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

**ROMANS-037**. **STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him: if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."*

*Romans 12:19-21*

The natural instinct is to answer enmity with enmity, and kindliness with kindliness. There are many people of whom we think well and like, for no other reason than because we believe that they think well of and like us. Such a love is really selfishness. In the same fashion, dislike, and alienation on the part of another naturally reproduce themselves in our own minds. A dog will stretch its neck to be patted, and snap at a stick raised to strike it. It requires a strong effort to master this instinctive tendency, and that effort the plainest principles of Christian morality require from us all. The precepts in our text are in twofold form, negative and positive; and they are closed with a general principle, which includes both these forms, and much more besides. There are two pillars, and a great lintel coping them, like the trilithons of Stonehenge.

**I. We deal with the negative precept.**

Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto wrath. Do not take the law into your own hands, but leave God's way of retribution to work itself out. By avenging, the Apostle means a passionate redress of private wrongs at the bidding of personal resentment. We must note how deep this precept goes. It prohibits not merely external acts which, in civilised times are restrained by law, but, as with Christian morality, it deals with thoughts and feelings, and not only with deeds. It forbids such natural and common thoughts as I owe him an ill turn for that; I should like to pay him off. A great deal of what is popularly called a proper spirit becomes extremely improper if tested by this precept. There is an eloquent word in German which we can only clumsily reproduce, which christens the ugly pleasure at seeing misfortune and calls it joy in others disasters. We have not the word; would that we had not the thing!

A solemn reason is added for the difficult precept, in that frequently misunderstood saying, Give place unto wrath. The question is, Whose wrath? And, plainly, the subsequent words of the section show that it is God's. That quotation comes from Deuteronomy xxxii. 35. It is possibly unfortunate that vengeance is ascribed to God; for hasty readers lay hold of the idea of passionate resentment, and transfer it to Him, whereas His retributive action has in it no resentment and no passion. Nor are we to suppose that the thought here is only the base one, they are sure to be punished, so we need not trouble. The Apostle points to the solemn fact of retribution as an element in the Divine government. It is not merely automatically working laws which recompense evil by evil, but it is the face of the Lord which is inexorably and inevitably set against them that do evil. That recompense is not hidden away in the future behind the curtain of death, but is realised in the present, as every evil-doer too surely and bitterly experiences.

Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord. God only has the right to recompense the ungodly and the sinner as well as the righteous. Dwelling in such a system as we do, how dares any one take that work into his hands? It requires perfect knowledge of the true evil of an action, which no one has who cannot read the heart; it requires perfect freedom from passion; it requires perfect immunity from evil desert on the part of the avenger; in a word, it belongs to God, and to Him alone. We have nothing to do with apportioning retribution to desert, either in private actions or in the treatment of so-called criminals. In the latter our objects should be reformation and the safety of society. If we add to these retribution, we transcend our functions.

**II. Take the positive,--Follow God's way of meeting hostility with beneficence.**

The hungry enemy is to be fed, the thirsty to be given drink; and the reason is, that such beneficence will heap coals of fire upon his head. The negative is not enough. To abstain from vengeance will leave the heart unaffected, and may simply issue in the cessation of all intercourse. The reason assigned sounds at first strange. It is clear that the coals of fire which are to be heaped on the head are meant to melt and soften the heart, and cause it to glow with love. There may be also included the burning pangs of shame felt by a man whose evil is answered by good. But these are secondary and auxiliary to the true end of kindling the fire of love in his alienated heart. The great object which every Christian man is bound to have in view is to win over the enemy and melt away misconceptions and hostility. It is not from any selfish regard to one's own personal ease that we are so to act, but because of the sacred regard which Christ has taught us to cherish for the blessing of peace amongst men, and in order that we may deliver a brother from the snare, and make him share in the joys of fellowship with God. The only way to burn up the evil in his heart is by heaping coals of kindness and beneficence on his head. And for such an end it becomes us to watch for opportunities. We have to mark the right moment, and make sure that we time our offer for food when he is hungry and of drink when he thirsts; for often mal-a-propos offers of kindness make things worse. Such is God's way. His thunderbolts we cannot grasp, His love we can copy. Of the two weapons mercy and judgment which He holds in His hand, the latter is emphatically His own; the former should be ours too.

**III. In all life meet and conquer evil with good.**

This last precept, Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good, is cast into a form which covers not only relations to enemies, but all contact with evil of every kind. It involves many great thoughts which can here be only touched. It implies that in all our lives we have to fight evil, and that it conquers, and we are beaten when we are led to do it. It is only conquered by being transformed into good. We overcome our foes when we win them to be lovers. We overcome our temptations to doing wrong when we make them occasions for developing virtues; we overcome the evil of sorrow when we use it to bring us nearer to God; we overcome the men around us when we are not seduced by their example to evil, but attract them to goodness by ours.

Evil is only thus transformed by the positive exercise of goodness on our part. We have seen this in regard to enemies in the preceding remarks. In regard to other forms of evil, it is often better not to fight them directly, but to occupy the mind and heart with positive truth and goodness, and the will and hands with active service. A rusty knife shall not be cleaned so effectually by much scouring as by strenuous use. Our lives are to be moulded after the great example of Him, who at almost the last moment of His earthly course said, Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world. Jesus seeks to conquer evil in us all, and counts that He has conquered it when He has changed it into love.