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

**1 CORINTHIANS-012**. **SLAVES AND FREE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"He that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's free man: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant."*

*1 Corinthians 7:22*

This remarkable saying occurs in a remarkable connection, and is used for a remarkable purpose. The Apostle has been laying down the principle, that the effect of true Christianity is greatly to diminish the importance of outward circumstance. And on that principle he bases an advice, dead in the teeth of all the maxims recognised by worldly prudence. He says, in effect, Mind very little about getting on and getting up. Do God's will wherever you are, and let the rest take care of itself. Now, the world says, Struggle, wriggle, fight, do anything to better yourself. Paul says, You will better yourself by getting nearer God, and if you secure that--art thou a slave? care not for it; if thou mayest be free, use it rather; art thou bound to a wife? seek not to be loosed; art thou loosed? seek not to be bound; art thou circumcised? seek not to be uncircumcised; art thou a Gentile? seek not to become in outward form a Jew. Never mind about externals: the main thing is our relation to Jesus Christ, because in that there is what will be compensation for all the disadvantages of any disadvantageous circumstances, and in that there is what will take the gilt off the gingerbread of any superficial and fleeting good, and will bring a deep-seated and permanent blessing.

Now, I am not going to deal in this sermon with that general principle, nor even to be drawn aside to speak of the tone in which the Apostle here treats the great abomination of slavery, and the singular advice that he gives to its victims; though the consideration of the tone of Christianity to that master-evil of the old world might yield a great many thoughts very relevant to pressing questions of to-day. But my one object is to fix upon the combination which he here brings out in regard to the essence of the Christian life; how that in itself it contains both members of the antithesis, servitude and freedom; so that the Christian man who is free externally is Christ's slave, and the Christian man who is outwardly in bondage is emancipated by his union with Jesus Christ.

There are two thoughts here, the application in diverse directions of the same central idea--viz. the slavery of Christ's free men, and the freedom of Christ's slaves. And I deal briefly with these two now.

**I. First, then, note how, according to the one-half of the antithesis, Christ's freed men are slaves.**

Now, the way in which the New Testament deals with that awful wickedness of a man held in bondage by a man is extremely remarkable. It might seem as if such a hideous piece of immorality were altogether incapable of yielding any lessons of good. But the Apostles have no hesitation whatever in taking slavery as a clear picture of the relation in which all Christian people stand to Jesus Christ their Lord. He is the owner and we are the slaves. For you must remember that the word most inadequately rendered here, servant does not mean a hired man who has, of his own volition, given himself for a time to do specific work and get wages for it; but it means a bond-slave, a chattel owned by another. All the ugly associations which gather round the word are transported bodily into the Christian region, and there, instead of being hideous, take on a shape of beauty, and become expressions of the deepest and most blessed truths, in reference to Christian men's dependence upon, and submission to, and place in the household and the heart of, Jesus Christ, their Owner.

And what is the centre idea that lies in this metaphor, if you like to call it so? It is this: absolute authority, which has for its correlative--for the thing in us that answers to it--unconditional submission. Jesus Christ has the perfect right to command each of us, and we are bound to bow ourselves, unreluctant, unmurmuring, unhesitating, with complete submission at His feet. His authority, and our submission, go far, far deeper than the most despotic sway of the most tyrannous master, or than the most abject submission of the most downtrodden slave. For no man can coerce another man's will, and no man can require more, or can ever get more, than that outward obedience which may be rendered with the most sullen and fixed rebellion of a hating heart and an obstinate will. But Jesus Christ demands that if we call ourselves Christians we shall bring, not our members only as instruments to Him, in outward surrender and service, but that we shall yield ourselves, with our capacities of willing and desiring, utterly, absolutely, constantly to Him.

The founder of the Jesuits laid it down as a rule for his Order that each member of it was to be at the master's disposal like a corpse, or a staff in the hand of a blind man. That was horrible. But the absolute putting of myself at the disposal of another's will, which is expressed so tyrannously in Loyola's demand, is the simple duty of every Christian, and as long as we have recalcitrating wills, which recoil at anything which Christ commands or appoints, and perk up their own inclinations in the face of His solemn commandment, or that shrink from doing and suffering whatsoever He imposes and enjoins, we have still to learn what it means to be Christ's disciples.

Dear brethren, absolute submission is not all that makes a disciple, but, depend upon it, there is no discipleship worth calling by the name without it. So I come to each of you with His message to you:--Down on your faces before Him! Bow your obstinate will, surrender yourselves and accept Him as absolute, dominant Lord over your whole being! Are you Christians after that pattern? Being freemen, are you Christ's slaves?

It does not matter what sort of work the owner sets his household of slaves to do. One man is picked out to be his pipe-bearer, or his shoe-cleaner; and, if the master is a sovereign, another one is sent off, perhaps, to be governor of a province, or one of his council. They are all slaves; and the service that each does is equally important.

All service ranks the same with God:

There is no last nor first.

What does it matter what you and I are set to do? Nothing. And, so, why need we struggle and wear our hearts out to get into conspicuous places, or to do work that shall bring some revenue of praise said glory to ourselves? Play well thy part; there all the honour lies, the world can say. Serve Christ in anything, and all His servants are alike in His sight.

The slave-owner had absolute power of life and death over his dependants. He could split up families; he could sell away dear ones; he could part husband and wife, parent and child. The slave was his, and he could do what he liked with his own, according to the cruel logic of ancient law. And Jesus Christ, the Lord of the household, the Lord of providence, can say to this one, Go! and he goes into the mists and the shadows of death. And He can say to those who are most closely united, Loose your hands! I have need of one of you yonder. I have need of the other one here. And if we are wise, if we are His servants in any real deep sense, we shall not kick against the appointments of His supreme, autocratic, and yet most loving Providence, but be content to leave the arbitrament of life and death, of love united or of love parted, in His hands, and say, Whether we live we are the Lord's, or whether we die we are the Lord's; living or dying we are His.

The slave-owner owned all that the slave owned. He gave him a little cottage, with some humble sticks of furniture in it; and a bit of ground on which to grow his vegetables for his family. But he to whom the owner of the vegetables and the stools belonged owned them too. And if we are Christ's servants, our banker's book is Christ's, and our purse is Christ's, and our investments are Christ's; and our mills, and our warehouses, and our shops and our businesses are His. We are not His slaves, if we arrogate to ourselves the right of doing what we like with His possessions.

And, then, still further, there comes into our Apostle's picture here yet another point of resemblance between slaves and the disciples of Jesus. For the hideous abominations of the slave-market are transferred to the Christian relation, and defecated and cleansed of all their abominations and cruelty thereby. For what immediately follows my text is, Ye are bought with a price. Jesus Christ has won us for Himself. There is only one price that can buy a heart, and that is a heart. There is only one way of getting a man to be mine, and that is by giving myself to be his. So we come to the very vital, palpitating centre of all Christianity when we say, He gave Himself for us, that He might acquire to Himself a people for His possession. Thus His purchase of His slave, when we remember that it is the buying of a man in his inmost personality, changes all that might seem harsh in the requirement of absolute submission into the most gracious and blessed privilege. For when I am won by another, because that other has given him or her whole self to me, then the language of love is submission, and the conformity of the two wills is the delight of each loving will. Whoever has truly been wooed into relationship with Jesus, by reflection upon the love with which Jesus grapples him to His heart, finds that there is nothing so blessed as to yield one's self utterly and for ever to His service.

The one bright point in the hideous institution of slavery was, that it bound the master to provide for the slave, and though that was degrading to the inferior, it made his life a careless, child-like, merry life, even amidst the many cruelties and abominations of the system. But what was a good, dashed with a great deal of evil, in that relation of man to man, comes to be a pure blessing and good in our relation to Him. If I am Christ's slave, it is His business to take care of His own property, and I do not need to trouble myself much about it. If I am His slave, He will be quite sure to find me in food and necessaries enough to get His tale of work out of me; and I may cast all my care upon Him, for He careth for me. So, brethren, absolute submission and the devolution of all anxiety on the Master are what is laid upon us, if we are Christ's slaves.

**II. Then there is the other side, about which I must say, secondly, a word or two; and that is, the freedom of Christ's slaves.**

As the text puts it, He that is called, being a servant, is the Lord's freedman. A freedman was one who was emancipated, and who therefore stood in a relation of gratitude to his emancipator and patron. So in the very word freedman there is contained the idea of submission to Him who has struck off the fetters.

But, apart from that, let me just remind you, in a sentence or two, that whilst there are many other ways by which men have sought, and have partially attained, deliverance from the many fetters and bondages that attach to our earthly life, the one perfect way by which a man can be truly, in the deepest sense of the word and in his inmost being, a free man is by faith in Jesus Christ.

I do not for a moment forget how wisdom and truth, and noble aims and high purposes, and culture of various kinds have, in lower degrees and partially, emancipated men from self and flesh and sin and the world, and all the other fetters that bind us. But sure I am that the process is never so completely and so assuredly effected as by the simple way of absolute submission to Jesus Christ, taking Him for the supreme and unconditional Arbiter and Sovereign of a life.

If we do that, brethren, if we really yield ourselves to Him, in heart and will, in life and conduct, submitting our understanding to His infallible Word, and our wills to His authority, regulating our conduct by His perfect pattern, and in all things seeking to serve Him and to realise His presence, then be sure of this, that we shall be set free from the one real bondage, and that is the bondage of our own wicked selves. There is no such tyranny as mob tyranny; and there is no such slavery as to be ruled by the mob of our own passions and lusts and inclinations and other meannesses that yelp and clamour within us, and seek to get hold of us and to sway. There is only one way by which the brute domination of the lower part of our nature can be surely and thoroughly put down, and that is by turning to Jesus Christ and saying to Him, Lord! do Thou rule this anarchic kingdom within me, for I cannot govern it myself. Do Thou guide and direct and subdue. You can only govern yourself and be free from the compulsion of your own evil nature when you surrender the control to the Master, and say ever, Speak, Lord! for Thy slave hears. Here am I, send me.

And that is the only way by which a man can be delivered from the bondage of dependence upon outward things. I said at the beginning of these remarks that my text occurred in the course of a discussion in which the Apostle was illustrating the tendency of true Christian faith to set man free from, and to make him largely independent of, the varieties in external circumstances. Christian faith does so, because it brings into a life a sufficient compensation for all losses, limitations, and sorrows, and a good which is the reality of which all earthly goods are but shadows. So the slave may be free in Christ, and the poor man may be rich in Him, and the sad man may be joyful, and the joyful man may be delivered from excess of gladness, and the rich man be kept from the temptations and sins of wealth, and the free man be taught to surrender his liberty to the Lord who makes him free. Thus, if we have the all-sufficient compensation which there is in Jesus Christ, the satisfaction for all our needs and desires, we do not need to trouble ourselves so much as we sometimes do about these changing things round about us. Let them come, let them go; let the darkness veil the light, and the light illuminate the darkness; let summer and winter alternate; let tribulation and prosperity succeed each other; we have a source of blessedness unaffected by these. Ice may skin the surface of the lake, but deep beneath, the water is at the same temperature in winter and in summer. Storms may sweep the face of the deep, but in the abyss there is calm which is not stagnation. So he that cleaves to Christ is delivered from the slavery that binds men to the details and accidents of outward life.

And if we are the servants of Christ, we shall be set free, in the measure in which we are His, from the slavery which daily becomes more oppressive as the means of communication become more complete, the slavery to popular opinion and to men round us. Dare to be singular; take your beliefs at first hand from the Master. Never mind what fellow-slaves say. It is His smile or frown that is of importance. Ye are bought with a price; be not servants of men.

And so, brethren, choose you this day whom ye will serve. You are not made to be independent. You must serve some thing or person. Recognise the narrow limitations within which your choice lies, and the issues which depend upon it. It is not whether you will serve Christ or whether you will be free. It is whether you will serve Christ or your own worst self, the world, men, and I was going to add, the flesh and the devil. Make your choice. He has bought you. You belong to Him by His death. Yield yourselves to Him, it is the only way of breaking your chains. He that doeth sin is the servant of sin. If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed, and not only free; for the King's slaves are princes and nobles, and all things are yours, and ye are Christ's. They who say to Him O Lord! truly I am Thy servant, receive from Him the rank of kings and priests to God, and shall reign with Him for ever.