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

**2 CORINTHIANS-015**. **GIVING AND ASKING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; 2. How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. 3. For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; 4. Praying us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. 5. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God: 6. Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. 7. Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us; see that ye abound in this grace also. 8. I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love. 9. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich. 10. And herein I give my advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago. 11. Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have. 12. For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not."*

*2 Corinthians 8:1-12*

A collection from Gentile churches for their poor brethren in Jerusalem occupied much of Paul's time and efforts before his last visit to that city. Many events, which have filled the world with noise and been written at length in histories, were less significant than that first outcome of the unifying spirit of common faith. It was a making visible of the grand thought, Ye are all one in Christ Jesus. Practical help, prompted by a deep-lying sense of unity which overleaped gulfs of separation in race, language, and social conditions, was a unique novelty. It was the first pulsation of that spirit of Christian liberality which has steadily grown in force and sweep ever since. Foolish people gibe at some of its manifestations. Wiser ones regard its existence as not the least of the marks of the divine origin of Christianity.

This passage is a striking example of the inimitable delicacy of the Apostle. His words are full of what we should call tact, if it were not manifestly the spontaneous utterance of right feeling. They are a perfect model of the true way to appeal for money, and set forth also the true spirit in which such appeals should be made.

In verses 1 to 5, Paul seeks to stimulate the liberality of the Corinthians by recounting that of the Macedonian churches. His sketch draws in outline the picture of what all Christian money-giving should be. We note first the designation of the Macedonian Christians beneficence as a grace given by God to them. It is twice called so (vers. 1, 4), and the same name is applied in regard to the Corinthians giving (vers. 6, 7). That is the right way to look at money contributions. The opportunity to give them, and the inclination to do so, are God's gifts. How many of us think that calls for service or money are troublesome obligations, to be got out of as easily as possible! A true Christian will be thankful, as for a love token from God, for every occasion of giving to Him. It would be a sharp test for many of us to ask ourselves whether we can say, To me ... is this grace given, that I should part with my money for Christ's sake.

Note, further, the lovely picture of these Macedonian givers. They were plunged in sorrows and troubles, but these did not dry their fountains of sympathy. Nothing is apt to be more selfish than grief; and if we have tears to spare for others, when they are flowing bitterly for ourselves, we have graduated well in Christ's school. Paul calls the Macedonians troubles proof of their affliction, meaning that it constituted a proof of their Christian character; that is, by the manner in which it was borne; and in it they had still abundance of joy, for the paradox of the Christian life is that it admits of the co-existence of grief and gladness.

Again, Christian giving gives from scanty stores. Deep poverty is no excuse for not giving, and will be no hindrance to a willing heart. I cannot afford it is sometimes a genuine valid reason, but oftener an insincere plea. Why are subscriptions for religious purposes the first expenditure to be reduced in bad times?

Further, Christian giving gives up to the very edge of ability, and sometimes goes beyond the limits of so-called prudence. In all regions power to its last particle is duty, and unless power is strained it is not fully exercised. It is in trying to do what we cannot do that we do best what we can do. He who keeps well within the limits of his supposed ability will probably not do half as much as he could. While there is a limit behind which generosity even for Christ may become dishonesty or disregard of other equally sacred claims, there is little danger of modern Christians transgressing that limit, and they need the stimulus to do a little more than they think they can do, rather than to listen to cold-blooded prudence.

Further, Christian giving does not wait to be asked, but takes the opportunity to give as itself grace and presses its benefactions. It is an unwonted experience for a collector of subscriptions to be besought to take them with much entreaty, but it would not be so anomalous if Christian people understood their privileges.

Further, Christian giving begins with the surrender of self to Christ, from which necessarily follows the glad offering of wealth. These Macedonians did more than Paul had hoped, and the explanation of the unexpected largeness of their contributions was their yielding of themselves to Jesus. That is the deepest source of all true liberality. If a man feels that he does not own himself, much less will he feel that his goods are his own. A slave's owner possesses the slave's bit of garden ground, his hut, and its furniture. If I belong to Christ, to whom does my money belong? But the consciousness that my goods are not mine, but Christ's, is not to remain a mere sentiment. It can receive practical embodiment by my giving them to Christ's representatives. The way for the Macedonians to show that they regarded their goods as Christ's, was to give them to Paul for Christ's poor saints. Jesus has His representatives still, and it is useless for people to talk or sing about belonging to Him, unless they verify their words by deeds.

Verse 6 tells the Corinthians that the success of the collection in Macedonia had induced Paul to send Titus to Corinth to promote it there. He had previously visited it on the same errand (chap. xii. 14), and now is coming to complete this grace. The rest of the passage is Paul's appeal to the Corinthians for their help in the matter, and certainly never was such an appeal made in a more dignified, noble, and lofty tone. He has been dilating on the liberality of others, and thereby sanctioning the stimulating of Christian liberality, in the same way as other graces may legitimately be stimulated, by example. That is delicate ground to tread on, and needs caution if it is not to degenerate into an appeal to rivalry, as it too often does, but in itself is perfectly legitimate and wholesome. But, passing from that incitement, Paul rests his plea on deeper grounds.

First, Christian liberality is essential to the completeness of Christian character. Paul's praise in verse 7 is not mere flattery, nor meant to put the Corinthians into good humour. He will have enough to say hereafter about scandals and faults, but now he gives them credit for all the good he knew to be in them. Faith comes first, as always. It is the root of every Christian excellence. Then follow two graces, eminently characteristic of a Greek church, and apt to run to seed in it,--utterance and knowledge. Then two more, both of a more emotional character,--earnestness and love, especially to Paul as Christ's servant. But all these fair attributes lacked completeness without the crowning grace of liberality. It is the crowning grace, because it is the practical manifestation of the highest excellences. It is the result of sympathy, of unselfishness, of contact with Christ, of drinking in of His spirit, Love is best. Utterance and knowledge and earnestness are poor beside it. This grace is like the diamond which clasps a necklace of jewels.

Christian giving does not need to be commanded. I speak not by way of commandment. That is poor virtue which only obeys a precept. Gifts given because it is duty to give them are not really gifts, but taxes. They leave no sweet savour on the hand that bestows, and bring none to that which receives. I call you not servants, but friends. The region in which Christian liberality moves is high above the realm of law and its correlative, obligation.

Further, Christian liberality springs spontaneously from conscious possession of Christ's riches. We cannot here enter on the mysteries of Christ's emptying Himself of His riches of glory. We can but touch the stupendous fact, remembering that the place whereon we stand is holy ground. Who can measure the nature and depth of that self-denuding of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was? But, thank God, we do not need to measure it, in order to feel the solemn, blessed force of the appeal which it makes to us. Adoring wonder and gratitude, unfaltering trust and absolute self-surrender to a love so self-sacrificing, must ever follow the belief of that mystery of Divine mercy, the incarnation and sacrifice of the eternal Son.

But Paul would have us remember that the same mighty act of stooping love, which is the foundation of all our hope, is to be the pattern for all our conduct. Even in His divinest and most mysterious act, Christ is our example. A dewdrop is rounded by the same laws which shape the planetary spheres or the sun himself; and Christians but half trust Christ if they do not imitate Him. What selfishness in enjoyment of our own things could live in us if we duly brought ourselves under the influence of that example? How miserably poor and vulgar the appeals by which money is sometimes drawn from grudging owners and tight-buttoned pockets, sound beside that heart-searching and heart-moving one, Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Further, Christian liberality will not go off in good intentions and benevolent sentiments. The Corinthians were ready with their willing on Titus's previous visit. Now Paul desires them to put their good feelings into concrete shape. There is plenty of benevolence that never gets to be beneficence. The advice here has a very wide application: As there was the readiness to will, so there may be the completion also. We all know where the road leads that is paved with good intentions.

Further, Christian liberality is accepted and rewarded according to willingness, if that is carried into act according to ability. While the mere wish to help is not enough, it is the vital element in the act which flows from it; and there may be more of it in the widow's mite than in the rich man's large donation--or there may be less. The conditions of acceptable offerings are twofold--first, readiness, glad willingness to give, as opposed to closed hearts or grudging bestowals; and, second, that willingness embodied in the largest gift possible. The absence of either vitiates all. The presence of both gives trifles a place in God's storehouse of precious things. A father is glad when his child brings him some utterly valueless present, not because he must, but because he loves; and many a parent has such laid away in sacred repositories. God knows how to take gifts from His children, not less well than we who are evil know how to do it.

But the gracious saying of our passage has a solemn side; for if only gifts according as a man hath are accepted, what becomes of the many which fall far short of our ability, and are really given, not because we have the willing mind, but because we could not get out of the unwelcome necessity to part with a miserably inadequate percentage of our possessions. Is God likely to be satisfied with the small dividends which we offer as composition for our great debt?