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

**PHILIPPIANS-028**. **THINK ON THESE THINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"... Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."*

*Philippians 4:8*

I am half afraid that some of you may think, as I have at times thought, that I am too old to preach to the young. You would probably listen with more attention to one less remote from you in years, and may be disposed to discount my advices as quite natural for an old man to give, and quite unnatural for a young man to take. But, dear friends, the message which I have to bring to you is meant for all ages, and for all sorts of people. And, if I may venture a personal word, I proved it, when I stood where you stand, and it is fresher and mightier to me to-day than it ever was.

You are in the plastic period of your lives, with the world before you, and the mightier world within to mould as you will; and you can be almost anything you like, I do not mean in regard to externals, or intellectual capacities, for these are only partially in our control, but in regard to the far more important and real things--viz. elevation and purity of heart and mind. You are in the period of life to which fair dreams of the future are natural. It is, as the prophet tells us, for the young man to see visions, and to ennoble his life thereafter by turning them into realities. Generous and noble ideas ought to belong to youth. But you are also in the period when there is a keen joy in mere living, and when some desires, which get weaker as years go on, are very strong, and may mar youthful purity. So, taking all these into account, I have thought that I could not do better than press home upon you the counsels of this magnificent text, however inadequately my time may permit of my dealing with them; for there are dozens of sermons in it, if one could expand it worthily.

But my purpose is distinctly practical, and so I wish just to cast what I have to say to you into the answer to three questions, the three questions that may be asked about everything. What? Why? How?

**I. What, then, is the counsel here?**

Think on these things. To begin with, that advice implies that we can, and, therefore, that we should, exercise a very rigid control over that part of our lives which a great many of us never think of controlling at all. There are hosts of people whose thoughts are just hooked on to one another by the slightest links of accidental connection, and who scarcely ever have put a strong hand upon them, or coerced them into order, or decided what they are going to let come into their minds, and what to keep out. Circumstances, the necessities of our daily occupations, the duties that we owe to one another, all these make certain streams of thought very necessary, and to some of us very absorbing. And for the rest--well! He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls; anybody can go in, and anybody can come out. I am sure that amongst young men and women there are multitudes who have never realised how responsible they are for the flow of the waves of that great river that is always coming from the depths of their being, and have never asked whether the current is bringing down sand or gold. Exercise control, as becomes you, over the run and drift of your thoughts. I said that many of us had minds like cities broken down. Put a guard at the gate, as they do in some Continental countries, and let in no vagrant that cannot show his passport, and a clear bill of health. Now, that is a lesson that some of you very much want.

But, further, notice that company of fair guests that you may welcome into the hospitalities of your heart and mind. Think on these things--and what are they? It would be absurd of me to try to exhaust the great catalogue which the Apostle gives here, but let me say a word or two about it.

Whatsoever things are true ... think on these things. Let your minds be exercised, breathed, braced, lifted, filled by bringing them into contact with truth, especially with the highest of all truths, the truths affecting God and your relations to Him. Why should you, like so many of us, be living amidst the small things of daily life, the trifles that are here, and never coming into vital contact with the greatest things of all, the truths about God and Christ, and what you have to do with them, and what they have to do with you? Whatsoever things are true ... think on these things.

Whatsoever things are honest, or, as the word more properly and nobly means, Whatsoever things are reverent, or venerable--let grave, serious, solemn thought be familiar to your minds, not frivolities, not mean things. There is an old story in Roman history about the barbarians breaking into the Capitol, and their fury being awed into silence, and struck into immobility, as they saw, round and round in the hall, the august Senators, each in his seat. Let your minds be like that, with reverent thoughts clustering on every side; and when wild passions, and animal desires, and low, mean contemplations dare to cross the threshold, they will be awed into silence and stillness. Whatsoever things are august ... think on these things.

Whatsoever things are just--let the great, solemn thought of duty, obligation, what I ought to be and do, be very familiar to your consideration and meditation. Whatsoever things are just ... think on these things.

Whatsoever things are pure--let white-robed angels haunt the place. Let there be in you a shuddering recoil from all the opposite; and entertain angels not unawares. Whatsoever things are pure ... think on these things.

Now, these characteristics of thoughts which I have already touched upon all belong to a lofty region, but the Apostle is not contented with speaking austere things. He goes now into a region tinged with emotion, and he says, whatsoever things are lovely; for goodness is beautiful, and, in effect, is the only beautiful. Whatsoever things are lovely ... think on these things. And whatsoever things are of good report--all the things that men speak well of, and speak good in the very naming of, let thoughts of them be in your minds.

And then he gathers all up into two words. If there be any virtue--which covers the ground of the first four, that he has already spoken about--viz. true, venerable, just, pure; and if there be any praise--which resumes and sums up the two last: lovely and of good report, think on these things.

Now, if my purpose allowed it, one would like to point out here how the Apostle accepts the non-Christian notions of the people in whose tongue he was speaking; and here, for the only time in his letters, uses the great Pagan word virtue, which was a spell amongst the Greeks, and says, I accept the world's notion of what is virtuous and praiseworthy, and I bid you take it to your hearts.

Dear brethren, Christianity covers all the ground that the noblest morality has ever attempted to mark out and possess, and it covers a great deal more. If there be any virtue, as you Greeks are fond of talking about, and if there be any praise, if there is anything in men which commends noble actions, think on these things.

Now, you will not obey this commandment unless you obey also the negative side of it. That is to say, you will not think on these fair forms, and bring them into your hearts, unless you turn away, by resolute effort, from their opposites. There are some, and I am afraid that in a congregation as large as this there must be some representatives of the class, who seem to turn this apostolic precept right round about, and whatsoever things are illusory and vain, whatsoever things are mean, and frivolous, and contemptible, whatsoever things are unjust, and whatsoever things are impure, and whatsoever things are ugly, and whatsoever things are branded with a stigma by all men they think on these things. Like the flies that are attracted to a piece of putrid meat, there are young men who are drawn by all the lustful, the lewd, the impure thoughts; and there are young women who are too idle and uncultivated to have any pleasure in anything higher than gossip and trivial fiction. Whatsoever things are noble and lovely, think on these things, and get rid of all the others.

There are plenty of occasions round about you to force the opposite upon your notice; and, unless you shut your door fast, and double-lock it, they will be sure to come in:--Popular literature, the scrappy trivialities that are put into some periodicals, what they call realistic fiction; modern Art, which has come to be largely the servant of sense; the Stage, which has come--and more is the pity! for there are enormous possibilities of good in it--to be largely a minister of corruption, or if not of corruption at least of frivolity--all these things are appealing to you. And some of you young men, away from the restraints of home, and in a city, where you think nobody could see you sowing your wild oats, have got entangled with them. I beseech you, cast out all this filth, and all this meanness and pettiness from your habitual thinkings, and let the august and the lovely and the pure and the true come in instead. You have the cup in your hand, you can either press into it clusters of ripe grapes, and make mellow wine, or you can squeeze into it wormwood and gall and hemlock and poison-berries; and, as you brew, you have to drink. You have the canvas, and you are to cover it with the figures that you like best. You can either do as Fra Angelico did, who painted the white walls of every cell in his quiet convent with Madonnas and angels and risen Christs, or you can do like some of those low-toned Dutch painters, who never can get above a brass pan and a carrot, and ugly boors and women, and fill the canvas with vulgarities and deformities. Choose which you will have to keep you company.

**II. Now, let me ask you to think for a moment why this counsel is pressed upon you.**

Let me put the reasons very briefly. They are, first, because thought moulds action. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. One looks round the world, and all these solid-seeming realities of institutions, buildings, governments, inventions and machines, steamships and electric telegrams, laws and governments, palaces and fortresses, they are all but embodied thoughts. There was a thought at the back of each of them which took shape. So, in another sense than the one in which the saying was originally meant, but yet an august and solemn sense, the word is made flesh, and our thoughts became visible, and stand round us, a ghastly company. Sooner or later what has been the drift and trend of a man's life comes out, flashes out sometimes, and dribbles out at other times, into visibility in his actions; and, just as the thunder follows on the swift passage of the lightning, so my acts are neither more nor less than the reverberation and after-clap of my thoughts.

So if you are entertaining in your hearts and minds this august company of which my text speaks, your lives will be fair and beautiful. For what does the Apostle immediately go on to add to our text? These things do--as you certainly will if you think about them, and as you certainly will not unless you do.

Again, thought and work make character. We come into the world with certain dispositions and bias. But that is not character, it is only the raw material of character. It is all plastic, like the lava when it comes out of the volcano. But it hardens, and whatever else my thought may do, and whatever effects may follow upon any of my actions, the recoil of them on myself is the most important effect to me. And there is not a thought that comes into, and is entertained by a man, or rolled as a sweet morsel under his tongue, but contributes its own little but appreciable something to the making of the man's character. I wonder if there is anybody in this chapel now who has been so long accustomed to entertain these angels of whom my text speaks as that to entertain their opposites would be an impossibility. I hope there is. I wonder if there is anybody in this chapel to-night who has been so long accustomed to live amidst the thoughts that are small and trivial and frivolous, if not amongst those that are impure and abominable, as that to entertain their opposites seems almost an impossibility. I am afraid there are some. I remember hearing about a Maori woman who had come to live in one of the cities in New Zealand, in a respectable station, and after a year or two of it she left husband and children, and civilisation, and hurried back to her tribe, flung off the European garb, and donned the blanket, and was happy crouching over the embers on the clay hearth. Some of you have become so accustomed to the low, the wicked, the lustful, the impure, the frivolous, the contemptible, that you cannot, or, at any rate, have lost all disposition to rise to the lofty, the pure, and the true.

Once more; as thought makes deeds, and thought and deeds make character, so character makes destiny, here and hereafter. If you have these blessed thoughts in your hearts and minds, as your continual companions and your habitual guests, then, my friend, you will have a light within that will burn all independent of externals; and whether the world smiles or frowns on you, you will have the true wealth in yourselves; a better and enduring substance. You will have peace, you will be lords of the world, and having nothing yet may have all. No harm can come to the man who has laid up in his youth, as the best treasure of old age, this possession of these thoughts enjoined in my text.

And character makes destiny hereafter. What is a man whose whole life has been one long thought about money-making, or about other objects of earthly ambition, or about the lusts of the flesh, and the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life, to do in heaven? What would one of those fishes in the sunless caverns of America, which, by long living in the dark, have lost their eyes, do, if it were brought out into the sunshine? A man will go to his own place, the place for which he is fitted, the place for which he has fitted himself by his daily life, and especially by the trend and the direction of his thoughts.

So do not be led away by talk about seeing both sides, about seeing life, about knowing what is going on. I would have you simple concerning evil, and wise concerning good. Do not be led away by talk about having your fling, and sowing your wild oats. You may make an indelible stain on your conscience, which even forgiveness will not wipe out; and you may sow your wild oats, but what will the harvest be? Whatsoever a man soweth that--that--shall he also reap. Would you like all your low thoughts, all your foul thoughts, to return and sit down beside you, and say, We have come to keep you company for ever? If there be any virtue ... think on these things.

**III. Now, lastly, how is this precept best obeyed?**

I have been speaking to some extent about that, and saying that there must be real, honest, continuous effort to keep out the opposite, as well as to bring in the things that are lovely and of good report. But there is one more word that I must say in answer to the question how this precept can be observed, and it is just this. All these things, true, venerable, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, are not things only; they are embodied in a Person. For whatever things are fair meet in Jesus Christ, and He, in His living self, is the sum of all virtue and of all praise. So that if we link ourselves to Him by faith and love, and take Him into our hearts and minds, and abide in Him, we have them all gathered together into that One. Thinking on these things is not merely a meditating upon abstractions, but it is clutching and living in and with and by the living, loving Lord and Saviour of us all. If Christ is in my thoughts, all good things are there.

If you trust Him, and make him your Companion, He will help you, He will give you His own life, and in it will give you tastes and desires which will make all these fair thoughts congenial to you, and will deliver you from the else hopeless bondage of subjection to their very opposites.

Brethren, our souls cleave to the dust, and all our efforts will be foiled, partially or entirely, to obey this precept, unless we remember that it was spoken to people who had previously obeyed a previous commandment, and had taken Christ for their Saviour. We gravitate earthwards, alas! after all our efforts, but if we will put ourselves in His hands, then He will be as a Magnet drawing us upwards, or rather He will give us wings of love and contemplation by which we can soar above that dim spot that men call Earth, and walk in the heavenly places. The way by which this commandment can be obeyed is by obeying the other precept of the same Apostle, Set your minds on things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

I beseech you, take Christ and enthrone Him in the very sanctuary of your minds. Then you will have all these venerable, pure, blessed thoughts as the very atmosphere in which you move. Think on these things ... these things do! ... and the God of Peace shall be with you.