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

**PSALMS-007**. **SECRET FAULTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Who can understand his errors? cleanse Thou me from secret faults."*

*Psalm 19:12*

The contemplation of the perfect law, enlightening the eyes, sends the Psalmist to his knees. He is appalled by his own shortcomings, and feels that, beside all those of which he is aware, there is a region, as yet unilluminated by that law, where evil things nestle and breed.

The Jewish ritual drew a broad distinction between inadvertent--whether involuntary or ignorant--and deliberate sins; providing atonement for the former, not for the latter. The word in my text rendered errors is closely connected with that which in the Levitical system designates the former class of transgressions; and the connection between the two clauses of the text, as well as that with the subsequent verse, distinctly shows that the secret faults of the one clause are substantially synonymous with the errors of the other.

They are, then, not sins hidden from men, whether because they have been done quietly in a corner, and remain undetected, or because they have only been in thought, never passing into act. Both of these pages are dark in every man's memory. Who is there that could reveal himself to men? who is there that could bear the sight of a naked soul? But the Psalmist is thinking of a still more solemn fact, that, beyond the range of conscience and consciousness, there are evils in us all. It may do us good to ponder his discovery that he had undiscovered sins, and to take for ours his prayer, Cleanse Thou me from secret faults.

**I. So I ask you to look with me, briefly, first, at the solemn fact here, that there are in every man sins of which the doer is unaware.**

It is with our characters as with our faces. Few of us are familiar with our own appearance, and most of us, if we have looked at our portraits, have felt a little shock of surprise, and been ready to say to ourselves, Well! I did not know that I looked like that! And the bulk even of good men are almost as much strangers to their inward physiognomy as to their outward. They see themselves in their looking-glasses every morning, although they go away and forget what manner of men they were. But they do not see their true selves in the same fashion in any other mirror. It is the very characteristic of all evil that it has a strange power of deceiving a man as to its real character; like the cuttle-fish, that squirts out a cloud of ink and so escapes in the darkness and the dirt. The more a man goes wrong the less he knows it. Conscience is loudest when it is least needed, and most silent when most required.

Then, besides that, there is a great part of every one's life which is mechanical, instinctive, and all but involuntary. Habits and emotions and passing impulses very seldom come into men's consciousness, and an enormously large proportion of everybody's life is done with the minimum of attention, and is as little remembered as it is observed.

Then, besides that, conscience wants educating. You see that on a large scale, for instance, in the history of the slow progress which Christian principle has made in leavening the world's thinkings. It took eighteen centuries to teach the Church that slavery was unchristian. The Church has not yet learned that war is unchristian, and it is only beginning to surmise that possibly Christian principle may have something to say in social questions, and in the determination, for example, of the relations of capital and labour, and of wealth and poverty. The very same slowness of apprehension and gradual growth in the education of conscience, and in the perception of the application of Christian principles to duty, applies to the individual as to the Church.

Then, besides that, we are all biassed in our own favour, and what, when another man says it, is flat blasphemy, we think, when we say it, is only a choleric word. We have fine names for our own vices, and ugly ones for the very same vices in other people. David will flare up into generous and sincere indignation about the man that stole the poor man's ewe lamb, but he has not the ghost of a notion that he has been doing the very same thing himself. And so we bribe our consciences as well as neglect them, and they need to be educated.

Thus, down below every life there lies a great dim region of habits and impulses and fleeting emotions, into which it is the rarest thing for a man to go with a candle in his hand to see what it is like.

But I can imagine a man saying, Well, if I do not know that I am doing wrong, how can it be a sin? In answer to that, I would say that, thank God! ignorance diminishes criminality, but ignorance does not alter the nature of the deed. Take a simple illustration. Here is a man who, all unconsciously to himself, is allowing worldly prosperity to sap his Christian character. He does not know that the great current of his life has been turned aside, as it were, by that sluice, and is taken to drive the wheels of his mill, and that there is only a miserable little trickle coming down the river bed. Is he any less guilty because he does not know? Is he not the more so, because he might and would have known if he had thought and felt right? Or, here is another man who has the habit of letting his temper get the better of him. He calls it stern adherence to principle, or righteous indignation; and he thinks himself very badly used when other people drive him so often into a temper. Other people know, and he might know, if he would be honest with himself, that, for all his fine names, it is nothing else than passion. Is he any the less guilty because of his ignorance? It is plain enough that, whilst ignorance, if it is absolute and inevitable, does diminish criminality to the vanishing point, the ignorance of our own faults which most of us display is neither absolute nor inevitable; and therefore, though it may, thank God! diminish, it does not destroy our guilt. She wipeth her mouth and saith, I have done no harm: was she, therefore, chaste and pure? In all our hearts there are many vermin lurking beneath the stones, and they are none the less poisonous because they live and multiply in the dark. I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified. But he that judgeth me is the Lord.

**II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look at the special perilousness of these hidden faults.**

As with a blight upon a rose-tree, the little green creatures lurk on the underside of the leaves, and in all the folds of the buds, and because unseen, they increase with alarming rapidity. The very fact that we have faults in our characters, which everybody sees but ourselves, makes it certain that they will grow unchecked, and so will prove terribly perilous. The small things of life are the great things of life. For a man's character is made up of them, and of their results, striking inwards upon himself. A wine-glassful of water with one drop of mud in it may not be much obscured, but if you come to multiply it into a lakeful, you will have muddy waves that reflect no heavens, and show no gleaming stars.

These secret faults are like a fungus that has grown in a wine-cask, whose presence nobody suspected. It sucks up all the generous liquor to feed its own filthiness, and when the staves are broken, there is no wine left, nothing but the foul growth. Many a Christian man and woman has the whole Christian life arrested, and all but annihilated, by the unsuspected influence of a secret sin. I do not believe it would be exaggeration to say that, for one man who has made shipwreck of his faith and lost his peace by reason of some gross transgression, there are twenty who have fallen into the same condition by reason of the multitude of small ones. He that despiseth little things shall fall by little and little; and whilst the deeds which the Ten Commandments rebuke are damning to a Christian character, still more perilous, because unseen, and permitted to grow without check or restraint, are these unconscious sins. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

**III. Notice the discipline, or practical issues, to which such considerations should lead.**

To begin with, they ought to take down our self-complacency, if we have any, and to make us feel that, after all, our characters are very poor things. If men praise us, let us try to remember what it will be good for us to remember, too, when we are tempted to praise ourselves--the underworld of darkness which each of us carries about within us.

Further, let me press upon you two practical points. This whole set of contemplations should make us practise a very rigid and close self-inspection. There will always be much that will escape our observation--we shall gradually grow to know more and more of it--but there can be no excuse for that which I fear is a terribly common characteristic of the professing Christianity of this day--the all but entire absence of close inspection of one's own character and conduct. I know very well that it is not a wholesome thing for a man to be always poking in his own feelings and emotions. I know also that, in a former generation, there was far too much introspection, instead of looking to Jesus Christ and forgetting self. I do not believe that self-examination, directed to the discovery of reasons for trusting the sincerity of my own faith, is a good thing. But I do believe that, without the practice of careful weighing of ourselves, there will be very little growth in anything that is noble and good.

The old Greeks used to preach, Know thyself. It was a high behest, and very often a very vain-glorious one. A man's best means of knowing what he is, is to take stock of what he does. If you will put your conduct through the sieve, you will come to a pretty good understanding of your character. He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls, into which all enemies can leap unhindered, and out from which all things that will may pass. Do you set guards at the gates and watch yourselves with all carefulness.

Then, again, I would say we must try to diminish as much as possible the mere instinctive and habitual and mechanical part of our lives, and to bring, as far as we can, every action under the conscious dominion of principle. The less we live by impulse, and the more we live by intelligent reflection, the better it will be for us. The more we can get habit on the side of goodness, the better; but the more we break up our habits, and make each individual action the result of a special volition of the spirit guided by reason and conscience, the better for us all.

Then, again, I would say, set yourselves to educate your consciences. They need that. One of the surest ways of making conscience more sensitive is always to consult it and always to obey it. If you neglect it, and let it prophesy to the wind, it will stop speaking before long. Herod could not get a word out of Christ when he asked Him many questions because for years he had not cared to hear His voice. And conscience, like the Lord of conscience, will hold its peace after men have neglected its speech. You can pull the clapper out of the bell upon the rock, and then, though the waves may dash, there will not be a sound, and the vessel will drive straight on to the black teeth that are waiting for it. Educate your conscience by obeying it, and by getting into the habit of bringing everything to its bar.

And, still further, compare yourselves constantly with your model. Do as the art students do in a gallery, take your poor daub right into the presence of the masterpiece, and go over it line by line and tint by tint. Get near Jesus Christ that you may learn your duty from Him, and you will find out many of the secret sins.

**IV. And, lastly, let us ask God to cleanse us.**

My text, as translated in the Revised Version, says, Clear Thou me from secret faults. And there is present in that word, if not exclusively, at least predominantly, the idea of a judicial acquittal, so that the thought of the first clause of this verse seems rather to be that of pronouncing guiltless, or forgiving, than that of delivering from the power of. But both, no doubt, are included in the idea, as both, in fact, come from the same source and in response to the same cry.

And so we may be sure that, though our eye does not go down into the dark depths, God's eye goes, and that where He looks He looks to pardon, if we come to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

He will deliver us from the power of these secret faults, giving to us that divine Spirit which is the candle of the Lord, to search us, and to convince of our sins, and to drag our evil into the light; and giving us the help without which we can never overcome. The only way for us to be delivered from the dominion of our unconscious faults is to increase the depth and closeness and constancy of our communion with Jesus Christ; and then they will drop away from us. Mosquitoes and malaria, the one unseen in their minuteness, and the other, the pestilence that walketh in darkness, haunt the swamps. Go up on the hilltop, and neither of them are found. So if we live more and more on the high levels, in communion with our Master, there will be fewer and fewer of these unconscious sins buzzing and stinging and poisoning our lives, and more and more will His grace conquer and cleanse.

They will all be manifested some day. The time comes when He shall bring to light the hidden things and darkness and the counsels of men's hearts. There will be surprises on both hands of the Judge. Some on the right, astonished, will say, Lord, when saw we Thee? and some on the left, smitten to confusion and surprise, will say, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? Let us go to Him with the prayer, Search me, O God! and try me; and see if there be any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting.