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

**MATTHEW-098**. **SELF-MUTILATION FOR SELF-PRESERVATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee."*

*Matthew 18:8 (R.V.)*

No person or thing can do our characters as much harm as we ourselves can do. Indeed, none can do them any harm but ourselves. For men may put stumbling-blocks in our way, but it is we who make them stumbling-blocks. The obstacle in the path would do us no hurt if it were not for the erring foot, nor the attractive prize if it were not for the hand that itched to lay hold of it, nor the glittering bauble if it were not for the eye that kindled at the sight of it. So our Lord here, having been speaking of the men that put stumbling-blocks in the way of His little ones, draws the net closer and bids us look at home. A solemn woe of divine judgment is denounced on those who cause His followers to stumble; let us leave God to execute that, and be sure that we have no share in their guilt, but let us ourselves be the executioners of the judgment upon the things in ourselves which alone give the stumbling-blocks, which others put before us, their fatal power.

There is extraordinary energy in these words. Solemnly they are repeated twice here, verbatim; solemnly they are repeated verbatim three times in Mark's edition. The urgent stringency of the command, the terrible plainness of the alternative put forth by the lips that could say nothing harsh, and the fact that the very same injunction appears in a wholly different connection in the Sermon on the Mount, show us how profoundly important our Lord felt the principle to be which He was here laying down.

We mark these three points. First, the case supposed, If thy hand or thy foot cause thee to stumble. Then the sharp, prompt remedy enjoined, Cut them off and cast them from thee. Then the solemn motive by which it is enforced, It is better for thee to enter into life maimed than, being a whole man, to be cast into hell-fire.

**I. First, then, as to the case supposed.**

Hand and foot and eye are, of course, regarded as organs of the inward self, and symbols of its tastes and capacities. We may perhaps see in them the familiar distinction between the practical and the theoretical:--hand and foot being instruments of action, and the eye the organ of perception. Our Lord takes an extreme case. If members of the body are to be amputated and plucked out should they cause us to stumble, much more are associations to be abandoned and occupations to be relinquished and pleasures to be forsaken, if these draw us away. But it is to be noticed that the whole stringency of the commandment rests upon that if. If they cause thee to stumble, then, and not else, amputate. The powers are natural, the operation of them is perfectly innocent, but a man may be ruined by innocent things. And, says Christ, if that process is begun, then, and only then, does My exhortation come into force.

Now, all that solemn thought of a possible injurious issue of innocent occupations, rests upon the principles that our nature has an ideal order, so as that some parts of it are to be suppressed and some are to rule, and that there are degrees of importance in men's pursuits, and that where the lower interfere and clog the operations of the higher, there they are harmful. And so the only wisdom is to excise and cut them off.

We see illustrations in abundance every day. There are many people who are being ruined in regard to the highest purposes of their lives, simply by an over-indulgence in lower occupations which in themselves may be perfectly right. Here is a young woman that spends so much of her day in reading novels that she has no time to look after the house and help her mother. Here is a young man so given to athletics that his studies are neglected--and so you may go all round the circle, and find instances of the way in which innocent things, and the excessive or unwise exercise of natural faculties, are destroying men. And much more is that the case in regard to religion, which is the highest object of pursuit, and in regard to those capacities and powers by which we lay hold of God. These are to be ministered to by the rest, and if there be in my nature or in the order of my life something which is drawing away to itself the energy that ought to go in that other direction, then, howsoever innocent it may be, per se, it is harming me. It is a wen that is sucking all the vital force into itself, and turning it into poison. And there is only one cure for it, and that is the knife.

Then there is another point to be observed in this case supposed, and that is that the whole matter is left to the determination of personal experience. No one else has the right to decide for you what it is safe and wise for you to do in regard to things which are not in themselves wrong. If they are wrong in themselves, of course the consideration of consequences is out of place altogether; but if they be not wrong in themselves, then it is you that must settle whether they are legitimate for you or not. Do not let your Christian liberty be interfered with by other people's dictation in regard to this matter. How often you hear people say, I could not do it; meaning thereby, therefore he ought not to do it!But that inference is altogether illegitimate. True, there are limitations of our Christian liberty in regard to things indifferent and innocent. Paul lays down the most important of these in three sentences. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not;--you must think of your brethren as well as of yourself. All things are lawful for me, yet will I not be brought under the power of any; keep master of them, and rather abstain altogether than become their slave. But these three limitations being observed, then, in regard to all such matters, nobody else can prescribe for you or me. To his own Master he standeth or falleth.

But, on the other hand, do not you be led away into things that damage you, because some other man does them, as he supposes, without injury. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. There are some Christian people who are simply very unscrupulous and think themselves very strong; and whose consciences are not more enlightened, but less sensitive, than those of the narrow-minded brethrenupon whom they look askance.

And so, dear friend, you ought to take the world--to inhale it, if I may so say, as patients do chloroform; only you must be your own doctor and keep your own fingers on your pulse, and watch the first sign of failure there, and take no more. When the safety lamps begin to burn blue you may be quite sure there is choke-damp about; and when Christian men and women begin to find prayer wearisome, and religious thoughts dull, and the remembrance of God an effort or a pain, then, whatever anybody else may do, it is time for them to pull up. If thy hand offend thee, never mind though your brother's hand is not offending him, do the necessary thing for your health, cut it off and cast it from you.

But of course there must be caution and common-sense in the application of such a principle. It does not mean that we are to abandon all things that are susceptible of abuse, for everything is so; and if we are to regulate our conduct by such a rule, it is not the amputation of a hand that will be sufficient. We may as well cut off our heads at once, and go out of the world altogether; for everything is capable of being thus abused.

Nor does the injunction mean that unconditionally we are to abandon all occupations in which there is danger. It can never be a duty to shirk a duty because it is dangerous. And sometimes it is as much a Christian man's duty to go into, and to stand in, positions that are full of temptation and danger, as it is a fireman's business to go into a burning house at the risk of suffocation. There were saints in Caesar's household, flowers that grew on a dunghill, and they were not bidden to abandon their place because it was full of possible danger to their souls. Sometimes Christ sets His sentinels in places where the bullets fly very thick; and if we are posted in such a place--and we all are so some time or other in our lives--the only course for us is to stand our ground until the relieving guard comes, and to trust that He said a truth that was always to be true, when He sent out His servants to their dangerous work, with the assurance that if they drank any deadly thing it should not hurt them.

**II. So much, then, for the first of the points here. Now a word, in the second place, as to the sharp remedy enjoined.**

Cut it off and cast it from thee. Entire excision is the only safety. I myself am to be the operator in that surgery. I am to lay my hand upon the block, and with the other hand to grasp the axe and strike. That is to say, we are to suppress capacities, to abandon pursuits, to break with associates, when we find that they are damaging our spiritual life and hindering our likeness to Jesus Christ.

That is plain common-sense. In regard to physical intoxication, it is a great deal easier to abstain altogether than to take a very little and then stop. The very fumes of alcohol will sometimes drive a reclaimed drunkard into a bout of dissipation that will last for weeks; therefore, the only safety is in entire abstinence. The rule holds in regard to everyday life. Every man has to give up a great many things if he means to succeed in one, and has to be a man of one pursuit if anything worth doing is to be done. Christian men especially have to adopt that principle, and shear off a great deal that is perfectly legitimate, in order that they may keep a reserve of strength for the highest things.

True, all forms of life are capable of being made Christian service and Christian discipline, but in practice we shall find that if we are earnestly seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, not only shall we lose our taste for a great deal that is innocent, but we shall have, whether we lose our taste for them or not--and more imperatively if we have not lost our taste for them than if we have--to give up allowable things in order that with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, we may love and serve our Master. There are no half-measures to be kept; the only thing to do with the viper is to shake it off into the fire and let it burn there. We have to empty our hands of earth's trivialities if we would grasp Christ with them. We have to turn away our eyes from earth if we would behold the Master, and rigidly to apply this principle of excision in order that we may advance in the divine life. It is the only way to ensure progress. There is no such certain method of securing an adequate flow of sap up the trunk as to cut off all the suckers. If you wish to have a current going down the main bed of the stream, sufficient to keep it clear, you must dam up all the side channels.

But it is not to be forgotten that this commandment, stringent and necessary as it is, is second best. The man is maimed, although it was for Christ's sake that he cut off his hand, or put out his eye. His hand was given him that with it he might serve God, and the highest thing would have been that in hand and foot and eye he should have been anointed, like the priests of old, for the service of his Master. But until he is strong enough to use the faculty for God, the wisest thing is not to use it at all. Abandon the outworks to keep the citadel. And just as men pull down the pretty houses on the outskirts of a fortified city when a siege is impending, in order that they may afford no cover to the enemy, so we have to sweep away a great deal in our lives that is innocent and fair, in order that the foes of our spirit may find no lodgment there. It is second best, but for all that it is absolutely needful. We must lay aside every weight, as well as the sin which so easily besets us. We must run lightly if we would run well. We must cast aside all burdens, even though they be burdens of treasure and delights, if we would run with patience the race that is set before us. If thy foot offend thee, do not hesitate, do not adopt half-measures, do not try moderation, do not seek to sanctify the use of the peccant member; all these may be possible and right in time, but for the present there is only one thing to do--down with it on the block, and off with it! Cut it off and cast it from thee.

**III. And now, lastly, a word as to the solemn exhortation by which this injunction is enforced.**

Christ rests His command of self-denial and self-mutilation upon the highest ground of self-interest. It is better for thee. We are told nowadays that this is a very low motive to appeal to, that Christianity is a religion of selfishness, because it says to men, Your life or your death depends upon your faith and your conduct. Well, I think it will be time for us to listen to fantastic objections of this sort when the men that urge them refuse to turn down another street, if they are warned that in the road on which they are going they will meet their death. As long as they admit that it is a wise and a kind thing to say to a man, Do not go that way or your life will be endangered, I think we may listen to our Master saying to us, Do not do that lest thou perish; do this, that thou may'st enter into life.

And then, notice that a maimed man may enter into life, and a complete man may perish. The first may be a very poor creature, very ignorant, with a limited nature, undeveloped capacities, intellect and the like all but dormant in him, artistic sensibilities quite atrophied, and yet he may have got hold of Jesus Christ and His love, and be trying to love Him back again and serve Him, and so be entering into life even here, and be sure of a life more perfect yonder. And the complete man, cultured all round, with all his faculties polished and exercised to the full, may have one side of his nature undeveloped--that which connects him with God in Christ. And so he may be like some fair tree that stands out there in the open, on all sides extending its equal beauty, with its stem symmetrical, cylindrical, perfect in its green cloud of foliage, yet there may be a worm at the root of it, and it may be given up to rottenness and destruction. Cultivated men may perish, and uncultured men may have the life. The maimed man may touch Christ with his stump, and so receive life, and the complete man may lay hold of the world and the flesh and the devil with his hands, and so share in their destruction.

Ay! and in that case the maimed man has the best of it. It is a very plain axiom of the rudest common-sense, this of my text: It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than to go into hell-fire with both thy hands. That is to say, it is better to live maimed than to die whole. A man comes into a hospital with gangrene in his leg; the doctor says it must come off; the man says, It shall not, and he is dead to-morrow. Who is the fool--the man that says, Here, then, cut away; better life than limb, or the man that says, I will keep it and I will die?

Better to enter into life maimed, because you will not always be maimed. The life will overcome the maiming. There is a wonderful restoration of capacities and powers that have been sacrificed for Christ's sake, a restoration even here. As crustaceans will develop a new claw in place of one that they have thrown off in their peril to save their lives, so we, if we have for Christ's sake maimed ourselves, will find that in a large measure the suppression will be recompensed even here on earth.

And hereafter, as the Rabbis used to say, No man will rise from the grave a cripple. All the limitations which we have imposed upon ourselves, for Christ's sake, will be removed then. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. Verily I say unto thee, there is no man that hath left anyof his possessions, affections, tastes, capacities, for My sake but he shall receive a hundredfold more in this life, and in the world to come, life everlasting. No man is a loser by giving up anything for Jesus Christ.

And, on the other hand, the complete man, complete in everything except his spiritual nature, is a fragment in all his completeness; and yonder, there will for him be a solemn process of stripping. Take it from him, and give it to him that hath ten talents. Ah! how much of that for which some of you are flinging away Jesus Christ will fade from you when you go yonder. His glory shall not descend after him; as he came, so shall he go. Tongues, they shall cease; knowledge, it shall vanish away; gifts will fail, capacities will disappear when the opportunities for the exercise of them in a material world are at an end, and there will be little left to the man who would carry hands and feet and eyes all into the fire and forgot the one thing needful, but a thin thread, if I may so say, of personality quivering with the sense of responsibility, and preyed upon by the gnawing worm of a too-late remorse.

My brother, the lips of Incarnate Love spoke those solemn words of my text, which it becomes not me to repeat to you as if they were mine; but I ask you to weigh this, His urgent commandment, and to listen to His solemn assurance, by which He enforces the wisdom of the self-suppression: It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to be cast into hell-fire.

Give your hearts to Jesus Christ, and set the following in His footsteps and the keeping of His commandments high above all other aims. You will have to suppress much and give up much, but such suppression is the shortest road to becoming perfect men, complete in Him, and such surrender is the surest way to possess all things. He that loseth his life--which is more than hand or eye--for Christ's sake, the same shall find it.