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

**1 CORINTHIANS-009**. **THE THREE TRIBUNALS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"3. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. 4. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord."*

*1 Corinthians 4:3-4*

The Church at Corinth was honeycombed by the characteristic Greek vice of party spirit. The three great teachers, Paul, Peter, Apollos, were pitted against each other, and each was unduly exalted by those who swore by him, and unduly depreciated by the other two factions. But the men whose names were the war-cries of these sections were themselves knit in closest friendship, and felt themselves to be servants in common of one Master, and fellow-workers in one task.

So Paul, in the immediate context, associating Peter and Apollos with himself, bids the Corinthians think of us as being servants of Christ, and not therefore responsible to men; and as stewards of the mysteries of God, that is, dispensers of truths long hidden but now revealed, and as therefore accountable for correct accounts and faithful dispensation only to the Lord of the household. Being responsible to Him, they heeded very little what others thought about them. Being responsible to Him, they could not accept vindication by their own consciences as being final. There was a judgment beyond these.

So here we have three tribunals--that of man's estimates, that of our own consciences, that of Jesus Christ. An appeal lies from the first to the second, and from the second to the third. It is base to depend on men's judgments; it is well to attend to the decisions of conscience, but it is not well to take it for granted that, if conscience approve, we are absolved. The court of final appeal is Jesus Christ, and what He thinks about each of us. So let us look briefly at these three tribunals.

**I. First, the lowest--men's judgment.**

With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, enlightened Christians that you are, or by the outside world. Now, Paul's letters give ample evidence that he was keenly alive to the hostile and malevolent criticisms and slanders of his untiring opponents. Many a flash of sarcasm out of the cloud like a lightning bolt, many a burst of wounded affection like rain from summer skies, tell us this. But I need not quote these. Such a character as his could not but be quick to feel the surrounding atmosphere, whether it was of love or of suspicion. So, he had to harden himself against what naturally had a great effect upon him, the estimate which he felt that people round him were making of him. There was nothing brusque, rough, contemptuous in his brushing aside these popular judgments. He gave them all due weight, and yet he felt, From all that this lowest tribunal may decide, there are two appeals, one to my own conscience, and one to my Master in heaven.

Now, I suppose I need not say a word about the power which that terrible court which is always sitting, and which passes judgment upon every one of us, though we do not always hear the sentences read, has upon us all. There is a power which it is meant to have. It is not good for a man to stand constantly in the attitude of defying whatever anybody else chooses to say or to think about him. But the danger to which we are all exposed, far more than that other extreme, is of deferring too completely and slavishly to, and being far too subtly influenced in all that we do by, the thought of what A, B, or C, may have to say or to think about it. The last infirmity of noble minds, says Milton about the love of fame. It is an infirmity to love it, and long for it, and live by it. It is a weakening of humanity, even where men are spurred to great efforts by the thought of the reverberation of these in the ear of the world, and of the honour and glory that may come therefrom.

But not only in these higher forms of seeking after reputation, but in lower forms, this trembling before, and seeking to conciliate, the tribunal of what we call general opinion, which means the voices of the half-dozen people that are beside us and know about us, besets us all, and weakens us all in a thousand ways. How many men would lose all the motive that they have for living reputable lives, if nobody knew anything about it? How many of you, when you go to London, and are strangers, frequent places that you would not be seen in in Manchester? How many of us are hindered, in courses which we know that we ought to pursue, because we are afraid of this or that man or woman, and of what they may look or speak? There is a regard to man's judgment, which is separated by the very thinnest partition from hypocrisy. There is a very shadowy distinction between the man who, consciously or unconsciously, does a thing with an eye to what people may say about it, and the man who pretends to be what he is not for the sake of the reputation that he may thereby win.

Now, the direct tendency of Christian faith and principle is to dwindle into wholesome insignificance the multitudinous voice of men's judgments. For, if I understand at all what Christianity means, it means centrally and essentially this, that I am brought into loving personal relation with Jesus Christ, and draw from Him the power of my life, and from Him the law of my life, and from Him the stimulus of my life, and from Him the reward of my life. If there is a direct communication between me and Him, and if I am deriving from Him the life that He gives, which is free from the law of sin and death, I shall have little need or desire to heed the judgment that men, who see only the surface, may pass upon me, and upon my doings, and I shall refer myself to Him instead of to them. Those who can go straight to Christ, whose lives are steeped in Him, who feel that they draw all from Him, and that their actions and character are moulded by His touch and His Spirit, are responsible to no other tribunal. And the less they think about what men have to say of them the stronger, the nobler, the more Christ-like they will be.

There is no need for any contempt or roughness to blend with such a putting aside of men's judgments. The velvet glove may be worn upon the iron hand. All meekness and lowliness may go with this wholesome independence, and must go with it unless that independence is false and distorted. With me it is a very small thing to be judged of you, or of man's judgment, need not be said in such a tone as to mean I do not care a rush what you think about me; but it must be said in such a tone as to mean I care supremely for one approbation, and if I have that I can bear anything besides.

Let me appeal to you to cultivate more distinctly, as a plain Christian duty, this wholesome independence of men's judgment. I suppose there never was a day when it was more needed that men should be themselves, seeing with their own eyes what God may reveal to them and they are capable of receiving, and walking with their own feet on the path that fits them, whatsoever other people may say about it. For the multiplication of daily literature, the way in which we are all living in glass houses nowadays--everybody knowing everything about everybody else, and delighting in the gossip which takes the place of literature in so many quarters--and the tendency of society to a more democratic form give the many-headed monster and its many tongues far more power than is wholesome, in the shaping of the lives and character and conduct of most men. The evil of democracy is that it levels down all to one plane, and that it tends to turn out millions of people, as like each other as if they had been made in a machine. And so we need, I believe, even more than our fathers did, to lay to heart this lesson, that the direct result of a deep and strong Christian faith is the production of intensely individual character. And if there are plenty of angles in it, perhaps so much the better. We are apt to be rounded by being rubbed against each other, like the stones on the beach, till there is not a sharp corner or a point that can prick anywhere. So society becomes utterly monotonous, and is insipid and profitless because of that. You Christian people, be yourselves, after your own pattern. And whilst you accept all help from surrounding suggestions and hints, make it a very small thing that you be judged of men. And you, young men, in warehouses and shops, and you, students, and you, boys and girls, that are budding into life, never mind what other people say. Let thine eyes look right onwards, and let all the clatter on either side of you go on as it will. The voices are very loud, but if we go up high enough on the hill-top, to the secret place of the Most High, we shall look down and see, but not hear, the bustle and the buzz; and in the great silence Christ will whisper to us, Well done! good and faithful servant. That praise is worth getting, and one way to get it is to put aside the hindrance of anxious seeking to conciliate the good opinion of men.

**II. Note the higher court of conscience.**

Our Apostle is not to be taken here as contradicting what he says in other places. I judge not mine own self,--yet in one of these same letters to the Corinthians he says, If we judged ourselves we should not be judged. So that he does not mean here that he is entirely without any estimate of his own character or actions. That he did in some sense judge himself is evident from the next clause, because he goes on to say, I know nothing against myself. If he acquitted himself, he must previously have been judging himself. But his acquittal of himself is not to be understood as if it covered the whole ground of his life and character, but it is to be confined to the subject in hand--viz. his faithfulness as a steward of the mysteries of God. But though there is nothing in that region of his life which he can charge against himself as unfaithfulness, he goes on to say, Yet am I not hereby justified?'

Our absolution by conscience is not infallible. I suppose that conscience is more reliable when it condemns than when it acquits. It is never safe for a man to neglect it when it says, You are wrong! It is just as unsafe for a man to accept it, without further investigation, when it says, You are right! For the only thing that is infallible about what we call conscience is its sentence, It is right to do right. But when it proceeds to say This, that, and the other thing is right; and therefore it is right for you to do it, there may be errors in the judgment, as everybody's own experience tells them. The inward judge needs to be stimulated, to be enlightened, to be corrected often. I suppose that the growth of Christian character is very largely the discovery that things that we thought innocent are not, for us, so innocent as we thought them.

You only need to go back to history, or to go down into your own histories, to see how, as light has increased, dark corners have been revealed that were invisible in the less brilliant illumination. How long it has taken the Christian Church to find out what Christ's Gospel teaches about slavery, about the relations of sex, about drunkenness, about war, about a hundred other things that you and I do not yet know, but which our successors will wonder that we failed to see! Inquisitor and martyr have equally said, We are serving God. Surely, too, nothing is more clearly witnessed by individual experience, than that we may do a wrong thing, and think that it is right. They that kill you will think that they do God service.

So, Christian people, accept the inward monition when it is stern and prohibitive. Do not be too sure about it when it is placable and permissive. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth. There may be secret faults, lying all unseen beneath the undergrowth in the forest, which yet do prick and sting. The upper floors of the house where we receive company, and where we, the tenants, generally live, may be luxurious, and sweet, and clean. What about the cellars, where ugly things crawl and swarm, and breed, and sting?

Ah, dear brethren! when my conscience says to me, You may do it, it is always well to go to Jesus Christ, and say to Him May I? Search me, O God, and ... see if there be any wicked way in me, and show it to me, and help me to cast it out. I know nothing against myself; yet am I not hereby justified.

**III. Lastly, note the supreme court of final appeal.**

He that judgeth me is the Lord. Now it is obvious that the Lord here is Christ, both because of the preceding context and because of the next verse, which speaks of His coming. And it is equally obvious, though it is often unnoticed, that the judgment of which the Apostle is here speaking is a present and preliminary judgment. He that judgeth me--not, will judge, but now, at this very moment. That is to say, whilst people round us are passing their superficial estimates upon me, and whilst my conscience is excusing, or else accusing me--and in neither case with absolute infallibility--there is another judgment, running concurrently with them, and going on in silence. That calm eye is fixed upon me, and sifting me, and knowing me. That judgment is not fallible, because before Him the hidden things that the darkness shelters, those creeping things in the cellars that I was speaking about, are all manifest; and to Him the counsels of the heart, that is, the motives from which the actions flow, are all transparent and legible. So His judgment, the continual estimate of me which Jesus Christ, in His supreme knowledge of me, has, at every moment of my life--that is uttering the final word about me and my character.

His estimate will dwindle the sentences of the other two tribunals into nothingness. What matter what his fellow-servants say about the steward's accounts, and distribution of provisions, and management of the household? He has to render his books, and to give account of his stewardship, only to his lord.

The governor of a Crown Colony may attach some importance to colonial opinion, but he reports home; and it is what the people in Downing Street will say that he thinks about. We have to report home; and it is the King whom we serve, to whom we have to give an account. The gladiator, down in the arena, did not much mind whether the thumbs of the populace were up or down, though the one was the signal for his life and the other for his death. He looked to the place where, between the purple curtains and the flashing axes of the lictors, the emperor sate. Our Emperor once was down on the sand Himself, and although we are compassed about with a cloud of witnesses, we look to the Christ, the supreme Arbiter, and take acquittal or condemnation, life or death, from Him.

That judgment, persistent all through each of our lives, is preliminary to the future tribunal and sentence. The Apostle employs in this context two distinct words, both of which are translated in our version judge. The one which is used in these three clauses, on which I have been commenting, means a preliminary examination, and the one which is used in the next verse means a final decisive trial and sentence. So, dear brethren, Christ is gathering materials for His final sentence; and you and I are writing the depositions which will be adduced in evidence. Oh! how little all that the world may have said about a man will matter then! Think of a man standing before that great white throne, and saying, I held a very high place in the estimation of my neighbours. The newspapers and the reviews blew my trumpet assiduously. My name was carved upon the plinth of a marble statue, that my fellow-citizens set up in honour of my many virtues,--and the name was illegible centuries before the statue was burned in the last fire!

Brother! seek for the praise from Him, which is praise indeed. If He says, Well done, good and faithful servant, it matters little what censures men may pass on us. If He says, I never knew you, all their praises will not avail. Wherefore we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.