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

**PROVERBS-016. SIN THE MOCKER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Fools make a mock at sin; but among the righteous there is favour."*

*Proverbs 14:9*

The wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man is the good man, and the good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is not only intellectual feebleness--the bad man is a fool, and the godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student and thinker God pronounces the sentence Thou fool!

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is, criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it completely round, and for the foolish make a mock at guilt, would read, guilt mocketh at the foolish. In the original the verb in our text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is guilt. The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to save some of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty chambers of many an empty soul.

**I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.**

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured, other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the reaper's hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn. There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David's son, Amnon, puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows--He hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her. Conscience, which was overpowered and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked, impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that promised him so much and hid so much from him.

Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is driving headlong to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that it is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and all but waterlogged, with its canvas lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind. It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the quid pro quo is not given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too, which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The Folly of the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten in secret, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. The temptations that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it to the hope.

**II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.**

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints of how little a thing it was. Don't make such a mountain of a molehill. It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like. But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, I have got you now and you cannot get away. The prey is seduced into the trap by a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible, We are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, Show yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims; the meaning of it was, Become my slave.

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in a sinner's power to promise himself It is only this one time that I will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the evil for ever after. We have to reckon with the tremendous power of habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the hatches and, if need be, the chains.

**III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.**

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped. The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both parts of sin's mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish, the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but God is not mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that--and not some other growth--shall he also reap. We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools who say to themselves, I did not think it would matter much. Each act of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and effect, every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward. Given the world as it is, and the continuous identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely, more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past. Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost power with vain threats.