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

**ROMANS-028**. **SOBER THINKING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"For I say, through the grace that is given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."*

*Romans 12:3*

It is hard to give advice without seeming to assume superiority; it is hard to take it, unless the giver identifies himself with the receiver, and shows that his counsel to others is a law for himself. Paul does so here, led by the delicate perception which comes from a loving heart, compared with which deliberate tact is cold and clumsy. He wishes, as the first of the specific duties to which he invites the Roman Christians, an estimate of themselves based upon the recognition of God as the Giver of all capacities and graces, and leading to a faithful use for the general good of the gifts differing according to the grace given to us. In the first words of our text, he enforces his counsel by an appeal to his apostolic authority; but he so presents it that, instead of separating himself from the Roman Christians by it, he unites himself with them. He speaks of the grace given to me, and in verse 6 of the grace given to us. He was made an Apostle by the same giving God who has bestowed varying gifts on each of them. He knows what is the grace which he possesses as he would have them know; and in these counsels he is assuming no superiority, but is simply using the special gift bestowed on him for the good of all. With this delicate turn of what might else have sounded harshly authoritative, putting prominently forward the divine gift and letting the man Paul to whom it was given fall into the background, he counsels as the first of the social duties which Christian men owe to one another, a sober and just estimate of themselves. This sober estimate is here regarded as being important chiefly as an aid to right service. It is immediately followed by counsels to the patient and faithful exercise of differing gifts. For thus we may know what our gifts are; and the acquisition of such knowledge is the aim of our text.

**I. What determines our gifts.**

Paul here gives a precise standard, or measure as he calls it, according to which we are to estimate ourselves. Faith is the measure of our gifts, and is itself a gift from God. The strength of a Christian man's faith determines his whole Christian character. Faith is trust, the attitude of receptivity. There are in it a consciousness of need, a yearning desire and a confidence of expectation. It is the open empty hand held up with the assurance that it will be filled; it is the empty pitcher let down into the well with the assurance that it will be drawn up filled. It is the precise opposite of the self-dependent isolation which shuts us out from God. The law of the Christian life is ever, according to your faith be it unto you; believe that ye receive and ye have them. So then the more faith a man exercises the more of God and Christ he has. It is the measure of our capacity, hence there may be indefinite increase in the gifts which God bestows on faithful souls. Each of us will have as much as he desires and is capable of containing. The walls of the heart are elastic, and desire expands them.

The grace given by faith works in the line of its possessor's natural faculties; but these are supernaturally reinforced and strengthened while, at the same time, they are curbed and controlled, by the divine gift, and the natural gifts thus dealt with become what Paul calls charisms. The whole nature of a Christian should be ennobled, elevated, made more delicate and intense, when the Spirit of life that is in Christ Jesus abides in and inspires it. Just as a sunless landscape is smitten into sudden beauty by a burst of sunshine which heightens the colouring of the flowers on the river's bank, and is flashed back from every silvery ripple on the stream, so the faith which brings the life of Christ into the life of the Christian makes him more of a man than he was before. So, there will be infinite variety in the resulting characters. It is the same force in various forms that rolls in the thunder or gleams in the dewdrops, that paints the butterfly's feathers or flashes in a star. All individual idiosyncrasies should be developed in the Christian Church, and will be when its members yield themselves fully to the indwelling Spirit, and can truly declare that the lives which they live in the flesh they live by the faith of the Son of God.

But Paul here regards the measure of faith as itself dealt to every man; and however we may construe the grammar of this sentence there is a deep sense in which our faith is God's gift to us. We have to give equal emphasis to the two conceptions of faith as a human act and as a divine bestowal, which have so often been pitted against each other as contradictory when really they are complementary. The apparent antagonism between them is but one instance of the great antithesis to which we come to at last in reference to all human thought on the relations of man to God. It is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure; and all our goodness is God-given goodness, and yet it is our goodness. Every devout heart has a consciousness that the faith which knits it to God is God's work in it, and that left to itself it would have remained alienated and faithless. The consciousness that his faith was his own act blended in full harmony with the twin consciousness that it was Christ's gift, in the agonised father's prayer, Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.

**II. What is a just estimate of our gifts.**

The Apostle tells us, negatively, that we are not to think more highly than we ought to think, and positively that we are to think soberly.

To arrive at a just estimate of ourselves the estimate must ever be accompanied with a distinct consciousness that all is God's gift. That will keep us from anything in the nature of pride or over-weening self-importance. It will lead to true humility, which is not ignorance of what we can do, but recognition that we, the doers, are of ourselves but poor creatures. We are less likely to fancy that we are greater than we are when we feel that, whatever we are, God made us so. What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now, if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?'

Further, it is to be noted that the estimate of gifts which Paul enjoins is an estimate with a view to service. Much self-investigation is morbid, because it is self-absorbed; and much is morbid because it is undertaken only for the purpose of ascertaining one's spiritual condition. Such self-examination is good enough in its way, and may sometimes be very necessary; but a testing of one's own capacities for the purpose of ascertaining what we are fit for, and what therefore it is our duty to do, is far more wholesome. Gifts are God's summons to work, and our first response to the summons should be our scrutiny of our gifts with a distinct purpose of using them for the great end for which we received them. It is well to take stock of the loaves that we have, if the result be that we bring our poor provisions to Him, and put them in His hands, that He may give them back to us so multiplied as to be more than adequate to the needs of the thousands. Such just estimate of our gifts is to be attained mainly by noting ourselves at work. Patient self-observation may be important, but is apt to be mistaken; and the true test of what we can do is what we do do.

The just estimate of our gifts which Paul enjoins is needful in order that we may ascertain what God has meant us to be and do, and may neither waste our strength in trying to be some one else, nor hide our talent in the napkin of ignorance or false humility. There is quite as much harm done to Christian character and Christian service by our failure to recognise what is in our power, as by ambitious or ostentatious attempts at what is above our power. We have to be ourselves as God has made us in our natural faculties, and as the new life of Christ operating on these has made us new creatures in Him not by changing but by enlarging our old natures. It matters nothing what the special form of a Christian man's service may be; the smallest and the greatest are alike to the Lord of all, and He appoints His servants work. Whether the servant be a cup-bearer or a counsellor is of little moment. He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much.

The positive aspect of this right estimate of one's gifts is, if we fully render the Apostle's words, as the Revised Version does, so to think as to think soberly. There is to be self-knowledge in order to sobriety, which includes not only what we mean by sober-mindedness, but self-government; and this aspect of the apostolic exhortation opens out into the thought that the gifts, which a just estimate of ourselves pronounces us to possess, need to be kept bright by the continual suppression of the mind of the flesh, by putting down earthly desires, by guarding against a selfish use of them, by preventing them by rigid control from becoming disproportioned and our masters. All the gifts which Christ bestows upon His people He bestows on condition that they bind them together by the golden chain of self-control.