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

**2 CORINTHIANS-011**. **THE LOVE THAT CONSTRAINS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The love of Christ constraineth us."*

*2 Corinthians 5:14*

It is a dangerous thing to be unlike other people. It is still more dangerous to be better than other people. The world has a little heap of depreciatory terms which it flings, age after age, at all men who have a higher standard and nobler aims than their fellows. A favourite term is mad. So, long ago they said, The prophet is a fool; the spiritual man is mad, and, in His turn, Jesus was said to be beside Himself, and Festus shouted from the judgment-seat to Paul that he was mad. A great many people had said the same thing about him before, as the context shows. For the verse before my text is: Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. Now the former clause can only refer to other people's estimate of the Apostle. No doubt there were many things about him that gave colour to it. He said that a dead Man had appeared to him and spoken with him. He said that he had been carried up into the third heaven. He had a very strange creed in the judgment of the times. He had abandoned a brilliant career for a very poor one. He was obviously utterly indifferent to the ordinary aims of men. He had a consuming enthusiasm. And so the world explained him satisfactorily to itself by the short and easy method of saying, Insane. And Paul explained himself by the great word of my text, The love of Christ constraineth us. Wherever there is a life adequately under the influence of Christ's love the results will be such as an unsympathising world may call madness, but which are the perfection of sober-mindedness. Would there were more such madmen! I wish to try to make one or two of them now, by getting some of you to take for your motto, The love of Christ constraineth us.

**I. Now the first thing to notice is this constraining love.**

I need not spend time in showing that when Paul says here The love of Christ, he means Christ's love to him, not his to Christ. That is in accordance with his continual usage of the expression; and it is in accordance with facts. For it is not my love to Jesus, but His love to me, that brings the real moulding power into my life, and my love to Him is only the condition on which the true power acts upon me. To get the fulcrum and the lever which will heave a life up to the heights you have to get out of yourselves.

Now Paul never saw Jesus Christ in this earthly life. Timothy, who is associated with him in this letter, and perhaps is one of the us, never saw Him either. The Corinthian believers whom he is addressing had, of course, never seen Him. And yet the Apostle has not the slightest hesitation in taking that great benediction of Christ's love and spreading it over them all. That love is independent of time and of space; it includes humanity, and is co-extensive with it. Unturned away by unworthiness, unrepelled by non-responsiveness, undisgusted by any sin, unwearied by any, however numerous, foiling of its attempts, the love of Christ, like the great heavens that bend above us, wraps us all in its sweetness, and showers upon us all its light and its dew.

And yet, brethren, I would have you remember that whilst we thus try to paint, in poor, poor words, the universality of that love, we have to remember that it does not partake of the weakness that infects all human affections, which are only strong when they are narrow, and as the river expands it becomes shallow, and loses the force in its flow which it had when it was gathered between straiter banks, so as that a universal charity is almost akin to a universal indifference. But this love that grasps us all, this river that proceedeth from the Throne of God and of the Lamb, flows in its widest reaches as deep and as impetuous in its career as if it were held within the narrowest of gorges. For Christ's universal love is universal only because it is individualising and particular. We love our nation by generalising and losing sight of the individuals. Christ loves the world because He loves every man and woman in it, and His grace enwraps all because His grace hovers over each.

The sun whose beams most glorious are

Despiseth no beholder,

but the rays come straight to each eyeball. Be sure of this: that He who, when the multitude thronged Him and pressed Him, felt the tremulous, timid, scarcely perceptible touch of one woman's wasted finger on the hem of His garment, holds each of us in the grasp of His love, which is universal, because it applies to each. You and I have each the whole radiance of it pouring down on our heads, and none intercepts the beams from any other. So, brethren, let us each feel not only the love that grasps the world, but the love that empties itself on me.

But there is one more remark that I wish to make in reference to this constraining love of Jesus Christ, and that is, that in order to see and feel it we must take the point of view that this Apostle takes in my text. For hearken how he goes on. The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then all died, and that He died for all, etc. That is to say, the death of Christ for all, which is equivalent to the death of Christ for each, is the great solvent by which the love of God melts men's hearts, and is the great proof that Jesus Christ loves me, and thee, and all of us. If you strike out that conception you have struck out from your Christianity the vindication of the belief that Christ loves the world. What possible meaning is there in the expression, He died for all? How can the fact of His death on a green hill outside the gates of a little city in Syria have world-wide issues, unless in that death He bore, and bore away, the sins of the whole world? I know that there have been many--and there are many to-day--who not accepting what seems to me to be the very vital heart of Christianity--viz. the death of Christ for the world's sin, do yet cherish--as I think illogically--yet do cherish a regard for Him, which puts some of us who call ourselves orthodox, and are tepid, to the blush. Thank God! men are often better than their creeds, as well as worse than them. But that fact does not affect what I am saying now, and what I beg you to take for what you find it to be worth, that unless we believe that Jesus Christ died for all, I do not know what claim He has on the love of the world. We shall admire Him, we shall bow before Him, as the very realised ideal of humanity, though how this one Man has managed to escape the taint of the all-pervading evil remains, upon that hypothesis, very obscure. But love Him? No! Why should I? But if I feel that His death had world-wide issues, and that He went down into the darkness in order that He might bring the world into the light, then--and I am sure, on the wide scale and in the long-run only then--will men turn to Him and say, Thou hast died for me, help me to live for Thee. Brethren, I beseech you, take care of emptying the death of Christ of its deepest meaning, lest you should thereby rob His character of its chiefest charm, and His name of its mightiest soul-melting power. The love that constraineth is the love that died, and died for all, because it died for each.

**II. Now let me ask you to consider the echo of this constraining love.**

I said a moment or two ago that Christ's love to us is the constraining power, and that ours to Him is but the condition on which that power works. But between the two there comes something which brings that constraining love to bear upon our hearts. And so notice what my text goes on to adduce as needful for Christ's love to have its effect--namely, because we thus judge, etc. Then my estimate, my apprehension of the love of Christ must come in between its manifestation and its power to grip, to restrain, to impel me. If I may use such a figure, He stands, as it were, bugle in hand, and blows the sweet strains that are meant to set the echoes flying. But the rock must receive the impact of the vibrations ere it can throw back the thinned echo of the music. Love must be believed and known ere it can be responded to.

Now the only answer and echo that hearts desire is the love of the beloved heart. We all know that in our earthly life. Love is as much a hunger to be loved as the outgoing of my own affection. The two things are inseparable, and there is nothing that repays love but love. Jesus Christ wishes each of us to love Him. If it is true that He loves me, then, intertwisted with the outgoing of His heart towards me is the yearning that my heart may go out towards Him. Dear brethren, this is no pulpit rhetoric, it is a plain, simple fact, inseparable from the belief in Christ's love--that He wishes you and every soul of man to love Him, and that, whatever else you bring, lip reverence, orthodox belief, apparent surrender, in the assay shop of His great mint all these are rejected, and the only metal that passes the fire is the pure gold of an answering love. Brethren! is that what you bring to Jesus Christ?

Love seeks for love, and our love can only be an echo of His. He takes the beginning in everything. If I am to love Him back again, I must have faith in His love to me. And if that be so, then the true way by which you, imperfect Christian people, can deepen and strengthen your love to Jesus Christ is not so much by efforts to work up a certain warmth of sentiment and glow of affection, as by gazing, with believing eyes of the heart, upon that which kindles your love to Him. If you want ice to melt, put it out into the sunshine, If you want the mirror to gleam, do not spend all your time in polishing it. Carry it where it can catch the ray, and it will flash it back in glory. We love Him because He first loved us. Our love is an echo; be sure that you listen for the parent note, and link yourselves by faith with that great love which has come down from Heaven for us all.

But how can I speak about echoes and responses when I know that there are scores of men and women whom a preacher's words reach who would be ashamed of themselves, and rightly, if they exhibited the same callousness of heart and selfishness of ingratitude to some human, partial benefactor as they are not ashamed to have exhibited all their lives to Jesus Christ. Echo? Yes! your heartstrings are set vibrating fast enough whenever, in the adjoining apartment, an instrument is touched which is tuned to the same key as your heart. Pleasures, earthly aims, worldly gifts, the sweetnesses of human life, all these things set them thrilling, and you can hear the music, but your hearts are not tuned to answer to the note that is struck in He loved me and gave Himself for me. The bugle is blown, and there is silence, and no echo, faint and far, comes whispering back. Brethren, we use no one else, in whose love we have any belief, a thousandth part so ill as we use Jesus Christ.

**III. Now, lastly, let me say a word about the constraining influence of this echoed love.**

Its first effect, if it has any real power in our hearts and lives, will be to change their centre, to decentralise. Look what the Apostle goes on to say: We thus judge that He ... died for all, that they which live should not live henceforth unto themselves. That is the great transformation. Secure that, and all nobleness will follow, and whatsoever things are lovely and of good report will come, like doves to their windows, flocking into the soul that has ceased to find its centre in its poor rebellious self. All love derives its power to elevate, refine, beautify, ennoble, conquer, from the fact that, in lower degree, all love makes the beloved the centre, and not the self. Hence the mother's self-sacrifice, hence the sweet reciprocity of wedded life, hence everything in humanity that is noble and good. Love is the antagonist of selfishness, and the highest type of love should be, and in the measure in which we are under the influence of Christ's love will be, the self-surrendering life of a Christian man. I know that in saying so I am condemning myself and my brethren. All the same, it is true. The one power that rescues a man from the tyranny of living for self, which is the mother of all sin and ignobleness, is when a man can say Christ is my aim, Christ is my object. The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. There is no secret of self-annihilation, which is self-transfiguration, and, I was going to say, deification, like that of loving Christ with all my heart because He has loved me so.

Again, let me remind you that, on its lower reaches and levels, we find that all true affection has in it a strange power of assimilating its objects to one another. Just as a man and woman who have lived together for half a century in wedded life come to have the same notions, the same prejudices, the same tastes, and sometimes you can see their very faces being moulded into likeness, so, if I love Jesus Christ, I shall by degrees grow liker and liker to Him, and be changed into the same image, from glory to glory.

Again, the love constrains, and not only constrains but impels, because it becomes a joy to divine and to do the will of the beloved Christ. My yoke is easy. Is it? It is very hard to be a Christian. His requirements are a great deal sterner than others. His yoke is easy, not because it is a lighter yoke, but because it is padded with love. And that makes all service a sacrament, and the surrender of my own will, which is the essence of obedience, a joy.

So, dear friends, we come here in sight of the unique and blessed characteristic of all Christian morality, and of all its practical exhortations, and the Gospel stands alone as the mightiest moulding power in the world, just because its word is love, and do as thou wilt. For in the measure of thy love will thy will coincide with the will of Christ. There is nothing else that has anything like that power. We do not want to be told what is right. We know it a great deal better than we practise it. A revelation from heaven that simply told me my duty would be surplusage. If there had been a law that could have given life, righteousness had been by the law. We want a life, not a law, and the love of Christ brings the life to us.

And so, dear friends, that life, restrained and impelled by the love to which it is being assimilated, is a life of liberty and a life of blessedness. In the measure in which the love of Christ constrains any man, it makes for him difficulties easy, the impossible possible, the crooked things straight, and the rough places plain. The duty becomes a delight, and self ceases to disturb. If the love of God is shed abroad in a heart, and in the measure in which it is, that heart will be at rest, and a great peace will brood over it. Then the will bows in glad submission, and all the powers arise to joyous service. We are lords of the world and ourselves when we are Christ's servants for love's sake; and earth and its good are never so good as when the power of His echoed love rules our lives. Do you know and believe that Christ loves you? Do you know and believe that you had a place in His heart when He hung on the Cross for the salvation of the world? Have you answered that love with yours, kindled by your faith in, and experience of, His? Is His love the overmastering impulse which urges you to all good, the mighty constraint that keeps you back from all evil, the magnet that draws, the anchor that steadies, the fortress that defends, the light that illumines, the treasure that enriches? Is it the law that commands, and the power that enables? Then you are blessed, though people will perhaps say that you are mad, whilst here; and you will be blessed for ever and ever.