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

**PSALMS-070**. **A CLEANSED WAY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to Thy word."*

*Psalm 119:9*

There are many questions about the future with which it is natural for you young people to occupy yourselves; but I am afraid that the most of you ask more anxiously How shall I make my way? than How shall I cleanse it? It is needful carefully to ponder the questions: How shall I get on in the world--be happy, fortunate? and the like, and I suppose that that is the consideration which presses with special force upon a great many of you. Now I want you to think of another question: How shall I cleanse my way? For purity is the best thing; and to be good is a wiser as well as a nobler object of ambition than any other. So my object is just to try and urge upon my dear young friends before me the serious consideration for a while of this grave question of my text, and the answers which are given to it.

If I can get you once to be smitten with a passion for purity, all but everything is gained. But I shall not be content if even that is the issue of my pleading with you now, for I want to have you all Christians. And that is why I have asked you to listen to what I have to say to you on this occasion.

**I. So, first, we have here the great practical problem for life: Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?**

Or, in other words, How may I live a pure and a noble life? It is a question, of course, for everybody: it is the question for everybody, but it is more especially one for you young people. And I wish to urge it upon you for two or three reasons, which I very briefly specify.

First, I desire to press upon you this question, because, as I have said, you are under special temptations not to ask it. There are so many other points in your future unresolved, that you are only too apt to put aside the consideration of this one in favour of those which seem to be of more pressing and immediate importance. And you have the other temptation, common to us all, but especially attending you as young people, of living without any plan of life at all. The sin and the misery of half the world are that they live from hand to mouth, knowing why they do each single action at the moment, but never looking a dozen inches beyond their noses to see where all the actions taken together tend; and so being just like weathercocks, whirled round by every wind of temptation that comes to them. If they are good or pure they are so by accident, by impulse, or because they have never been tempted. They have no definite plan or theory of life which they could put into words if anybody asked them on what principles, and for what end, and towards what objects they were living. And as everybody is tempted into such an unreflecting way of life, so you especially are tempted to it, because at your age judgment and experience are not so strong as inclination and passion; and everything has got the fresh gloss of novelty upon it, and it seems to be sometimes sufficient delight to live and get hold of the new joys that are flooding in upon you. And therefore I want you to stop and for a moment think whether you have any plan of life that bears being put into words, whether you can tell God and your own consciences what you are living for.

And I urge this question upon you for another reason--because it is worth while for you to ask it. For you have still the prerogative that some of us have lost, of determining the shape that your life's course is to take. The path that you are going to tread lies all unmarked out across the plain of life. You may be pretty nearly what you like. Life is before you, with great blessed possibilities; it is behind some of us. All the long years which you may probably have are all plastic in your hands yet; they are moulded into a rigid shape for men like me. We have made our beds, and we must lie on them. You have your life in your own hands; therefore, I beseech you, while you have not to ask this question with the bitter meaning with which old men that have made their paths, and made them filthy, have to ask it--How shall an old man cleanse his way, and get rid of the filth?--consider how you may secure that your way in the untrodden future shall be clean, and do not rest till you get an answer.

And I press it upon you for another reason, because you have special temptations to make your ways unclean. It is a fearful ordeal that every young man and woman has to face, as he or she steps across the dividing boundary between childhood and youth, when parental authority is weakened, and the leading-strings are loosened, and the young swimmer is as it were cut away from the buoys, and has to battle with the waves alone. There are hundreds of young men in Manchester, there are many of them here now, who have come up into this great city from quiet country homes where they were shielded by the safeguards of a father's and a mother's love and care, and have been flung into this place, with its every street swarming with temptation, and companions on the benches of the university, at the desks, in the warehouses, and the workshops, leading them away into evil and teaching them the devil's alphabet--young men with their evenings vacant and with no home. Am I speaking to any such standing in slippery places? Oh, my young friend! there is nothing in all these temptations, the fascinations of which you are beginning to find out, there is nothing in them all worth soiling your fingers for; there is nothing in them all that will pay you for the loss of your innocence. There is nothing in them all except a fair outside with poison at the core. You see the primrose path; you do not see, to use Shakespeare's solemn words, the everlasting burnings to which it leads. And so I plead with you all, young men and women, to lay this question to heart; and I beseech you to credit me when I say to you that you have not yet touched the gravest and the most pressing problem of life unless you have asked yourselves in a serious mood of deep reflection, Wherewithal shall I cleanse my way?

**II. So much for the first point to which I ask your attention. Now, secondly, look at this answer, which tells us that we can only make our way clean on condition of constant watchfulness. By taking heed thereto.**

That seems a very plain, simple, common-sense answer. The best made road wants looking after if it is to be kept in repair. What would become of a railway that had no surfacemen and platelayers going along the line and noticing whether anything was amiss? I remember once seeing a bit of an old Roman road; the lava blocks were there, but for want of care, here a young sapling had grown up between two of them and had driven them apart; there they were split by the frost, here was a great ugly gap full of mud; and the whole thing ended in a jungle. How shall a man keep his road in repair? By taking heed thereto. Things that are left to go anyhow in this world have a strange knack of going one how. You do not need anything else than negligence to ensure that things will come to grief.

And so, at first sight, my text simply seems to preach the plain truth: if you want to keep your road right, look after it. But if you look at your Bibles, you will see that the word thereto is a supplement, and that all that the Psalmist really says is by taking heed. And perhaps it is to himself rather than to his way that a man is exhorted to take heed. Take heed to thyself is the only condition of a pure and noble life.

That such a condition is necessary, will appear very plain from two considerations. First, it is clear that there must be constant watchfulness, if we consider what sort of a world this is that we have got into And it is also plain, if we consider what sort of creatures we are that have got into it.

First, it is plain if we consider what sort of a world this is that we have got into. It is a world a great deal fuller of inducements to do wrong than of inducements to do right; a world in which there are a great many bad things that have a deceptive appearance of pleasure; a great many circumstances in which it seems far easier to follow the worse than to follow the better course. And so, unless a man has learned the great art of saying No! So did not I because of the fear of the Lord; he will come to rack and ruin without a doubt. There are more things round about you that will tempt you downwards than will draw you upwards, and your only security is constant watchfulness. As George Herbert says:--

Who keeps no guard upon himself is slack,

And rots to nothing at the next great thaw.

And that is what will happen to you, as sure as you are living, in spite of all your good resolutions, unless you back up those resolutions with perpetual jealous watchfulness over yourselves. Keep thy heart with all diligence.

And the same lesson is pealed out to us if we consider what sort of creatures we are that have got into this world all full of wickedness. We are creatures evidently made for self-government. Our whole nature is like a monarchy. There are things in each of us that are never meant to rule, but to be kept well down under control, such as strong passions, desires rooted in the flesh which are not meant to get the mastery of a man, and there are parts of our nature which are as obviously intended to be supreme and sovereign: the reason, the conscience, the will.

There is a deal of pestilent talk which one sometimes hears, amongst young men especially, about following nature. Yes! I say, Follow nature! and nature says, Let the man govern the animal! and Do not set beggars on horseback, nor allow your passions to guide you, but keep a tight hand on them, suppress them, scourge them, rule them by your reason, by your conscience, and by your will.

Suppose a man were to say about a steamship, The structure of this vessel shows that it is meant that we should get a roaring fire up in the furnaces, and set the engines going at full speed, and let her go as she will. Would he not have left out of account that there was a steering apparatus, which was as plainly meant to guide as are the engines to drive? What are the rudder and the wheel for?--do they not imply a pilot? and is not the make of our souls as plainly suggestive of subordination and control? Doth not nature itself teach you that you do not follow, but outrage, nature, when you let your passions rule, and that you only then follow nature when you bow the whole man under the dominion of the conscience, and when conscience stands waiting for the voice of God?

Unless above himself he can erect

Himself, how mean a thing is man!

You are called upon by the very world that you have come into, and by the very sort of person that you yourself are, to exercise that perpetual watchfulness which is the only condition of cleansing your way. There must be a strong guard on the frontier, which shall examine all the thoughts and purposes and desires that would pass out, and all the temptations and seductions that would pass in; and take care that none shall pass which cannot bring the King's warrant, Keep thy heart with diligence. Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto.

**III. This constant watchfulness, to be of any use, must be regulated by God's Word. Taking heed thereto, according to Thy word.**

The guard on the frontier who is to keep the path must have instructions from headquarters, and not choose and decide according to their own phantasy, but according to the King's orders. Or to use another metaphor, it is no use having a guard unless the guard has a lantern, and the lantern and light is the Word of God.

That brings me to say, and only in a word or two, how inadequate for the task of regulating our own lives our own watchfulness is. Conscience is the captain of the guard, and there is only one judgment in which conscience is always and infallibly right, and that is when it says, It is right to do right; and it is wrong to do wrong. But when you begin to ask conscience, And, pray, what is right and what is wrong? it is by no means invariably to be trusted; for you can educate conscience up or down to almost anything; and you can warp conscience, and you can bribe conscience, and you can stifle conscience. And so it is not enough that we should exercise the most watchful care over our course, and decide upon the right and the wrong of it by our own judgments; we may be fearfully wrong notwithstanding it all. It is not enough for a man to have a good watch in his pocket unless now and then he can get Greenwich time by which he can set it, and unless that has been secured by taking an observation of the sun. And so you cannot trust to anything in yourselves for the guidance of your own way or for the determination of your duty, but you must look to that higher Wisdom that has condescended to speak to us, and give us in this Book the revelation of its will. Men rebel against the moral law of the Bible, and speak of it as if it were a restraint and a sharp taskmaster. Ah, no! It is one of the greatest tokens of God's infinite love to us that He has not left us to grope our way amidst the illusions of our own judgments, and the questionable shapes of human conceptions of right and wrong, but that He has declared to us His own character for the standard of all perfection, and given us in the human life of the Son of His love the all-sufficient pattern for every life.

So I need not dwell at any length upon the thought that in that word of God, in its whole sweep, and eminently and especially in Christ, who is the Incarnate Word, we have an all-sufficient Guide. A guide of conduct must be plain--and whatever doubts and difficulties there may be about the doctrines of Christianity there is none about its morality. A guide of conduct must be decisive--and there is no faltering in the utterance of the Book as to right and wrong. A guide of conduct must be capable of application to the wide diversities of character, age, circumstance--and the morality of the New Testament especially, and of the Old in a measure, secures that, because it does not trouble itself about minute details, but deals with large principles. The morality of the Gospel, if I may so say, is a morality of centres, not of circumferences; of germinal principles, not of special prescriptions. A guide for morals must be far in advance of the followers, and it has taken generations and centuries to work into men's consciences, and to work out in men's practice, a portion of the morality of that Book. People tell us that Christianity is worn out. Ah! it will not be worn out until all its moral teaching has become part of the practice of the world, and that will not be for a year or two! The men that care least about Christian doctrines are foremost to admit that the Sermon on the Mount is the noblest code of morality that has ever been promulgated. If the world kept the commandments of the New Testament, the world would be in the Millennium; and all the sin and crime, and ninety-nine-hundredths of all the sorrow, of earth would have vanished like an ugly dream. Here is the guide for you, and if you take it you will not err.

My dear young friend! did you ever try to measure one day's actions by the standard of this Book? Let me press upon you this: Cultivate the habit--the habit of bringing all that you do side by side with this light; as a scholar in some school of art will take his feeble copy, and hold it by the side of the masterpiece, and compare line for line, and tint for tint. Take your life, and put it by the side of the Great Life, and you will begin to find out how according to Thy word is the only standard by which to set your lives.

**IV. And now I have one last thing to say. All this can only be done effectually if you are a Christian.**

My psalm does not go to the bottom; it goes as far as the measure of revelation granted to its author admitted; but if a person had no more to say than that, it would be a weary business. It is no use to tell a man, Guard yourself, guard yourself, nor even to tell him, Guard yourself according to God's word, if God's word is only a law.

The fatal defect of all attempts at keeping my heart by my own watchfulness is that keeper and kept are one and the same, and so there may be mutiny in the garrison, and the very forces that ought to subdue the rebellion may have gone over to the rebels. You want a power outside of you to steady you. The only way to haul a boat up the rapids is to have some fixed point on the shore to which a man may fasten a rope and pull at that. You get that eternal guard and fixed point by which to hold in Jesus Christ, the dear Son of God's love, who has died for you.

You want another motive to be brought to bear upon your conduct, and upon your convictions and your will mightier than any that now influence them; and you get that if you will yield yourself to the love that has come down from heaven to save you, and says to you, If you love Me, keep My commandments. You want for keeping yourself and cleansing your way reinforcements to your own inward vigour, and you will get these if you will trust to Jesus Christ, who will breathe into you the Spirit of His own life, which will make you free from the law of sin and death.

You want, if your path is to be cleansed--the youngest of you, the most tenderly nurtured, the purest, the most innocent wants--forgiveness for a past path, which is in some measure stained and foul, as well as strength for the future, to deliver you from the dreadful influence of the habit of evil. And you get all these, dear friends! in the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses from all sin.

So, standing as you do in the place where two ways meet, and with your choice yet in your power, I beseech you, turn away from the broad, easy road that slopes pleasantly downwards, and choose the narrow, steep path that climbs. Better rocks than mud, better the painful life of self-restraint and self-denial than the life of pleasing self.

Oh! choose the better portion, choose Christ for your Leader, your Law, your Lord! Trust yourselves to that great sacrifice which He made on the Cross, that all the past for you may be cleansed, and the future may be swept clear; and, so trusting, be sure He will be with you, to keep you and to guide you into the path which His own hand has raised above the filth of the world; the path of holiness, along which you may walk with feet and garments unstained till you come to Zion, with songs and everlasting joy upon your heads, and bless Him there for all the way by which He led you home.