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

**1 CORINTHIANS-019**. **THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"23. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. 24. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth. 25. Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake. 26. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. 27. If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go, whatsoever is set before you eat, asking no question for conscience sake. 28. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: 29. Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? 30. For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks? 31. Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. 32. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: 33. Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved."*

*1 Corinthians 10:23-33*

This passage strikingly illustrates Paul's constant habit of solving questions as to conduct by the largest principles. He did not keep his theology and his ethics in separate water-tight compartments, having no communication with each other. The greatest truths were used to regulate the smallest duties. Like the star that guided the Magi, they burned high in the heavens, but yet directed to the house in Bethlehem.

The question here in hand was one that pressed on the Corinthian Christians, and is very far away from our experience. Idolatry had so inextricably intertwined itself with daily life that it was hard to keep up any intercourse with non-Christians without falling into constructive idolatry; and one very constantly obtruding difficulty was that much of the animal food served on private tables had been slaughtered as sacrifices or with certain sacrificial rites. What was a Christian to do in such a case? To eat or not to eat? Both views had their vehement supporters in the Corinthian church, and the importance of the question is manifest from the large space devoted to it in this letter.

In chapter 8. we have a weighty paragraph, in which one phase of the difficulty is dealt with--the question whether a Christian ought to attend a feast in an idol temple, where, of course, the viands had been offered as sacrifices. But in chapter 10. Paul deals with the case in which the meat had been bought in the flesh-market, and so was not necessarily sacrificial. Paul's manner of handling the point is very instructive. He envelops, as it were, the practical solution in a wrapping of large principles; verses 23, 24 precede the specific answer, and are general principles; verses 25-30 contain the practical answer; verses 31-33 and verse 1 of the next chapter are again general principles, wide and imperative enough to mould all conduct, as well as to settle the matter immediately in hand, which, important as it was at Corinth, has become entirely uninteresting to us.

We need not spend time in elucidating the specific directions given as to the particular question in hand further than to note the immense gift of saving common-sense which Paul had, and how sanely and moderately he dealt with his problem. His advice was--Don't ask where the joint set before you came from. If you do not know that it was offered, your eating of it does not commit you to idol worship. No doubt there were Corinthian Christians with inflamed consciences who did ask such questions, and rather prided themselves on their strictness and rigidity; but Paul would have them let sleeping dogs lie. If, however, the meat is known to have been offered to an idol, then Paul is as rigid and strict as they are. That combination of willingness to go as far as possible, and inflexible determination not to go one step farther, of yieldingness wherever principle does not come in, and of iron fixedness wherever it does, is rare indeed, but should be aimed at by all Christians. The morality of the Gospel would make more way in the world if its advocates always copied the sweet reasonableness of Paul, which, as he tells us in this passage, he learned from Jesus.

As to the wrapping of general principles, they may all be reduced to one--the duty of limiting Christian liberty by consideration for others. In the two verses preceding the practical precepts, that duty is stated with reference entirely to the obligations flowing from our relationship to others. We are all bound together by a mystical chain of solidarity. Since every man is my neighbour, I am bound to think of him and not only of myself in deciding what I may do or refrain from doing. I must abstain from lawful things if, by doing them, I should be likely to harm my neighbour's building up of a strong character. I can, or I believe that I can, pursue some course of conduct, engage in some enterprise, follow some line of life, without damage to myself, either in regard to worldly position, or in regard to my religious life. Be it so, but I have to take some one else into account. Will my example call out imitation in others, to whom it may be harmful or fatal to do as I can do with real or supposed impunity? If so, I am guilty of something very like murder if I do not abstain.

What harm is there in betting a shilling? I can well afford to lose it, and I can keep myself from the feverish wish to risk more. Yes, and you are thereby helping to hold up that gambling habit which is ruining thousands.

I can take alcohol in moderation, and it does me no harm, and I can go to a prayer-meeting after my dinner and temperate glass, and I am within my Christian liberty in doing so. Yes, and you take part thereby in the greatest curse that besets our country, and are, by countenancing the drink habit, guilty of the blood of souls. How any Christian man can read these two verses and not abstain from all intoxicants is a mystery. They cut clean through all the pleas for moderate drinking, and bring into play another set of principles which limit liberty by regard to others good. Surely, if there was ever a subject to which these words apply, it is the use of alcohol, the proved cause of almost all the crime and poverty on both sides of the Atlantic. To the Christians who plead their liberty we can only say, Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

The same general considerations reappear in the verses following the specific precept, but with a difference. The neighbour's profit is still put forth as the limiting consideration, but it is elevated to a higher sacredness of obligation by being set in connection with the glory of God and the example of Christ. Do all to the glory of God. To put the thought here into modern English--Could you ask a blessing over a glass of spirits when you think that, though it should do you no harm, your taking it may, as it were, tip some weak brother over the precipice? Can you drink to God's glory when you know that drink is slaying thousands body and soul, and that hopeless drunkards are made by wholesale out of moderate drinkers? Give no occasion of stumbling; do not by your example tempt others into risky courses. And remember that neighbour (verse 24) resolves itself into Jews and Greeks and the Church of God--that is, substantially to your own race and other races--to men with whom you have affinities, and to men with whom you have none.

A Christian man is bound to shape his life so that no man shall be able to say of him that he was the occasion of that one's fall. He is so bound because every man is his neighbour. He is so bound because he is bound to live to the glory of God, which can never be advanced by laying stumbling-blocks in the way for feeble feet. He is so bound because, unless Christ had limited Himself within the bound of manhood, and had sought not His own profit or pleasure, we should have had neither life nor hope. For all these reasons, the duty of thinking of others, and of abstaining, for their sakes, from what one might do, is laid on all Christians. How do they discharge that duty who will not forswear alcohol for their neighbour's sake?