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

**PROVERBS-009. THE CORDS OF SIN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins."*

*Proverbs 5:22*

In Hosea's tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas! failed of its effect, we read, I drew them with cords of a man, which is further explained as being with bands of love. The metaphor in the prophet's mind is probably that of a child being taught to go and upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life, and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter's toils, enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations, shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our own sins. We may choose which condition shall be ours, but one or other of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of God's love or we may be holden by the cords of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all. The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain, whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or not. His own iniquities shall take the wicked--they ring him round, a grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have now taken him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since forgotten novel told of the fate of a modern Prometheus, who made and put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us meshed, but let me point out some of these.

**I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.**

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is true about both good and bad actions, but ill weeds grow apace, and it is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that custom presses on us with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life, and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard his spots as for those who are accustomed to do evil to do good.

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder held before it, and at last driven into it by pricking goads and heavy blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own evil deeds have made for him, that he commits the sin once more, not because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper has to go on making false entries in his employer's books in order to hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end must be. Let no man say, I will do this doubtful thing once only, and never again. Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can venture to say, This once only will I do this thing. Let us remember that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless deeds.

**II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.**

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are made. Our evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why so many of us do not yield to God's merciful drawings of us to Himself? We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us that thirsteth for God, even the living God. Alas! how many of us have let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us that cries out for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after God, who is his being's end and aim, is caught and prisoned by the cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know, when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these are the cords out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of soul, the one real joy of life.

**III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.**

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the grave. It is not for a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner. Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward. Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the consequences actually encountered. A rogue is a roundabout fool. True, we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense, penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond, surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that every sinful man is miserably holden with the cords of his sin. Life is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping too, and we do not need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning that he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption. Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

**IV. The cords can be loosened.**

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? But to men writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing, and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like their captivity, comes one whose name is the Breaker, whose mission it is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for many great gifts, but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin, the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus can make any of us, even him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, free from the law of sin and death. We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three Hebrews in the furnace, when the king was astonished and asked, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? and wonderingly declared, Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.