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

**MATTHEW-095**. **THE SECRET POWER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? 20. And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief."*

*Matthew 17:19-20*

And when He had called unto Him His twelve disciples, He gave them power against unclean spirits to cast them out. That same power was bestowed, too, on the wider circle of the seventy who returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through Thy name. The ground of it was laid in the solemn words with which Christ met their wonder at their own strength, and told how He beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Therefore had they triumphed, showing the fruits of their Master's victory; and therefore had He a right to renew the gift, in the still more comprehensive promise, I give unto you power--over all the power of the enemy.

What a commentary on such words this story affords! What has become of the disciplessupernatural might? Has it ebbed away as suddenly as it flowed? Is their Lord's endowment a shadow or His assurances delusion? Has He taken back what He gave? Not so. And yet His servants are ignominiously beaten. One poor devil-ridden boy brings all their resources to nothing. He stands before them writhing in the gripe of his tormentor, but they cannot set him free. The importunity of the father's prayers is vain, and the tension of expectancy in his eager face relaxes into the old hopeless languor as he slowly droops to the conviction that they could not cast him out. The malicious scorn in the eyes of the Scribes, those hostile critics who knew that it would be so, helps to produce the failure which they anticipated. The curious crowd buzz about them, and in the midst of it all stand the little knot of baffled disciples, possessors of power which seems to leave them when they need it most, with the unavailing spells dying half spoken on their lips, and their faint hearts longing that their Master would come down from the mount, and cover their weakness with His own great strength.

No wonder that, as soon as Christ and they are alone, they wish to know how their mortifying defeat has come about. And they get an answer which they little expected, for the last place where men look for the explanation of their failures is within; but they will ascend into the heavens, and descend into the deeps for remote and recondite reasons, before they listen to the voice which says, The fault is nigh thee, in thy heart. Christ's reply distinctly implies that the cause of their impotence lay wholly in themselves, not in any defect or withdrawal of power, but solely in that in them which grasped the power. They little expected, too, to be told that they had failed because they had not been sure they would succeed. They had thought that they believed in their ability to cast out the demon. They had tried to do so, with some kind of anticipation that they could. They had been surprised when they found that they could not. They had wonderingly asked why. And now Christ tells them that all along they had had no real faith in Him and in the reality of His gift. So subtly may unbelief steal into the heart, even while we fancy that we are working in faith. And a further portion of our Lord's reply points them to the great means by which this conquering faith can be maintained--namely, prayer and fasting. If, then, we put all these things together, we get a series of considerations, very simple and commonplace indeed, but all the better and truer therefor, which I venture to submit to you, as having a very important bearing on all our Christian work, and especially on the missionary work of the Church. The principles which the text suggests touch the perpetual possession of the power which conquers; the condition of its victorious exercise by us, as being our faith; the subtle danger of unsuspected unbelief to which we are exposed; and the great means of preserving our faith pure and strong. I ask your attention to a few considerations on these points in their order.

But first, let me say very briefly, that I would not be understood as, by the selection of such a text, desiring to suggest that we have failed in our work. Thank God! we can point to results far, far greater than we have deserved, far greater than we have expected, however they may be beneath our desires, and still further below what the gospel was meant to accomplish. It may suit observers who have never done anything themselves, and have not particularly clear eyes for appreciating spiritual work, to talk of Christian missions as failures; but it would ill become us to assent to the lie. Failures indeed! with half a million of converts, with new forms of Christian life budding in all the wilderness of the peoples, with the consciousness of coming doom creeping about the heart of every system of idolatry! Is the green life in the hedges and in the sweet pastures starred with rathe primroses, and in the hidden copses blue with hyacinths, a failure, because the east wind bites shrewdly, and the tender ash delays to clothe herself with green? No! no, we have not failed. Enough has been done to vindicate the enterprise, more than enough to fill our lips with thanksgiving, enough to entitle us to say to all would-be critics--Do you the same with your enchantments. But, on the other hand, we have to confess that the success has been slow and small, chequered and interrupted, that often we have been foiled, that we have confronted many a demon whom we could not cast out, and that at home and abroad the masses of evil seem to close in around us, and we make but little impression on their serried ranks. We have had success enough to assure us that we possess the treasure, and failures enough to make us feel how weak are the earthen vessels which hold it.

And now let us turn to the principles which flow from this text.

**I. We have an unvarying power.**

No doubt the explanation of their defeat which most naturally suggested itself to these disciples would be that somehow or other--perhaps because of Christ's absence--they had lost the gift which they knew that they once had. And the same way of accounting for later want of success lingers among Christian people still. You will sometimes hear it said: God sends forth His Spirit in special fulness at special times, according to His own sovereign will; and till then we can only wait and pray. Or, The miraculous powers which dwelt in the early Church have been withdrawn, and therefore the progress is slow. The strong imaginative tendency to make an ideal perfect in the past leads us to think of the primitive age of the Church as golden, in opposition to the plain facts of the case. We fancy that because apostles were its teachers, and the Cross within its memory, the infant society was stronger, wiser, better than any age since, and had gifts which we have lost. What had it which we do not possess? The power of working miracles. What have we which it did not possess? A completed Bible, and the experience of nineteen centuries to teach us to understand it, and to confirm by facts our confidence that Christ's gospel is for all time and every land. What have we in common with it? The same mission to fulfil, the same wants in our brethren to meet, the same gospel, the same spirit, the same immortal Lord. All that any age has possessed to fit it for the task of witnessing for Christ we too possess. The Church has in it a power which is ever adequate to the conquest of the world; and that power is constant through all time, whether we consider it as recorded in an unvarying gospel, or as energised by an abiding spirit, or as flowing from and centred in an unchangeable Lord.

We have a gospel which never can grow old. Its adaptation to the deepest needs of men's souls remains constant with these needs. These vary not from age to age. No matter what may be the superficial differences of dress, the same human heart beats beneath every robe. The great primal wants of men's spirits abide, as the great primal wants of their bodily life abide. Food and shelter for the one,--a loving, pardoning God, to know and love, for the other--else they perish. Wherever men go they carry with them a conscience which needs cleansing, a sense of separation from God joined with a dim knowledge that union with Him is life, a will which is burdened with its own selfhood, an imagination which paints the misty walls of this earthly prison with awful shapes that terrify and faint hopes that mock, a heart that hungers for love, and a reason which pines in atrophy without light. And all these the gospel which is lodged in our hands meets. It addresses itself to nothing in men that is not in man. Surface differences of position, culture, clime, age, and the like, it brushes aside as unimportant, and it goes straight to the universal wants. People tell us it has done its work, and much confident dogmatism proclaims that the world has outgrown it. We have a right to be confident also, with a confidence born of our knowledge, that it has met and satisfied for us the wants which are ours and every man's, and to believe that as long as men live by bread, so long will this word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God be the food of their souls. Areopagus and Piccadilly, Benares and Oxford, need the same message and will find the same response to all their wants in the same word.

Many of the institutions in which Christendom has embodied its conceptions of God's truth will crumble away. Many of the conceptions will have to be modified, neglected truths will grow, to the dislocation of much systematic theology, and the Word better understood will clear away many a portentous error with which the Church has darkened the Word. Be it so. Let us be glad when the things which can be shaken are removed, like mean huts built against the wall of some cathedral, masking and marring the completeness of its beauty; that the things which cannot be shaken may remain, and all the clustered shafts, and deep-arched recesses, and sweet tracery may stand forth freed from the excrescences which hid them.

The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away. But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

We have an abiding Spirit, the Giver to us of a power without variableness or the shadow of turning, I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you for ever. The manner of His operations may vary, but the reality of His energy abides. The worksof wonder which Jesus did on earth may no more be done, but the greater works than these are still the sign of His presence, without whom no spiritual life is possible. Prophecies may fail, tongues may cease, but the more excellent gifts are poured out now as richly as ever. We are apt to look back to Pentecost and think that that marked a height to which the tide has never reached since, and therefore we are stranded amidst the ooze and mud. But the river which proceeds from the throne of God and of the Lamb is not like one of our streams on earth, that leaps to the light and dashes rejoicingly down the hillside, but creeps along sluggish in its level course, and dies away at last in the sands. It pours along the ages the same full volume with which it gushed forth at first. Rather, the source goes with the Church in all ages, and we drink not of water that came forth long ago in the history of the world, and has reached us through the centuries, but of that which wells out fresh every moment from the Rock that follows us. The Giver of all power is with us.

We have a Lord, the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world. We have not merely to look back to the life and death of Christ in history, and recognise there the work, the efficacy of which shall endure for ever. But whilst we do this, we have also to think of the Christ that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. And the one thought, as the other, should strengthen our confidence in our possession of all the might that we need for bringing the world back to our Lord.

A work in the past which can never be exhausted or lose its power is the theme of our message. The mists of gathering ages wrap in slowly thickening folds of forgetfulness all other men and events in history, and make them ghostlike and shadowy; but no distance has yet dimmed or will ever dim that human form divine. Other names are like those stars that blaze out for a while, and then smoulder down into almost complete invisibility; but He is the very Light itself, that burns and is not consumed. Other landmarks sink below the horizon as the tribes of men pursue their solemn march through the centuries, but the Cross on Calvary shall stand for an ensign of the people, and to it shall the Gentiles seek. To proclaim that accomplished salvation, once for all lodged in the heart of the world's history, and henceforth for ever valid, is our unalterable duty. The message carries in itself its own immortal strength.

A living Saviour in the present, who works with us, confirming the word with signs following, is the source of our power. Not till He is impotent shall we be weak. The unmeasurable measure of the gift of Christ defines the degree, and the unending duration of His life who continueth for ever sets the period, of our possession of the grace which is given to every one of us. He is ever bestowing. He never withdraws what He once gives. The fountain sinks not a hairs-breadth, though nineteen centuries have drawn from it. Modern astronomy begins to believe that the sun itself by long expense of light will be shorn of its beams and wander darkling in space, circled no more by its daughter planets. But this Sun of our souls rays out for ever the energies of life and light and love, and after all communication possesses the infinite fulness of them all. His name shall be continued as long as the sun; all nations shall call Him blessed.

Here then, brethren, are the perpetual elements of our constant power, an eternal Word, an abiding Spirit, an unchanging Lord.

**II. The condition of exercising this power is Faith.**

With such a force at our command--a force that could shake the mountains and break the rocks--how come we ever to fail? So the disciples asked, and Christ's answer cuts to the very heart of the matter. Why could you not cast him out? For one reason only, because you had lost your hold of My strength, and therefore had lost your confidence in your own derived power, or had forgotten that it was derived, and essayed to wield it as if it were your own. You did not trust Me, so you did not believe that you could cast him out; or you believed that you could by your own might, therefore you failed. He throws them back decisively on themselves as solely responsible. Nowhere else, in heaven or in earth or hell, but only in us, does the reason lie for our breakdown, if we have broken down. Not in God, who is ever with us, ready to make all grace abound in us, whose will is that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth; not in the gospel which we preach, for it is the power of God unto salvation; not in the demon might which has overcome us, for greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. We are driven from all other explanations to the bitterest and yet the most hopeful of all, that we only are to blame.

And what in us is to blame? Some of us will answer--Our modes of working; they have not been free enough, or not orderly enough, or in some way or other not wisely adapted to our ends. Some will answer--Our forms of presenting the truth; they have not been flexible enough, or not fixed enough; they have been too much a reproduction of the old; they have been too licentious a departure from the old. Some will answer--Our ecclesiastical arrangements; they have been too democratic; they have been too priestly. Some will answer--Our intellectual culture; it has been too great, obscuring the simplicity that is in Christ; it has been too small, sending poorly furnished men into the field to fight with ordered systems of idolatry which rest upon a philosophical basis, and can only be overturned by undermining that. It is no part of my present duty to discuss these varying answers. No doubt there is room for improvement in all the fields which they indicate. But does not the spirit of our Lord's words here beckon us away from these purely secondary subjects to fix our self-examination on the depth and strength of our faith, as incomparably the most important element in the conditions which determine our success or our failure? I do not undervalue the worth of wise methods of action, but the history of the Church tells us that pretty nearly any methods of action are fruitful in the right hands, and that without living faith the best of them become like the heavy armour which half-smothered a feeble man. I do not pretend to that sublime indifference to dogma which is the modern form of supreme devotion to truth, but experience has taught us that wherever the name of Christ, as the Saviour of the world, has been lovingly proclaimed, there devils have been cast out, whatever private and sectional doctrines the exerciser has added to it. I do not disparage organisation, but courage is more than drill; and there is such a thing as the very perfection of arrangement without life, like cabinets in a museum, where all the specimens are duly classified, and dead. I believe, with the old preacher, that if God does not need our learning, He needs our ignorance still less, but it is of comparatively little importance whether the draught of living water be brought to thirsty lips in an earthen cup or a golden vase.

The main thing is, does it hold good measure?

Heaven soon sets right all other matters.

And therefore, while leaving full scope for all improvements in these subordinate conditions, let me urge upon you that the main thing which makes us strong for our Christian work is the grasp of living faith, which holds fast the strength of God. There is no need to plunge into the jungle of metaphysical theology here. Is it not a fact that the might with which the power of God has wrought for men's salvation has corresponded with the strength of the Church's desire and the purity of its trust in His power? Is it not a truth plainly spoken in Scripture and confirmed by experience, that we have the awful prerogative of limiting the Holy One of Israel, and quenching the Spirit? Was there not a time in Christ's life on earth when He could do no mighty works because of their unbelief? We receive all spiritual gifts in proportion to our capacity, and the chief factor in settling the measure of our capacity is our faith. Here on the one hand is the boundless ocean of the divine strength, unfathomable in its depth, full after all draughts, tideless and calm, in all its movement never troubled, in all its repose never stagnating; and on the other side is the empty aridity of our poor weak natures. Faith opens these to the influx of that great sea, and according to our faith, in the exact measure of our receptivity, does it enter our hearts. In itself the gift is boundless. It has no limit except the infinite fulness of the power which worketh in us. But in reference to our possession it is bounded by our capacity, and though that capacity enlarges by the very fact of being filled, and so every moment becomes greater through fruition, yet at each moment it is the measure of our possession, and our faith is the measure of our capacity. Our power is God's power in us, and our faith is the power with which we grasp God's power and make it ours. So then, in regard to God, our faith is the condition of our being strengthened with might by His Spirit.

Consider, too, how the same faith has a natural operation on ourselves which tends to fit us for casting out the evil spirits. Given a man full of faith, you will have a man tenacious in purpose, absorbed in one grand object, simple in his motives, in whom selfishness has been driven out by the power of a mightier love, and indolence stirred into unwearied energy. Such a man will be made wise to devise, gentle to attract, bold to rebuke, fertile in expedients, and ready to be anything that may help the aim of his life. Fear will be dead in him, for faith is the true anaesthesia of the soul; and the knife may cut into the quivering flesh, and the spirit be scarce conscious of a pang. Love, ambition, and all the swarm of distracting desires will be driven from the soul in which the lamp of faith burns bright. Ordinary human motives will appeal in vain to the ears which have heard the tones of the heavenly music, and all the pomps of life will show poor and tawdry to the sight that has gazed on the vision of the great white throne and the crystal sea. The most ignorant and erroneous religious sentiment--to use a modern phrase--is mightier than all other forces in the world's history. It is like some of those terrible compounds of modern chemistry, an inert, innocuous-looking drop of liquid. Shake it, and it flames heaven high, shattering the rocks and ploughing up the soil. Put even an adulterated and carnalised faith into the hearts of a mob of wild Arabs, and in a century they will stream from their deserts, and blaze from the mountains of Spain to the plains of Bengal. Put a living faith in Christ and a heroic confidence in the power of His Gospel to reclaim the worst sinners into a man's heart, and he will out of weakness be made strong, and plough his way through obstacles with the compact force and crashing directness of lightning. There have been men of all sorts who have been honoured to do much in this world for Christ. Wise and foolish, learned and ignorant, differing in tone, temper, creed, forms of thought, and manner of working, in every conceivable degree; but one thing, and perhaps one thing only, they have all had--a passion of enthusiastic personal devotion to their Lord, a profound and living faith in Him and in His salvation. All in which they differed is but the gay gilding on the soldier's coat. That in which they were alike is as the strong arm which grasps the sword, and has its muscles braced by the very clutch. Faith is itself a source of strength, as well as the condition of drawing might from heaven.

Consider, too, how faith has power over men who see it. The exhibition of our own personal convictions has more to do in spreading them than all the arguments which we use. There is a magnetism and a contagious energy in the sight of a brother's faith which few men can wholly resist. If you wish me to weep, your own tears must flow; and if you would have me believe, let me see your soul heaving under the emotion which you desire me to feel. The arrow may be keen and true, the shaft rounded and straight, the bow strong, and the arm sinewy; but unless the steel be winged it will fall to the ground long before it strikes the butt. Your arrows must be winged with faith, else orthodoxy, and wise arrangements, and force and zeal, will avail nothing. No man will believe in, and no demon will obey, spells which the would-be exorcist only half believes himself. Even if he speak the name of Christ, unless he speak it with unfaltering confidence, all the answer he will get will only be the fierce and taunting question, Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?Brethren, let us give heed to the solemn rebuke which our Master lovingly reads to us in these words, and while we aim at the utmost possible perfection in all subordinate matters, let us remember that they all without faith are weak, as an empty suit of armour with no life beneath the corselet; and that faith without them all is strong, like the knight of old, who rode into the bloody field in simple silken vest, and conquered. That which determines our success or failure in the work of our Lord is our faith.

**III. Our faith is ever threatened by subtle unbelief.**

It would appear that the disciples were ignorant of the unbelief that had made them weak. They fancied that they had confidence in their Christ-given power, and they certainly had in some dull kind of fashion expected to succeed in their attempt. But He who sees the heart knew that there was no real living confidence in their souls; and His words are a solemn warning to us all, of how possible it is for us to have our faith all honeycombed by gnawing doubt while we suspect it not, like some piece of wood apparently sound, the whole substance of which has been eaten away by hidden worms. We may be going on with Christian work, and may even be looking for spiritual results. We may fancy ourselves faithful stewards of the gospel, and all the while there may be an utter absence of the one thing which makes our words more than so much wind whistling through an archway. The shorn Samson went out to shake himself as at other times, and knew not that the Spirit of the Lord had departed from him. Who among us is not exposed to the assaults of that pestilence that walketh in darkness? and, alas! who among us can say that he has repelled the contagion? Subtly it creeps over us all, the stealthy intangible vapour, unfelt till it has quenched the lamp which alone lights the darkness of the mine, and clogged to suffocation the labouring lungs.

I will not now speak of the general sources of danger to our faith, which are always in operation with a retarding force as constant as friction, as certain as the gravitation which pulls the pendulum to rest at its lowest point. But I may very briefly particularise two of the enemies of that faith, which have a special bearing on our missionary work, and may be illustrated from the narrative before us.

First, all our activity in spreading the Gospel, whether by personal effort or by our gifts, like every form of outward action, tends to become mechanical, and to lose its connection with the motive which originated it. Of course it is also true, on the other side, that all outward action also tends to strengthen the motive from which it flows. But our Christian work will not do so, unless it be carefully watched, and pains be taken to keep it from slipping off its original foundation, and so altering its whole character. We may very easily become so occupied with the mere external occupation as to be quite unconscious that it has ceased to be faithful work, and has become routine, dull mechanism, or the result of confidence, not in Christ, whose power once flowed through us, but in ourselves the doers. So these disciples may have thought, We can cast out this devil, for we have done the like already, and have forgotten that it was not they, but Christ in them, who had done it.

How widely this foe to our faith operates amid the multiplied activities of this busy age, one trembles to think. We see all around us a Church toiling with unexampled expenditure of wealth, and effort, and time. It is difficult to repress the suspicion that the work is out of proportion to the life. Ah, brethren, how much of all this energy of effort, so admirable in many respects, will He whose fan is in His hand accept as true service--how much of it will be wheat for the garner, how much chaff for the fire? It is not for us to divide between the two, but it is for us to remember that it is not impossible to make of our labours the most dangerous enemy to the depth of our still life hidden with Christ in God, and that every deed of apparent service which is not the real issue of living faith is powerless for good to others, and heavy with hurt to ourselves. Brethren and fathers in the ministry! how many of us know what it is to talk and toil away our early devotion; and all at once to discover that for years perhaps we have been preaching and labouring from mere habit and routine, like corpses galvanised into some ghastly and transient caricature of life. Christian men and women, beware lest this great enterprise of missions, which our fathers began from the holiest motives and in the simplest faith, should in our hand be wrenched away from its only true basis, and be done with languid expectation and more languid desires of success, from no higher motive than that we found it in existence, and have become accustomed to carry it on. If that be our reason, then we harm ourselves, and mask from our own sight our own unbelief. If that be the case the work may go on for a while, like a clock ticking with fainter and fainter beats for a minute after it has run down; but it will soon cease, and neither heaven nor earth will be much the poorer for its ending.

Again, the atmosphere of scornful disbelief which surrounded the disciples made their faith falter. It was too weak to sustain itself in the face of the consciousness that not a man in all that crowd believed in their power; and it melted away before the contempt of the scribes and the incredulous curiosity of the bystanders, without any reason except the subtle influence which the opinions and characters of those around us have on us all.

And, brethren, are not we in danger to-day of losing the firmness of our grasp on Christ, as our Saviour and the world's, from a precisely similar cause? We live in an atmosphere of hesitancy and doubt, of scornful rejection of His claims, of contemptuous disbelief in anything which a scalpel cannot cut. We cannot but be conscious that to hold by Jesus Christ as the Incarnate God, the supernatural Beginning of a new life, the sole Hope of the world, is to expose ourselves to the contempt of so-called advanced and liberal thinkers, and to be out of harmony with the prevailing set of opinions. The current of educated thought runs strongly against such beliefs, and I suppose that every thoughtful man among us feels that a great danger to our faith to-day comes from the force with which that current swings us round, and threatens to make some of us drag our anchors, and drift, and strike and go to pieces on the sands. For one man who is led by the sheer force of reason to yield to the intellectual grounds on which modern unbelief reposes, there are twenty who simply catch the infection in the atmosphere. They find that their early convictions have evaporated, they know not how; only that once the fleece was wet with dew and now it is dry. For unbelief has a contagious energy wholly independent of reason, no less than has faith, and affects multitudes who know nothing of its grounds, as the iceberg chills the summer air for leagues, and makes the sailors shiver long before they see its barren peaks.

Therefore, brethren, let us all take heed to ourselves, lest we suffer our grasp of our dear Lord's hand to relax for no better reason than because so many have left His side. To us all His pleading love, which knows how much we are moulded by the example of others, is saying, in view of the fashion of unbelief, Will ye also go away?Let us answer, with a clasp that clings the tighter for our danger of being sucked in by the strong current, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. We cannot help seeing that the creeping paralysis of hesitancy and doubt about even the power of Christ's name is stealing over portions of the Church, and stiffening the arm of its activity. Lips that once spoke with full confidence the words that cast out devils, mutter them now languidly with half-belief. Hearts that were once full of sympathy with the great purpose for which Christ died are growing cold to the work of preaching the Gospel to the heathen, because they are growing to doubt whether, after all, there is any Gospel at all. This icy breath, dear brethren, is blowing over our Churches and over our hearts. And wherever it reaches, there labour for Jesus and for men languishes, and we recoil baffled with unavailing exorcisms dying in our throats, and the rod of our power broken in our hands. Why could not we cast him out? Because of your unbelief.

**IV. Our faith can only be maintained by constant devotion and rigid self-denial.**

I can touch but very lightly on that solemn thought in which our Lord sets forth the condition of our faith, and therefore of our power. This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting. The discipline then which nurtures faith is mainly moral and spiritual--not as a substitute for, or to the exclusion of, the intellectual discipline, which is presupposed, not neglected, in these words.

The first condition of the freshness and energy of faith is constant devotion. The attrition of the world wears it thin, the distractions of life draw it from its clinging hold on Christ, the very toil for Him is apt to entice our thoughts from out of the secret place of the most High into the busy arena of our strife. Therefore we have ever need to refresh the drooping flowers of the chaplet by bathing them in the Fountain of Life, to rise above all the fevered toil of earth to the calm heights where God dwells, and in still communion with Him to replenish our emptied vessels and fill our dimly burning lamps with His golden oil. The sister of the cumbered Martha is the contemplative Mary, who sits in silence at the Master's feet and lets His words sink into her soul; the closest friend of Peter the apostle of action is John the apostle of love. If our work is to be worthy, it must ever be freshened anew by our gaze into His face; if our communion with Him is to be deep, it must never be parted from outward service. Our Master has left us the example, in that, when the night fell and every man went to his own home, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives; and thence, after His night of prayer, came very early in the morning to the temple, and taught. The stream that is to flow broad and life-giving through many lands must have its hidden source high among the pure snows that cap the mount of God. The man that would work for God must live with God. It was from the height of transfiguration that He came, before whom the demon that baffled the disciples quailed and slunk away like a whipped hound. This kind goeth not out but by prayer.

The second condition is rigid self-denial. Fasting is the expression of the purpose to control the lower life, and to abstain from its delights in order that the life of the spirit may be strengthened. As to the outward fact, it is nothing--it may be practised or not. If it be, it will be valuable only in so far as it flows from and strengthens that purpose. And such vigorous subordination of all the lower powers, and abstinence from many an inferior good, both material and immaterial, is absolutely necessary if we are to have any wholesome strength of faith in our souls. In the recoil from the false asceticism of Roman Catholicism and Puritanism, has not this generation of the Church gone too far in the opposite direction? and in the true belief that Christianity can sanctify all joys, and ensure the harmonious development of all our powers, have we not been forgetting that hand and foot may cause us to stumble, and that we had better live maimed than die with all our limbs? There is a true asceticism, a discipline--a gymnastic unto godliness, as Paul calls it. And if our faith is to grow high and bear rich clusters on the topmost boughs that look up to the sky, we must keep the wild lower shoots close nipped. Without rigid self-control and self-limitation, no vigorous faith.

And without them no effectual work! It is no holiday task to cast out devils. Self-indulgent men will never do it. Loose-braced, easy souls, that lie open to all the pleasurable influences of ordinary life, are no more fit for God's weapons than a reed for a lance, or a bit of flexible lead for a spear-point. The wood must be tough and compact, the metal hard and close-grained, out of which God makes His shafts. The brand that is to guide men through the darkness to their Father's home must glow with a pallor of consuming flame that purges its whole substance into light. This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.

Dear brethren, what solemn rebuke these words have for us all! How they winnow our works of Christian activity! How they show us the hollowness of our services, the self-indulgence of our lives, the coldness of our devotion, the cowardice of our faith! How marvellous they make the fruits which God's great goodness has permitted us to see even from our doubting service! Let us turn to Him with fresh thankfulness that unto us, who are less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that we should preach among the nations the unsearchable riches of Christ. Let us not be driven from our confidence that we have a gospel to preach for all the world; but strong in the faith which rests on impregnable historical grounds, on our own experience of what Christ has done for us, and on nineteen centuries of growing power and unfolding wisdom, let us thankfully welcome all that modern thought may supply for the correction of errors in belief, in organisation, and in life, that may have gathered round His perfect and eternal gospel--being assured, as we have a right to be, that all will but lift higher the Name which is above every name, and set forth more plainly that Cross which is the true tree of life to all the families of men. Let us cast ourselves before Him with penitent confession, and say,--O Lord, our strength! we have not wrought any deliverance on earth; we have been weak when all Thy power was at our command; we have spoken Thy word as if it were an experiment and a peradventure whether it had might; we have let go Thy hand and lost Thy garment's hem from our slack grasp; we have been prayerless and self-indulgent. Therefore Thou hast put us to shame before our foes, and our enemies laugh among themselves. Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth; stir up Thy strength and come and save us!Then will the last words that He spoke on earth ring out again from the throne: All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations; and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.