, and you will not master the source of all wrong and corrupt fruit.

**III. Lastly, let me say a word about the triumphant solution.**

Law says, Make the tree good, and does not try to do it. Christ said, Make the tree good, and proceeds to do it. And how does He do it?

He does it by coming to us; to every soul of man on the earth, and offering, first, forgiveness for all the past. I do not know that amongst all the bonds by which evil holds a poor soul that struggles to get away from it, there is one more adamantine and unyielding than the consciousness that the past is irrevocable, and that what I have written I have written, and never can blot out. But Jesus Christ deals with that consciousness. It is true that whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, and the Christian doctrine of forgiveness does not contradict that solemn truth, but it assures us that God's heart is not turned away from us, notwithstanding the past, and that we can write the future better, and break altogether the fatal bond that decrees, apart from Him, that to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant, and that past sin shall beget a progeny of future sins. That fruitfulness of sin is at an end, if we take Christ for our Saviour.

He makes the tree good in another fashion still; for the very centre, as it seems to me, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that into our spirits He will breathe a new life kindred with His own, a new nature which is free from the law and bonds of past sin, and of present and future death. The tree is made good because He makes those who believe in Him new creatures in Christ Jesus. Now, do not turn away and say that that is mysticism. Be it mysticism or not, it is God's truth. It is the truth of the Christian Revelation, that faith in Jesus Christ puts a new nature into any man, however sinful he may have been, and however deep the marks of the fetters may have been upon his limbs.

Christ makes the tree good in yet another fashion, because He brings to the reinforcement of the new life which He imparts the mightiest motives, and sways by love, which leads to the imitation of the Beloved, which leads to obedience to the Beloved, which leads to shunning as the worst of evils anything that would break the communion with the Beloved, and which is in itself the decentralising of the sinful soul from its old centre, and the making of Christ the Beloved the centre round which it moves, and from which it draws radiance and light and motion. By all these methods, and many more that I cannot dwell upon now, the problem is triumphantly solved by Christianity. The tree is made good, and instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle tree.

You may say, That is all very well in theory. What about the practice? I do not see such a mighty difference between you Christians and us. Well, for myself and my brethren, I accept the rebuke. There is not such a difference as there ought to be. But do you know why? Not because our great Gardener cannot change the nature of the plant, but because we do not submit ourselves to His power as we ought to do. Debit us with as many imperfections and inconsistencies as you like, do not lay them to the charge of Christ.

And yet we are willing to accept the test of Christianity which lies in its power to change men. I point to the persecutor on the road to Damascus. I point to the Bedfordshire tinker, to him that wrote Pilgrim's Progress. I point to the history of the Christian Church all down through the ages. I point to our mission fields to-day. I point to every mission hall, where earnest, honest men are working, and where, if you go and ask them, they will let you see people lifted from the very depths of degradation and sin, and made honest, sober, respectable, hard-working, though not very intelligent or refined, Christian people. I suppose that there is no man in an official position like mine who cannot look back over his ministry and remember, some of them dozens, some of them scores, some of them hundreds, of cases in which the change was made on the most hopeless people, by the simple acceptance of the simple gospel, Christ died for me, and Christ lives in me. I know that I can recall such, and I am sure that my brethren can.

People who are not Christians talk glibly about the failure of Christianity to transform men. They have never seen the transformations because they have never put themselves in the way of seeing them. They are being worked to-day; they might be worked here and now.

Try the power of the Gospel for yourselves. You cannot make the tree good, but you can let Jesus Christ do it. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots, but Jesus can do both. The lion shall eat straw like the ox. It is weary work to be tinkering at your acts. Take the comprehensive way, and let Him change your character. I believe that in some processes of dyeing, a piece of cloth, prepared with a certain liquid, is plunged into a vat full of dye-stuffs of one colour, and is taken out tinged of another. The soul, wet with the waters of repentance, and plunged into the Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, the crimson fountain of the blood of Christ, emerges whiter than snow. Let Him make the tree good and fruit will be good, for if not we shall be hewn down and cast into the fire, because we cannot bear any fruit unto holiness, nor can the end be everlasting life.