

A TRIPLET OF GOOD COUNSEL **Alexander Maclaren**

"Render to no man evil for evil. Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as in you lieth, be at peace with all men." Romans 12:17, 18 (R.V.)

The closing words of this chapter have a certain unity in that they deal principally with a Christian's duty in the face of hostility and antagonism. A previous injunction touched on the same subject in the exhortation to bless the persecutors; but with that exception, all the preceding verses have dealt with duties owing to those with whom we stand in friendly relations. Such exhortations take no cognizance of the special circumstances of the primitive Christians as 'lambs in the midst of wolves'; and a large tract of Christian duty would be undealt with if we had not such directions for feelings and actions in the face of hate and hurt. The general precept in our text is expanded in a more complete form in the verses which follow the text, and we may postpone its consideration until we have to deal with them. It is one form of the application of the 'love without hypocrisy' which has been previously recommended. The second of these three precepts seems quite heterogeneous, but it may be noticed that the word for 'evil' in the former and that for 'honorable,' in these closely resemble each other in sound, and the connection of the two clauses may be partially owing to that verbal resemblance; whilst we may also discern a real link between the thoughts in the consideration that we owe even to our enemies the exhibition of a life which a prejudiced hostility will be forced to recognize as good. The third of these exhortations prescribes unmoved persistence in friendly regard to all men.

Dealing then, in this sermon only, with the second and third of these precepts, and postponing the consideration of the first to the following discourse, we have here the counsel that--

1. Hostility is to be met with a holy and beautiful life.

The Authorized Version inadequately translates the significant word in this exhortation by 'honest.' The Apostle is not simply enjoining honesty in our modern, narrow sense of the word, which limits it to the rendering to every man his own. It is a remarkable thing that 'honest,' like many other words expressing various types of goodness, has steadily narrowed in signification, and it is very characteristic of England that probity as to money and material goods should be its main meaning. Here the word is used in the full breadth of its ancient use, and is equivalent to that which is fair with the moral beauty of goodness.

A Christian man then is bound to live a good life which all men will acknowledge to be good. In that precept is implied the recognition of even bad men's notions of morality as correct. The Gospel is not a new system of ethics, though in some points it brings old virtues into new prominence and alters their perspective. It is further implied that the world's standard of what Christians ought to be may be roughly taken as a true one. Christian men would learn a great deal about themselves, and might in many respects heighten their ideal, if they would try to satisfy the expectations of the most degraded among them as to what they ought to be. The worse of men has a rude sense of duty which tops the attainments of the best. Christian people ought to seek for the good opinion of those around them. They are not to take that opinion as the motive for their conduct, nor should they do good in order to be praised or admired for it. But they are to 'adorn the doctrine,' and to let their light shine that men seeing their good may be led to think more loftily of its source, and so to 'glorify their Father which is in heaven.'

That is one way of preaching the Gospel. The world knows goodness when it sees it, though it often hates it, and has no better ground for its dislike of a man than that his purity and beauty of character make the lives of others seem base indeed. . . . Jesus had to say, 'The world

hates Me because I testify of it that the deeds thereof are evil.' That witness was the result of His being 'the Light of the world'; and if His followers are illuminated from Him, they will have the same effect, and must be prepared for the same response. But none the less is it incumbent upon them to 'take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men.'

This duty involves the others of taking care that we have goodness to show, and that we do not make our goodness repulsive by our additions to it. There are good people who comfort themselves when men dislike them or scoff at them by thinking that their religion is the cause, when it is only their own roughness and harshness of character. It is not enough that we present an austere and repellent virtue; the fair food should be set on a fair platter. This duty is especially owing to our enemies. They are our keenest critics. They watch for our halting. The thought of their hostile scrutiny should ever stimulate us; and the consciousness that Argus-eyes are watching us--with a keenness sharpened by dislike--should lead us not only to vigilance over our own steps, but also to the prayer, 'Lead me in a plain path because of those who watch me.' To 'provide things honest in the sight of all men' is a possible way of disarming some hostility, conciliating some prejudice, and commending to some hearts the Lord whom we seek to imitate.

2. Be sure that if there is to be enmity, it is all on one side.

'As much as in you lieth, be at peace with all.' These words are, I think, unduly limited when they are supposed to imply that there are circumstances in which a Christian has a right to be at strife. As if they meant: Be peaceable as far as you can; but if it be impossible, then quarrel. The real meaning goes far deeper than that. 'It takes two to make a quarrel,' says the old proverb; it takes two to make peace also, does it not? We cannot determine whether our relations with men will be peaceful or no; we are only answerable for our part, and for that we are answerable. 'As much as lieth in you' is the explanation of 'if it be possible.' Your part is to be at peace. It is not your part up to a certain point and no further, but always, and in all circumstances, it is your part. It may not be possible to be at peace with all men. There may be some who *will* quarrel with you; you are not to blame for that. But their part and yours are separate, and your part is the same whatever they do. Be you at peace with all men whether they are at peace with you or not. Don't you quarrel with them even if they will quarrel with you. That seems to me to be plainly the meaning of the words.

It would be contrary to the tenor of the context and the teaching of the New Testament to suppose that here we had that favorite principle, 'There is a point beyond which forbearance cannot go,' where it becomes right to cherish hostile sentiments or to try to injure a man. If there be such a point, it is very remarkable that there is no attempt made in the New Testament to define it. The nearest approach to such definition is 'till seventy times seven,' the two perfect numbers multiplied into themselves. So I think that this injunction absolutely prescribes persistent, patient peacefulness, and absolutely proscribes [repudiates] our taking up the position of antagonism, and under no circumstances meeting hate with hate. It does not follow that there is never to be opposition. It may be necessary for the good of the opponent himself and for the good of society that he should be hindered in his actions of hostility. But there is never to be bitterness, and we must take care that none of the devil's leaven mingles with our zeal against evil.

There is no need for enlarging on the enormous difficulty of carrying out such a commandment in our daily lives; we all know too well how hard it is. But we may reflect for a moment on the absolute necessity of obeying this precept to the full. For their own souls' sakes, Christian men are to avoid all bitterness, strife, and malice. Let us try to remember and to bring to bear on our daily lives the solemn things which Jesus said about God's forgiveness being measured by our forgiveness. The faithful, even though imperfect, following of this exhortation would revolutionize our lives. Nothing that we can only win by fighting with our fellows is worth fighting for. Men will weary of antagonism that is met only by the

imperturbable calm of a heart at peace with God and seeking peace with all men. The hot fire of hatred dies down, like burning coals scattered on a glacier, when laid against the crystal coldness of a patient, peaceful spirit. Watch-dogs in farmhouses will bark half the night through, because they hear another barking a mile off. It takes two to make a quarrel. Let me be sure that I am never one of the two!