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

**MATTHEW-124**. **IS IT I? by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22.* *And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto Him, Lord, is it I? 25. Then Judas, which betrayed Him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said."*

*Matthew 26:22, 25*

*"He then lying on Jesus breast saith unto Him, Lord, who is it?"*

*John 13:25*

The genius of many great painters has portrayed the Lord's Supper, but the reality of it was very different from their imaginings. We have to picture to ourselves some low table, probably a mere tray spread upon the ground, round which our Lord and the twelve reclined, in such a fashion as that the head of each guest came against the bosom of him that reclined above him; the place of honour being at the Lord's left hand, or higher up the table than Himself, and the second place being at His right, or below Himself.

So there would be no eager gesticulations of disciples starting to their feet when our Lord uttered the sad announcement, One of you shall betray Me!but only horror-struck amazement settled down upon the group. These verses, which we have put together, show us three stages in the conversation which followed the sad announcement. The three evangelists give us two of these; John alone omits these two, and only gives us the third.

First, we have their question, born of a glimpse into the possibilities of evil in their hearts, Lord, is it I?The form of that question in the original suggests that they expected a negative answer, and might be reproduced in English: 'Surely it is not I?None of them could think that he was the traitor, yet none of them could be sure that he was not. Their Master knew better than they did; and so, from a humble knowledge of what lay in them, coiled and slumbering, but there, they would not meet His words with a contradiction, but with a question. His answer spares the betrayer, and lets the dread work in their consciences for a little longer, for their good. For many hands dipped in the dish together, to moisten their morsels; and to say, He that dippeth with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me, was to say nothing more than One of you at the table.

Then comes the second stage. Judas, reassured that he has escaped detection for the moment, and perhaps doubting whether the Master had anything more than a vague suspicion of treachery, or knew who was the traitor, shapes his lying lips with loathsome audacity into the same question, but yet not quite the same, The others had said, Is it I, Lord?he falters when he comes to that name, and dare not say Lord!That sticks in his throat. Rabbi!is as far as he can get. Is it I, Rabbi?Christ's answer to him, Thou hast said, is another instance of patient longsuffering. It was evidently a whisper that did not reach the ears of any of the others, for he leaves the room without suspicion. Our Lord still tries to save him from himself by showing Judas that his purpose is known, and by still concealing his name.

Then comes the third stage, which we owe to John's Gospel. Here again he is true to his task of supplementing the narrative of the three synoptic Gospels. Remembering what I have said about the attitude of the disciples at the table, we can understand that Peter, if he occupied the principal place at the Lord's left, was less favourably situated for speaking to Christ than John, who reclined in the second seat at His right, and so he beckoned over the Master's head to John. The Revised Version gives the force of the original more vividly than the Authorised does: He, leaning back, as he was, on Jesusbreast, saith unto Him, Lord! who is it?John, with a natural movement, bends back his head on his Master's breast, so as to ask and be answered, in a whisper. His question is not, Is it I?He that leaned on Christ's bosom, and was compassed about by Christ's love, did not need to ask that. The question now is, Who is it?Not a question of presumption, nor of curiosity, but of affection; and therefore answered: He it is to whom I shall give the sop, when I have dipped it.

The morsel dipped in the dish and passed by the host's hand to a guest, was a token of favour, of unity and confidence. It was one more attempt to save Judas, one more token of all-forgiving patience. No wonder that that last sign of friendship embittered his hatred and sharpened his purpose to an unalterable decision, or, as John says: After the sop, Satan entered into him. For then, as ever, the heart which is not melted by Christ's offered love is hardened by it.

Now, if we take these three stages of this conversation we may learn some valuable lessons from them. I take the first form of the question as an example of that wholesome self-distrust which a glimpse into the slumbering possibilities of evil in our hearts ought to give us all. I take the second on the lips of Judas, as an example of the very opposite of that self-distrust, the fixed determination to do a wrong thing, however clearly we know it to be wrong. And I take the last form of the question, as asked by John, as an illustration of the peaceful confidence which comes from the consciousness of Christ's love, and of communion with Him. Now a word or two about each of these.

**I. First, we have an example of that wholesome self-distrust, which a glimpse into the possibilities of evil that lie slumbering in all our hearts ought to teach every one of us.**

Every man is a mystery to himself. In every soul there lie, coiled and dormant, like hibernating snakes, evils that a very slight rise in the temperature will wake up into poisonous activity. And let no man say, in foolish self-confidence, that any form of sin which his brother has ever committed is impossible for him. Temperament shields us from much, no doubt. There are sins that we are inclined to, and there are sins that we have no mind to. But the identity of human nature is deeper than the diversity of temperament, and there are two or three considerations that should abate a man's confidence that anything which one man has done it is impossible that he should do. Let me enumerate them very briefly. Remember, to begin with, that all sins are at bottom but varying forms of one root. The essence of every evil is selfishness, and when you have that, it is exactly as with cooks who have the stockby the fireside. They can make any kind of soup out of it, with the right flavouring. We have got the mother tincture of all wickedness in each of our hearts; and therefore do not let us be so sure that it cannot be manipulated and flavoured into any form of sin. All sin is one at bottom, and this is the definition of it--living to myself instead of living to God. So it may easily pass from one form of evil into another, just as light and heat, motion and electricity, are all--they tell us--various forms and phases of one force. Just as doctors will tell you that there are types of disease which slip from one form of sickness into another, so if we have got the infection about us it is a matter very much of accidental circumstances what shape it takes. And no man with a human heart is safe in pointing to any sin, and saying, That form of transgression I reckon alien to myself.

And then let me remind you, too, that the same consideration is reinforced by this other fact, that all sin is, if I may so say, gregarious; is apt not only to slip from one form into another, but that any evil is apt to draw another after it. The tangled mass of sin is like one of those great fields of seaweed that you some times come across upon the ocean, all hanging together by a thousand slimy growths; which, if lifted from the wave at any point, drags up yards of it inextricably grown together. No man commits only one kind of transgression. All sins hunt in couples. According to the grim picture of the Old Testament, about another matter, None of them shall want his mate. The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wild beasts of the islands. One sin opens the door for another, and seven other spirits worse than himselfcome and make holiday in the man's heart.

Again, any evil is possible to us, seeing that all sin is but yielding to tendencies common to us all. The greatest transgressions have resulted from yielding to such tendencies. Cain killed his brother from jealousy; David besmirched his name and his reign by animal passion; Judas betrayed Christ because he was fond of money. Many a man has murdered another one simply because he had a hot temper. And you have got a temper, and you have got the love of money, and you have got animal passions, and you have got that which may stir you up into jealousy. Your neighbour's house has caught fire and been blown up. Your house, too, is built of wood, and thatched with straw, and you have as much dynamite in your cellars as he had in his. Do not be too sure that you are safe from the danger of explosion.

And, again, remember that this same wholesome self-distrust is needful for us all, because all transgression is yielding to temptations that assail all men. Here are one hundred men in a plague-stricken city; they have all got to draw their water from the same well. If five or six of them died of cholera it would be very foolish of the other ninety-five to say, There is no chance of our being touched. We all live in the same atmosphere; and the temptations that have overcome the men that have headed the count of crimes appeal to you. So the lesson is, Be not high-minded, but fear.

And remember, still further, that the same solemn consideration is enforced upon us by the thought that men will gradually drop down to the level which, before they began the descent, seemed to be impossible to them. Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?said Hazael when the crime of murdering his master first floated before him. Yes, but he did it. By degrees he came down to the level to which he thought that he would never sink. First the imagination is inflamed, then the wish begins to draw the soul to the sin, then conscience pulls it back, then the fatal decision is made, and the deed is done. Sometimes all the stages are hurried quickly through, and a man spins downhill as cheerily and fast as a diligence down the Alps. Sometimes, as the coast of a country may sink an inch in a century until long miles of the flat seabeach are under water, and towers and cities are buried beneath the barren waves, so our lives may be gradually lowered, with a motion imperceptible but most real, bringing us down within high-water mark, and at last the tide may wash over what was solid land.

So, dear friends, there is nothing more foolish than for any man to stand, self-confident that any form of evil that has conquered his brother has no temptation for him. It may not have for you, under present circumstances; it may not have for you to-day; but, oh! we have all of us one human heart, and he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool. Blessed is the man that feareth always. Humble self-distrust, consciousness of sleeping sin in my heart that may very quickly be stirred into stinging and striking; rigid self-control over all these possibilities of evil, are duties dictated by the plainest common-sense.

Do not say, I know when to stop. Do not say, I can go so far; it will not do me any harm. Many a man has said that, and many a man has been ruined by it. Do not say, It is natural to me to have these inclinations and tastes, and there can be no harm in yielding to them. It is perfectly natural for a man to stoop down over the edge of a precipice to gather the flowers that are growing in some cranny in the cliff; and it is as natural for him to topple over, and be smashed to a mummy at the bottom. God gave you your dispositions and your whole nature under lock and key,--keep them so. And when you hear of, or see, great criminals and great crimes, say to yourself, as the good old Puritan divine said, looking at a man going to the scaffold, But for the grace of God there go I!And in the contemplation of sins and apostasies, let us each look humbly at our own weakness, and pray Him to keep us from our brother's evils which may easily become ours.

**II. Secondly, we have here an example of precisely the opposite sort, namely, of that fixed determination to do evil which is unshaken by the clearest knowledge that it is evil.**

Judas heard his crime described in its own ugly reality. He heard his fate proclaimed by lips of absolute love and truth; and notwithstanding both, he comes unmoved and unshaken with his question. The dogged determination in his heart, that dares to see his evil stripped naked and is not ashamed, is even more dreadful than the hypocrisy and sleek simulation of friendship in his face.

Now most men turn away with horror from even the sins that they are willing to do, when they are put plainly and bluntly before them. As an old mediaeval preacher once said, There is nothing that is weaker than the devil stripped naked. By which he meant exactly this--that we have to dress wrong in some fantastic costume or other, so as to hide its native ugliness, in order to tempt men to do it. So we have two sets of names for wrong things, one of which we apply to our brethren's sins, and the other to the same sins in ourselves. What I do is prudence, what you do of the same sort is covetousness; what I do is sowing my wild oats, what you do is immoralityand dissipation; what I do is generous living, what you do is drunkennessand gluttony; what I do is righteous indignation, what you do is passionate anger. And so you may go the whole round of evil. Very bad are the men who can look at their deed, described in Its own inherent deformity, and yet say, Yes; that is it, and I am going to do it. One of you shall betray Me. Yes; I will betray you!It must have taken something to look into the Master's face, and keep the fixed purpose steady.

Now I ask you to think, dear friends, of this, that that obstinate condition of dogged determination to do a wrong thing, knowing it to be a wrong thing, is a condition to which all evil steadily tends. We may not come to it in this world--I do not know that men ever do so wholly; but we are all getting towards it in regard to the special wrong deeds and desires which we cherish and commit. And when a man has once reached the point of saying to evil, Be thou my good, then he is a devilin the true meaning of the word; and wherever he is, he is in hell! And the one unpardonable sin is the sin of clear recognition that a given thing is contrary to God's will, and unfaltering determination, notwithstanding, to do it. That is the only sin that cannot be pardoned, either in this world or in the world to come.

And so, my brother, seeing that such a condition is possible, and that all the paths of evil, however tentative and timorous they may be at first, and however much the sin may be wrapped up with excuses and forms and masks, tend to that condition, let us take that old prayer upon our lips, which befits both those who distrust themselves because of slumbering sins, and those who dread being conquered by manifest iniquity:--Who can understand his errors? Cleanse Thou me from secret faults. Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me.

**III. Now, lastly, we have in the last question an example of the peaceful confidence that comes from communion with Jesus Christ.**

John leaned on the Master's bosom. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved. And so compassed with that great love, and feeling absolute security within the enclosure of that strong hand, his question is not, Is it I?but Who is it?From which I think we may fairly draw the conclusion that to feel that Christ loves me, and that I am compassed about by Him, is the true security against my falling into any sin.

It was not John's love to Christ, but Christ's to John that made his safety. He did not say: I love Thee so much that I cannot betray Thee. For all our feelings and emotions are but variable, and to build confidence upon them is to build a heavy building upon quicksand; the very weight of it drives out the foundations. But he thought to himself--or he felt rather than he thought--that all about him lay the sweet, warm, rich atmosphere of his Master's love; and to a man who was encompassed by that, treachery was impossible.

Sin has no temptation so long as we actually enjoy the greater sweetness of Christ's felt love. Would thirty pieces of silver have been a bribe to John? Would anything that could have terrified others have frightened him from his Master's side whilst he felt His love? Will a handful of imitation jewellery, made out of coloured glass and paste, be any temptation to a man who bears a rich diamond on his finger? And will any of earth's sweetness be a temptation to a man who lives in the continual consciousness of the great rich love of Christ wrapping him round about? Brethren, not ourselves, not our faith, not our emotion, not our religious experience; nothing that is in us, is any security that we may not be tempted, and yield to the temptation, and deny or betray our Lord. There is only one thing that is a security, and that is that we be folded to the heart, and held by the hand, of that loving Lord. Then--then we may be confident that we shall not fall; for the Lord is able to make us stand.

Such confidence is but the other side of our self-distrust; is the constant accompaniment of it, must have that self-distrust for its condition and prerequisite, and leads to a yet deeper and more blessed form of that self-distrust. Faith in Him and no confidence in the fleshare but the two sides of the same coin, the obverse and the reverse. The seed, planted in the ground, sends a little rootlet down, and a little spikelet up, by the same vital act. And so in our hearts, as it were, the downward rootlet is self-despair, and the upward shoot is faith in Christ. The two emotions go together--the more we distrust ourselves the more we shall rest upon Him, and the more we rest upon Him, and feel that all our strength comes, not from our foot, but from the Rock on which it stands, the more we shall distrust our own ability and our own faithfulness.

Therefore, dear brethren, looking upon all the evil that is around us, and conscious in some measure of the weakness of our own hearts, let us do as a man would do who stands upon the narrow ledge of a cliff, and look sheer down into the depth below, and feels his head begin to reel and turn giddy; let us lay hold of the Guide's hand, and if we cleave by Him, He will hold up our goings that our footsteps slip not. Nothing else will. No length of obedient service is any guarantee against treachery and rebellion. As John Bunyan saw, there was a backdoor to hell from the gate of the Celestial City. Men have lived for years consistent professing Christians, and have fallen at last. Many a ship has come across half the world, and gone to pieces on the harbour bar. Many an army, victorious in a hundred fights, has been annihilated at last. No depths of religious experience, no heights of religious blessedness, no attainments of past virtue and self-sacrifice, are any guarantees for to-morrow. Trust in nothing and in nobody, least of all in yourselves and your own past. Trust only in Jesus Christ.

Now unto Him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Saviour be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever. Amen.