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

**PROVERBS-029. THE SLUGGARD'S GARDEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"30. I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; 31. And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down."*

*Proverbs 24:30-31*

This picture of the sluggard's garden seems to be intended as a parable. No doubt its direct simple meaning is full of homely wisdom in full accord with the whole tone of the Book of Proverbs; but we shall scarcely do justice to this saying of the wise if we do not see in the ground grown over with thorns, and the stone wall thereof broken down, an apologue of the condition of a soul whose owner has neglected to cultivate and tend it.

**I. Note first who the slothful man is.**

The first plain meaning of the word is to be kept in view. The whole Book of Proverbs brands laziness as the most prolific source of poverty. Honest toil is to it the law of life. It is never weary of reiterating In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread; and it condemns all swift modes of getting riches without labour. No doubt the primitive simplicity of life as set forth in this book seems far behind the many ingenuities by which in our days the law is evaded. How much of Stock Exchange speculation and Company promoter's gambling would survive the application of the homely old law?

But it is truer in the inward life than in the outward that the hand of the diligent maketh rich. After all, the differences between men who truly succeed and the human failures, which are so frequent, are more moral than intellectual. It has been said that genius is, after all, the capacity for taking infinite pains; and although that is an exaggerated statement, and an incomplete analysis, there is a great truth in it, and it is the homely virtue of hard work which tells in the long run, and without which the most brilliant talents effect but little. However gifted a man may be, he will be a failure if he has not learned the great secret of dogged persistence in often unwelcomed toil. No character worth building up is built without continuous effort. If a man does not labour to be good, he will surely become bad. It is an old axiom that no man attains superlative wickedness all at once, and most certainly no man leaps to the height of the goodness possible to his nature by one spring. He has laboriously, and step by step, to climb the hill. Progress in moral character is secured by long-continued walking upwards, not by a jump.

We note that in our text the slothful is paralleled by the man void of understanding; and the parallel suggests the stupidity in such a world as this of letting ourselves develop according to whims, or inclinations, or passions; and also teaches that understanding is meant to be rigidly and continuously brought to bear on actions as director and restrainer. If the ship is not to be wrecked on the rocks or to founder at sea, Wisdom's hand must hold the helm. Diligence alone is not enough unless directed by understanding.

**II. What comes of sloth.**

The description of the sluggard's garden brings into view two things, the abundant, because unchecked, growth of profitless weeds, and the broken down stone wall. Both of these results are but too sadly and evidently true in regard to every life where rigid and continuous control has not been exercised. It is a familiar experience known, alas! to too many of us, that evil things, of which the seeds are in us all, grow up unchecked if there be not constant supervision and self-command. If we do not carefully cultivate our little plot of garden ground, it will soon be overgrown by weeds. Ill weeds grow apace as the homely wisdom of common experience crystallises into a significant proverb. And Jesus has taught the sadder truth that thorns spring up and choke the word and it becometh unfruitful. In the slothful man's soul evil will drive out good as surely as in the struggle for existence the thorns and nettles will cover the face of the slothful man's garden. In country places we sometimes come across a ruined house with what was a garden round it, and here and there still springs up a flower seeking for air and light in the midst of a smothering mass of weeds. They needed no kindly gardener's hand to make them grow luxuriantly; can barely put out a pale petal unless cared for and guarded.

But not only is there this unchecked growth, but the stone wall thereof was broken down. The soul was unfenced. The solemn imperative of duty ceases to restrain or to impel in proportion as a man yields slothfully to the baser impulses of his nature. Nothing is hindered from going out of, nor for coming into, an unfenced soul, and he that hath no rule over his own spirit, but is like a city broken down without walls, is certain sooner or later to let much go forth from that spirit that should have bean rigidly shut up, and to let many an enemy come in that will capture the city. It is not yet safe to let any of the fortifications fall into disrepair, and they can only be kept in their massive strength by continuous vigilance.

**III. How sloth excuses itself.**

Our text is followed at the distance of one verse with what seemed to be the words of the sluggard in answer to the attempt to awake him: Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep. They are a quotation from an earlier chapter (ch. vi.) where His Laziness is sent to consider the ways of the ant and be wise. They are a drowsy petition which does not dispute the wisdom of the call to awake, but simply craves for a little more luxurious laziness from which he has unwillingly been aroused. And is it not true that we admit too late the force of the summons and yet shrink from answering it? Do we not cheat ourselves and try to deceive God with the promise that we will set about amendment soon? This indolent sleeper asks only for a little: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep. Do we not all know that mood of mind which confesses our slothfulness and promises to be wide awake tomorrow but would fain bargain to be left undisturbed today? The call Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead! rings from Christ's lips in the ears of every man, and he who answers, I will presently, but must sleep a little longer, may seem to himself to have complied with the call, but has really refused it. The little more generally becomes much more; and the answer presently alas! too often becomes the answer never. When a man is roused so as to be half awake, the only safety for him is immediately to rise and clothe himself; the head that drowsily droops back on the pillow after he has heard the morning's call, is likely to lie there long. Now, not by-and-by is the time to shake off the bonds of sloth to cultivate our garden.

**IV. How sloth ends.**

The sleeper's slumber is dramatically represented as being awakened by armed robbers who bring a grim awakening. Poverty and want break in on his folding hands to sleep. That is true as regards the outward life, where indulgence in literal slothfulness brings want, and the whole drift of things executes on the sluggard the sentence that if any man will not work, neither shall he eat.

But the picture is more sadly and fatally true concerning the man who has made his earthly life a little sleep as concerns heavenly things, and in spite of his beseechings, is roused to life and consciousness of himself and of God by death. That man's poverty in his lack of all that is counted as wealth in the world of realities to which he goes will indeed come as a robber. I would press upon you all the plain question, Is this fatal slothfulness characteristic of me? It may co-exist with, and indeed is often the consequence of vehement energy and continuous work to secure wealth, or wisdom, or material good; and the contrast between a man who is all eagerness in regard to the things that don't matter, and all carelessness in regard to the things that do, is the tragedy of life amongst us. My friend! if your garden has been suffered by you to be overgrown with weeds, be sure of this, that one day you will be awakened from the slumber that you would fain continue, and will find yourself in a life where your poverty will come as a robber and your want of all which there is counted treasure as an armed man.

One word more. Christ's parable of the sower may be brought into relationship with this parable. He sows the true seed in our hearts, but when sown, it, too, has to be cared for and tended. If it is sown in the sluggard's garden, it will bring forth few ears, and the tares will choke the wheat.