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

**1 CORINTHIANS-029**. **STRONG AND LOVING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13. Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. 14. Let all your things be done with charity."*

*1 Corinthians 16:13-14*

There is a singular contrast between the first four of these exhortations and the last. The former ring sharp and short like pistol-shots; the last is of gentler mould. The former sound like the word of command shouted from an officer along the ranks; and there is a military metaphor running all through them. The foe threatens to advance; let the guards keep their eyes open. He comes nearer; prepare for the charge, stand firm in your ranks. The battle is joined; quit you like men--strike a man's stroke--be strong.

And then all the apparatus of warfare is put away out of sight, and the captain's word of command is softened into the Christian teacher's exhortation: Let all your deeds be done in charity. For love is better than fighting, and is stronger than swords. And yet, although there is a contrast here, there is also a sequence and connection. No doubt these exhortations, which are Paul's last word to that Corinthian Church on whom he had lavished in turn the treasures of his manifold eloquence, indignation, argumentation, and tenderness, reflected the deficiencies of the people to whom he was speaking. They were schismatic and factious to the very core, and so they needed the exhortation to be left last in their ears, as it were, that everything should be done in love. They were ill-grounded in regard to the very fundamental doctrines of the faith, as all Paul's argumentation about the resurrection proves, and so they needed to be bidden to stand fast in the faith. Their slothful carelessness as to the discipline of the Christian life, and their consequent feebleness of grasp of the Christian verities, made them loose-braced and weak in all respects, and incapacitated them for vigorous warfare. Thus, we see a picture in these injunctions of the sort of community that Paul had to deal with in Corinth, which yet he called a Church of saints, and for which he loved and laboured. Let me then run over and try to bring out the importance and mutual connection of what I may call this drill-book for the Christian warfare, which is the Christian life.

Watch ye. That means one of two things certainly, probably both--Keep awake, and keep your eyes open. Our Lord used the same metaphor, you remember, very frequently, but with a special significance. On His lips it generally referred to the attitude of expectation of His coming in judgment. Paul uses sometimes the figure with the same application, but here, distinctly, it has another. As I said, there is the military idea underlying it. What will become of an army if the sentries go to sleep? And what chance will a Christian man have of doing his devoir against his enemy, unless he keeps himself awake, and keeps himself alert? Watchfulness, in the sense of always having eyes open for the possible rush down upon us of temptation and evil, is no small part of the discipline and the duty of the Christian life. One part of that watchfulness consists in exercising a very rigid and a very constant and comprehensive scrutiny of our motives. For there is no way by which evil creeps upon us so unobserved, as when it slips in at the back door of a specious motive. Many a man contents himself with the avoidance of actual evil actions, and lets any kind of motives come in and out of his mind unexamined. It is all right to look after our doings, but as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. The good or the evil of anything that I do is determined wholly by the motive with which I do it. And we are a great deal too apt to palm off deceptions on ourselves to make sure that our motives are right, unless we give them a very careful and minute scrutiny. One side of this watchfulness, then, is a habitual inspection of our motives and reasons for action. What am I doing this for? is a question that would stop dead an enormous proportion of our activity, as if you had turned the steam off from an engine. If you will use a very fine sieve through which to strain your motives, you will go a long way to keeping your actions right. We should establish a rigid examination for applicants for entrance, and make quite sure that each that presents itself is not a wolf in sheep's clothing. Make them all bring out their passports. Let every vessel that comes into your harbour remain isolated from all communication with the shore, until the health officer has been on board and given a clean bill. Watch ye, for yonder, away in the dark, in the shadow of the trees, the black masses of the enemy are gathered, and a midnight attack is but too likely to bring a bloody awakening to a camp full of sleepers.

My text goes on to bring the enemy nearer and nearer and nearer. Watch ye--and if, not unnoticed, they come down on you, stand fast in the faith. There will be no keeping our ranks, or keeping our feet--or at least, it is not nearly so likely that there will be--unless there has been the preceding watchfulness. If the first command has not been obeyed, there is small chance of the second's being so. If there has not been any watchfulness, it is not at all likely that there will be much steadfastness. Just as with a man going along a crowded pavement, a little touch from a passer-by will throw him off his balance, whereas if he had known it was coming, and had adjusted his poise rightly, he would have stood against thrice as violent a shock, so, in order that we may stand fast, we must watch. A sudden assault will be a great deal less formidable when it is a foreseen assault.

Stand fast in the faith. I take it that this does not mean the thing that we believe, which use of the word faith is the ecclesiastical, but not the New Testament meaning. In Scripture, faith means not the body of truths that we believe, but the act of believing them. This further command tells us that, in addition to our watchfulness, and as the basis of our steadfastness, confidence in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ will enable us to keep our feet whatever comes against us, and to hold our ground, whoever may assault us.

But remember that it is not because I have faith that I stand fast, but because of that in which I have faith. My feet may be well shod--and it used to be said that a soldier's shoes were of as much importance in the battle as his musket--my feet may be well shod, but if they are not well planted upon firm ground I never shall be able to stand the collision of the foe. So then, it is not my grasp of the blessed truth, God in Christ my Friend and Helper, but it is that truth which I grasp at, that makes me strong. Or, to put it into other words, it is the foothold, and not the foot that holds it, that ensures our standing firm. Only there is no steadfastness communicated to us from the source of all stability, except by way of our faith, which brings Christ into us. Watch ye; stand fast in the faith.

The next two words of command are very closely connected, though not quite identical. Quit you like men. Play a man's part in the battle; strike with all the force of your muscles. But the Apostle adds, be strong. You cannot play a man's part unless you are. Be strong--the original would rather bear become strong. What is the use of telling men to be strong? It is a waste of words, in nine cases out of ten, to say to a weak man, Pluck up your courage, and show strength. But the Apostle uses a very uncommon word here, at least uncommon in the New Testament, and another place where he uses it will throw light upon what he means: Strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man. Then is it so vain a mockery to tell a poor, weak creature like me to become strong, when you can point me to the source of all strength, in that Spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind? We have only to take our weakness there to have it stiffened into strength; as people put bits of wood into what are called petrifying wells which infiltrate into them mineral particles, that do not turn the wood into stone, but make the wood as strong as stone. So my manhood, with all its weakness, may have filtered into it divine strength, which will brace me for all needful duty, and make me more than conqueror through Him that loved us. Then, it is not mockery and cruelty, vanity and surplusage to preach Quit you like men; be strong, and be a man; because if we will observe the plain and not hard conditions, strength will come to us according to our day, in fulfilment of the great promises: My grace is sufficient for thee; and My strength is made perfect in weakness.

And now we have done with the fighting words of command, and come to the gentler exhortation: Let all your things be done in charity.

That was a hard lesson for these Corinthians who were splitting themselves into factions and sects, and tearing each other's eyes out in their partisanship for various Christian teachers. But the advice has a much wider application than to the suppression of squabbles in Christian communities. It is the sum of all commandments of the Christian life, if you will take love in its widest sense, in the sense, that is, in which it is always used in Paul's writings. We cut it into two halves, and think of it as sometimes meaning love to God, and sometimes love to man. The two are inseparably inter-penetrated in the New Testament writings; and so we have to interpret this supreme commandment in the whole breadth and meaning of that great word Love. And then it just comes to this, that love is the victor in all the Christian warfare. If we love God, at any given moment, consciously having our affection engaged with Him, and our heart going out to Him, do you think that any evil or temptation would have power over us? Should we not see them as they are, to be devils in disguise? In the proportion in which I love God I conquer all sin. And at the moment in which that great, sweet, all-satisfying light floods into my soul, I see through the hollowness and the shams, and detect the ugliness and the filth of the things that otherwise would be temptations. If you desire to be conquerors in the Christian fight, remember that the true way of conquest is, as another Apostle says, Keep yourselves in the love of God. Let all your things be done in charity.

And, further, how beautifully the Apostle here puts the great truth that we are all apt to forget, that the strongest type of human character is the gentlest and most loving, and that the mighty man is not the man of intellectual or material force, such as the world idolises, but the man who is much because he loves much. If we would come to supreme beauty of Christian character, there must be inseparably manifested in our lives, and lived in our hearts, strength and love, might and gentleness. That is the perfect man, and that was the union which was set before us, in the highest form, in the Strong Son of God, Immortal Love, whom we call our Saviour, and whom we are bound to follow. His soldiers conquer as the Captain of their salvation has conquered, when watchfulness and steadfastness and courage and strength are all baptized in love and perfected thereby.