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

**JOHN-079**. **THE TRUE BRANCHES OF THE TRUE VINE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples."*

*John 15:5-8*

No wise teacher is ever afraid of repeating himself. The average mind requires the reiteration of truth before it can make that truth its own. One coat of paint is not enough, it soon rubs off. Especially is this true in regard to lofty spiritual and religious truth, remote from men's ordinary thinkings, and in some senses unwelcome to them. So our Lord, the great Teacher, never shrank from repeating His lessons when He saw that they were but partially apprehended. It was not grievous to Him to say the same things, because for them it was safe. He broke the bread of life into small pieces, and fed them little and often.

So here, in the verses that we have to consider now, we have the repetition, and yet not the mere repetition, of the great parable of the vine, as teaching the union of Christians with Christ, and their consequent fruitfulness. He saw, no doubt, that the truth was but partially dawning upon His disciplesminds. Therefore He said it all over again, with deepened meaning, following it out into new applications, presenting further consequences, and, above all, giving it a more sharp and definite personal application.

Are we any swifter scholars than these first ones were? Have we absorbed into our own thinking this truth so thoroughly and constantly, and wrought it out in our lives so completely, that we do not need to be reminded of it any more? Shall we not be wise if we faithfully listen to His repeated teachings?

The verses which I have read give us four aspects of this great truth of union with Jesus Christ; or of its converse, separation from Him. There is, first, the fruitfulness of union; second, the withering and destruction of separation; third, the satisfaction of desire which comes from abiding in Christ; and, lastly, the great, noble issue of fruitfulness, in God's glory, and our own increasing discipleship. Now let me touch upon these briefly.

**I. First, then, our Lord sets forth, with no mere repetition, the same broad idea which He has already been insisting upon--viz., that union with Him is sure to issue in fruitfulness.**

He repeats the theme, I am the Vine; but He points its application by the next clause, Ye are the branches. That had been implied before, but it needed to be said more definitely. For are we not all too apt to think of religious truth as swinging in vacuo as it were, with no personal application to ourselves, and is not the one thing needful in regard to the truths which are most familiar to us, to bring them into close connection with our own personal life and experience?

I am the Vineis a general truth, with no clear personal application. Ye are the branchesbrings each individual listener into connection with it. How many of us there are, as there are in every so-called Christian communion, that listen pleasedly, and, in a fitful sort of languid way, interestedly, to the most glorious and most solemn words that come from a preacher's lips, and never dream that what he has been saying has any bearing upon themselves! And the one thing that is most of all needed with people like some of you, who have been listening to the truth all your days, is that it should be sharpened to a point, and the conviction driven into you, that you have some personal concern in this great message. Ye are the branchesis the one side of that sharpening and making definite of the truth in its personal application, and the other side is, Thou art the man. All preaching and religious teaching is toothless generality, utterly useless, unless we can manage somehow or other to force it through the wall of indifference and vague assent to a general proposition, with which Gospel-hardened hearerssurround themselves, and make them feel that the thing has got a point, and that the point is touching their own consciousness. Ye are the branches.

Note next the great promise of fruitfulness. He that abideth in Me, and I in Him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.

I need not repeat what I have said in former sermons as to the plain, practical duties which are included in that abiding in Christ, and Christ's consequent abiding in us. It means, on the part of professedly Christian people, a temper and tone of mind very far remote from the noisy, bustling distractions too common in our present Christianity. We want quiet, patient waiting within the veil. We want stillness of heart, brought about by our own distinct effort to put away from ourselves the strife of tongues and the pride of life. We want activity, no doubt, but we want a wise passiveness as its foundation.

Think you, midst all this mighty sum

Of things for ever speaking,

That nothing of itself will come,

But we must still be seeking?

Get away into the secret place of the Most High, and rise into a higher altitude and atmosphere than the region of work and effort; and sitting still with Christ, let His love and His power pour themselves into your hearts. Come, My people, enter thou into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee. Get away from the jangling of politics, and empty controversies and busy distractions of daily duty. The harder our toil necessarily is, the more let us see to it that we keep a little cell within the central life where in silence we hold communion with the Master. Abide in Me and I in you.

That is the way to be fruitful, rather than by efforts after individual acts of conformity and obedience, howsoever needful and precious these are. There is a deeper thing wanted than these. The best way to secure Christian conduct is to cultivate communion with Christ. It is better to work at the increase of the central force than at the improvement of the circumferential manifestations of it. Get more of the sap into the branch, and there will be more fruit. Have more of the life of Christ in the soul, and the conduct and the speech will be more Christlike. We may cultivate individual graces at the expense of the harmony and beauty of the whole character. We may grow them artificially and they will be of little worth--by imitation of others, by special efforts after special excellence, rather than by general effort after the central improvement of our nature and therefore of our life. But the true way to influence conduct is to influence the springs of conduct; and to make a man's life better, the true way is to make the man better. First of all be, and then do; first of all receive, and then give forth; first of all draw near to Christ, and then there will be fruit to His praise. That is the Christian way of mending men, not tinkering at this, that, and the other individual excellence, but grasping the secret of total excellence in communion with Him.

Our Lord is here not merely laying down a law, but giving a promise, and putting his veracity into pawn for the fulfilment of it. If a man will keep near Me, He says, he shall bear fruit.

Notice that little word which now appears for the first time. He shall bear much fruit. We are not to be content with a little fruit; a poor shrivelled bunch of grapes that are more like marbles than grapes, here and there, upon the half-nourished stem. The abiding in Him will produce a character rich in manifold graces. A little fruitis not contemplated by Christ at all. God forbid that I should say that there is no possibility of union with Christ and a little fruit. Little union will have little fruit; but I would have you notice that the only two alternatives which come into Christ's view here are, on the one hand, no fruit, and on the other hand, much fruit. And I would ask why it is that the average Christian man of this generation bears only a berry or two here and there, like such as are left upon the vines after the vintage, when the promise is that if he will abide in Christ, he will bear much fruit?

This verse, setting forth the fruitfulness of union with Jesus, ends with the brief, solemn statement of the converse--the barrenness of separation--Apart from Me(not merely without, as the Authorised Version has it) ye can do nothing. There is the condemnation of all the busy life of men which is not lived in union with Jesus Christ. It is a long row of figures which, like some other long rows of algebraic symbols added up, amount just to zero. Without me, nothing. All your busy life, when you come to sum it up, is made up of plus and minus quantities, which precisely balance each other, and the net result, unless you are in Christ, is just nothing; and on your gravestones the only right epitaph is a great round cypher. He did not do anything. There is nothing left of his toil; the whole thing has evaporated and disappeared. That is life apart from Jesus Christ.

**II. And so note, secondly, the withering and destruction following separation from Him.**

Commentators tell us, I think a little prosaically, that when our Lord spoke, it was the time of pruning the vine in Palestine, and that, perhaps, as they went from the upper room to the garden, they might see in the valley, here and there, the fires that the labourers had kindled in the vineyards to burn the loppings of the vines. That does not matter. It is of more consequence to notice how the solemn thought of withering and destruction forces itself, so to speak, into these gracious words; and how, even at that moment, our Lord, in all His tenderness and pity, could not but let words of warning--grave, solemn, tragical--drop from His lips.

This generation does not like to hear them, for its conception of the Gospel is a thing with no minor notes in it, with no threatenings, a proclamation of a deliverance, and no proclamation of anything from which deliverance is needed--which is a strange kind of Gospel! But Jesus Christ could not speak about the blessedness of fruitfulness and the joy of life in Himself without speaking about its necessary converse, the awfulness of separation from Him, of barrenness, of withering, and of destruction.

Separation is withering. Did you ever see a hawthorn bough that children bring home from the woods, and stick in the grate; how in a day or two the little fresh green leaves all shrivel up and the white blossoms become brown and smell foul, and the only thing to be done with it is to fling it into the fire and get rid of it? And so, says Jesus Christ, as long as a man holds on to Me and the sap comes into him, he will flourish, and as soon as the connection is broken, all that was so fair will begin to shrivel, and all that was green will grow brown and turn to dust, and all that was blossom will droop, and there will be no more fruit any more for ever. Separate from Christ, the individual shrivels, and the possibilities of fair buds wither and set into no fruit, and no man is the man he might have been unless he holds by Jesus Christ and lets His life come into him.

And as for individuals, so for communities. The Church or the body of professing Christians that is separate from Jesus Christ dies to all noble life, to all high activity, to all Christlike conduct, and, being dead, rots.

Withering means destruction. The language of our text is a description of what befalls the actual branches of the literal vine; but it is made a representation of what befalls the individuals whom these branches represent, by that added clause, like a branch. Look at the mysteriousness of the language. They gather them. Who? They cast them into the fire. Who have the tragic task of flinging the withered branches into some mysterious fire? All is left vague with unexplained awfulness. The solemn fact that the withering of manhood by separation from Jesus Christ requires, and ends in, the consuming of the withered, is all that we have here. We have to speak of it pityingly, with reticence, with terror, with tenderness, with awe lest it should be our fate.

But O, dear brethren! be on your guard against the tendency of the thinking of this generation, to paste a bit of blank paper over all the threatenings of the Bible, and to blot out from its consciousness the grave issues that it holds forth. One of two things must befall the branch, either it is in the Vine or it gets into the fire. If we would avoid the fire let us see to it that we are in the Vine.

**III. Thirdly, we have here the union with Christ as the condition of satisfied desires.**

If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Notice how our Lord varies His phraseology here, and instead of saying I in you, says My words in you. He is speaking about prayers, consequently the variation is natural. In fact, His abiding in us is largely the abiding of His words in us; or, to speak more accurately, the abiding of His words in us is largely the means of His abiding in us.

What is meant by Christ's words abiding in us? Something a great deal more than the mere intellectual acceptance of them. Something very different from reading a verse of the Gospels of a morning before we go to our work, and forgetting all about it all the day long; something very different from coming in contact with Christian truth on a Sunday, when somebody else preaches to us what he has found in the Bible, and we take in a little of it. It means the whole of the conscious nature of a man being, so to speak, saturated with Christ's words; his desires, his understanding, his affections, his will, all being steeped in these great truths which the Master spoke. Put a little bit of colouring matter into the fountain at its source, and you will have the stream dyed down its course for ever so far. See that Christ's words be lodged in your inmost selves, by patient meditation upon them, by continual recurrence to them, and all your life will be glorified and flash into richness of colouring and beauty by their presence.

The main effect of such abiding of the Lord's words in us which our Lord touches upon here is, that in such a case, if our whole inward nature is influenced by the continual operation upon it of the words of the Lord, then our desires will be granted. Do not so vulgarise and lower the nobleness and the loftiness of this great promise as to suppose that it only means--If you remember His words you will get anything you like. It means something a great deal better than that. It means that if Christ's words are the substratum, so to speak, of your wishes, then your wishes will harmonise with His will, and so ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.

Christ loves us a great deal too well to give to our own foolish and selfish wills the keys of His treasure-house. The condition of our getting what we will is our willing what He desires; and unless our prayers are a great deal more the utterance of the submission of our wills to His than they are the attempt to impose ours upon Him, they will not be answered. We get our wishes when our wishes are moulded by His word.

**IV. The last thought that is here is that this union and fruitfulness lead to the noble ends of glorifying God and increasing discipleship.**

Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit. Christ's life was all for the glorifying of God. The lives which are ours in name--but being drawn from Him, in their depths are much rather the life of Christ in us than our lives--will have the same end and the same issue.

Ah, dear brethren, we come here to a very sharp test for us all. I wonder how many of us there are, on whom men looking think more loftily of God and love Him better, and are drawn to Him by strange longings. How many of us are there about whom people will say, There must be something in the religion that makes a man like that? How many of us are there, to look upon whom suggests to men that God, who can make such a man, must be infinitely sweet and lovely? And yet that is what we should all be--mirrors of the divine radiance, on which some eyes, that are too dim and sore to bear the light as it streams from the Sun, may look, and, beholding the reflection, may learn to love. Does God so shine in me that I lead men to magnify His name? If I am dwelling with Christ it will be so.

I shall not know it. Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone; but, in meek unconsciousness of the glory that rays from us, we may walk the earth, reflecting the light and making God known to our fellows.

And if thus we abide in Him and bear fruit we shall beor (as the word might more accurately be rendered), we shall become His disciples. The end of our discipleship is never reached on earth: we never so much are as we are in the process of becoming, His true followers and servants.

If we bear fruit because we are knit to Him, the fruit itself will help us to get nearer Him, and so to be more His disciples and more fruitful. Character produces conduct, but conduct rests on character, and strengthens the impulses from which it springs. And thus our action as Christian men and women will tell upon our inward lives as Christians, and the more our outward conduct is conformed to the pattern of Jesus Christ, the more shall we love Him in our inmost hearts. We ourselves shall eat of the fruit which we ourselves have borne to Him.

The alternatives are before us--in Christ, living and fruitful; out of Christ, barren, and destined to be burned. As the prophet says, Will men take of the wood of the vine for any work?Vine-wood is worthless, its only use is to bear fruit; and if it does not do that, there is only one thing to be done with it, and that is, They cast it into the fire, and it is burned.