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

**1 TIMOTHY-001**. **THE END OF THE COMMANDMENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Now, the end of the commandment is love, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned."*

*1 Timothy 1:6*

The Apostle has just said that he left Timothy in Ephesus, in order to check some tendencies there which were giving anxiety. Certain teachers had appeared, the effect of whose activity was to create parties, to foster useless speculations, and to turn the minds of the Ephesian Christians away from the practical and moral side of Christianity. In opposition to these, the Apostle here lays down the broad principle that God has spoken, not in order to make acute theologians, or to provide materials for controversy, but in order to help us to love. The whole of these latest letters of the Apostle breathe the mellow wisdom of old age, which has learned to rate brilliant intellectualism, agility, incontroversial fence and the like, far lower than homely goodness. And so, says Paul, the end of the commandment is love.

Now he here states, not only the purpose of the divine revelation, but gives us a summary, but yet sufficient, outline of the method by which God works towards that purpose. The commandment is the beginning, love is the end or aim. And between these two there are inserted three things, a pure heart, a good conscience, faith unfeigned. Now of these three the two former are closely connected, and the third is the cause, or condition, of both of them. It is, therefore, properly named last as being first in order, and therefore last reached in analysis. When you track a stream from its mouth to its source, the fountain-head is the last thing that you come to. And here we have, as in these great lakes in Central Africa--out of which finally the Nile issues--the stages of the flow. There are the twin lakes, a good conscience and a pure heart. These come from unfeigned faith, which lies higher up in the hills of God; and they run down into the love which is the end of the commandment. The faith lays hold on the commandment, and so the process is complete. Or, if you begin at the top, instead of at the bottom, God gives the word; faith grasps the word, and thereby nourishes a pure heart and a good conscience, and thereby produces a universal love. So, then, we have three steps to look at here.

**I. First of all, what God speaks to us for.**

The end of the commandment is love.

Now, I take it that the word commandment here means, not this or that specific precept, but the whole body of Christian revelation, considered as containing laws for life. And to begin with, and only to mention, it is something to get that point of view, that all which God says, be it promise, be it self-manifestation, be it threatening, or be it anything else, has a preceptive bearing, and is meant to influence life and conduct. I shall have a word or two more to say about that presently, but note, just as we go on, how remarkable it is, and how full of lessons, if we will ponder it, that one name for the Gospel on the lips of the man who had most to say about the contrast between Gospel and Law is commandment. Try to feel the stringency of that aspect of evangelical truth and of Christian revelation.

Then I need not remind you how here the indefinite expression love must be taken, as I think is generally the case in the New Testament, when the object on which the love rests is not defined, as including both of the twin commandments, of which the second, our Master says, is like unto the first, love to God and love to man. In the Christian idea these two are one. They are shoots from the one root. The only difference is that the one climbs and the other grows along the levels of earth. There is no gulf set in the New Testament teaching, and there ought to be none in the practice and life of a Christian man, between the love of God and the love of man. They are two aspects of one thing.

Then, if so, mark how, according to the Apostle's teaching here, in this one thought of a dual-sided love, one turned upwards, one turned earthwards, there lies the whole perfection of a human soul. You want nothing more if you are rooted and grounded in love. That will secure all goodness, all morality, all religion, everything that is beautiful, and everything that is noble. And all this is meant to be the result of God's speech to us.

So, then, two very plain practical principles may be deduced and enforced from this first thought. First, the purpose of all revelation and the test of all religion is--character and conduct.

It is all very well to know about God, to have our minds filled with true thoughts about Him, His nature, and dealings with us. Orthodoxy is good, but orthodoxy is a means to an end. There should be nothing in a man's creed which does not act upon his life. Or, if I may put it into technical words, all a man's credenda should be his agenda; and whatsoever he believes should come straight into his life to influence it, and to shape character. Here, then, is the warning against a mere notional orthodoxy, and against regarding Christian truth as being intended mainly to illuminate the understanding, or to be a subject of speculation and discussion. There are people in all generations, and there are plenty of them to-day, who seem to think that the great verities of the Gospel are mainly meant to provide material for controversy--

As if religion were intended

For nothing else but to be mended;

and that they have done all that can be expected when they have tried to apprehend the true bearing of this revelation, and to contend against misinterpretations. This is the curse of religious controversy, that it blinds men to the practical importance of the truths for which they are fighting. It is as if one were to take some fertile wheat-land, and sand it all over, and roll it down, and make it smooth for a gymnasium, where nothing would grow. So the temper which finds in Christian truth simply a ministration of questions, as my text says, mars its purpose, and robs itself of all the power and nourishment that it might find there.

No less to be guarded against is the other misconception which the clear grasp of our text would dismiss at once, that the great purpose for which God speaks to us men, in the revelation of Jesus Christ, is that we may, as we say, be forgiven, and escape any of the temporal or eternal consequences of our wrongdoing. That is a purpose, no doubt, and men will never rise to the apprehension of the loftiest purposes, nor penetrate to a sympathetic perception of the inmost sweetness of the Gospel, unless they begin with its redemptive aspect, even in the narrowest sense of that word. But there are a miserable number of so-called and of real Christians in this world, and in our churches to-day, who have little conception that God has spoken to them for anything else than to deliver them from the fear of death, and from the incidence on them of future condemnation. He has spoken for this purpose, but the ultimate end of all is that we may be helped to love Him, and so to be like Him. The aim of the commandment is love, and if you ever are tempted to rest in intellectual apprehensions, or to pervert the truth of God into a mere arena on which you can display your skill of fence and your intellectual agility, or if ever you are tempted to think that all is done when the sweet message of forgiveness is sealed upon a man's heart, remember the solemn and plain words of my text--the final purpose of all is that we may love God and man.

But then, on the other side, note that no less distinctly is the sole foundation of this love laid in God's speech. My text, in its elevation of sentiment and character and conduct above doctrine, falls in with the prevailing tendencies of this day; but it provides the safeguards which these tendencies neglect. Notice that this favourite saying of the most advanced school of broad thinkers, who are always talking about the decay of dogma, and the unimportance of doctrine as compared with love, is here uttered by a man who was no sentimentalist, but to whom the Christian system was a most distinct and definite thing, bristling all over with the obnoxious doctrines which are by some of us so summarily dismissed as of no importance. My very text protests against the modern attempt to wrench away the sentiments and emotions produced in men, by the reception of Christian truth, from the truth which it recognises as the only basis on which they can be produced. It declares that the commandment must come first, before love can follow; and the rest of the letter, although, as I say, it decisively places the end of revelation as being the moral and religious perfecting of men into assimilation with the divine love, no less decisively demands that for such a perfecting there shall be laid the foundation of the truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

And that is what we want to-day in order to make breadth wholesome, and if only we will carry with us the two thoughts, the commandment and love, we shall not go far wrong. But what would you think of a man that said, I do not want any foundations. I want a house to live in? And pray how are you going to get your house without the foundations? Or would he be a wise man who said, Oh, never mind about putting grapes into the vine vat, and producing fermentation; give me the wine! Yes! But you must have the fermentation first. The process is not the result, of course, but there is no result without the process. And according to New Testament teaching, which, I am bold to say, is verified by experience, there is no deep, all-swaying, sovereign, heart-uniting love to God which is not drawn from the acceptance of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

**II. And so I come, secondly, to note the purifying which is needed prior to such love.**

Our text, as I said, divides the process into stages; or, if I may go back to a former illustration, into levels. And on the level immediately above the love, down into which the waters of the twin lakes glide, are a pure heart and a good conscience. These are the requisites for all real and operative love. Now they are closely connected, as it seems to me, more closely so than with either the stage which precedes or that which follows. They are, in fact, two twin thoughts, very closely identified, though not quite identical.

A pure heart is one that has been defecated and cleansed from the impurities which naturally attach to human affections. A good conscience is one which is void of offence towards God and man, and registers the emotions of a pure heart. It is like a sheet of sensitive paper that, with a broken line, indicates how many hours of sunshine in the day there have been. We need not discuss the question as to which of these two great gifts and blessings which sweeten a whole life come first. In the initial stages of the Christian life I suppose the good conscience precedes the pure heart. For forgiveness which calms the conscience and purges it of the perilous stuff which has been injected into it by our corruptions--forgiveness comes before cleansing, and the conscience is calm before the heart is purified. But in the later stages of the Christian life the order seems to be reversed, and there cannot be in a man a conscience that is good unless there is a heart that is pure.

But however that may be--and it does not affect the general question before us--mark how distinctly Paul lays down here the principle that you will get no real love of God or man out of men whose hearts are foul, and whose consciences are either torpid or stinging them. I need not dwell upon that, for it is plain to anybody that will think for a moment that all sin separates between a man and God; and that from a heart all seething and bubbling, like the crater of a volcano, with foul liquids, and giving forth foul odours, there can come no love worth calling so to God, nor any benevolence worth calling so to man. Wherever there is sin, unrecognised, unconfessed, unpardoned, there there is a black barrier built up between a man's heart and the yearning heart of God on the other side. And until that barrier is swept away, until the whole nature receives a new set, until it is delivered from the love of evil, and from its self-centred absorption, and until conscience has taken into grateful hands, if I might so say, the greatest of all gifts, the assurance of the divine forgiveness, I, for one, do not believe that deep, vital, and life-transforming love to God is possible. I know that it is very unfashionable, I know it is exceedingly narrow teaching, but it seems to me that it is Scriptural teaching; and it seems to me that if we will strip it of the exaggerations with which it has often been surrounded, and recognise that there may be a kind of instinctive and occasional recognition of a divine love, there may be a yearning after a clear light, and fuller knowledge of it, and yet all the while no real love to God, rooted in and lording over and moulding the life, we shall not find much in the history of the world, or in the experience of ourselves or of others, to contradict the affirmation that you need the cleansing of forgiveness, and the recognition of God's love in Jesus Christ, before you can get love worth calling so in return to Him in men's hearts.

Brethren, there is much to-day to shame Christian men in the singular fact which is becoming more obvious daily, of a divorce between human benevolence and godliness. It is a scandal that there should be so many men in the world who make no pretensions to any sympathy with your Christianity, and who set you an example of benevolence, self-sacrifice, enthusiasm for humanity, as it is called. I believe that the one basis upon which there can be solidly built benevolence to men is devotion to God, because of God's great love to us in Jesus Christ. But I want to stir, if I might not say sting, you and myself into a recognition of our obligations to mankind, more stringent and compelling than we have ever felt it, by this phenomenon of modern life, that a divorce has been proclaimed between philanthropy and religion. The end of the commandment is love, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience.

**III. Lastly, notice the condition of such purifying.**

To recur to my former illustration, we have to go up country to a still higher level. What feeds the two reservoirs that feed the love? What makes the heart pure and the conscience good? Paul answers, faith unfeigned; not mere intellectual apprehension, not mere superficial or professed, but deep, genuine, and complete faith which has in it the element of reliance as well as the element of credence. Belief is not all that goes to make faith. Trust is not all that goes to make faith. Belief and trust are indissolubly wedded in the conception of it. Such a faith, which knows what it lays hold of--for it lays hold upon definite truth, and lays hold on what it knows, for it trusts in Him whom the truth reveals--such a faith makes the heart pure and the conscience good.

And how does it do so? By nothing in itself. There is no power in my faith to make me one bit better than I am. There is no power in it to still one accusation of conscience. It is only the condition on which the one power that purges and that calms enters into my heart and works there. The power of faith is the power of that which faith admits to operate in my life. If we open our hearts the fire will come in, and it will thaw the ice, and melt out the foulness from my heart. It is important for practice that we should clearly understand that the great things which the Bible says of faith it says of it only because it is the channel, the medium, the condition, by and on which the real power, which is Jesus Christ Himself, acts upon us. It is not the window, but the sunshine, that floods this building with light. It is not the opened hand, but the gift laid in it, that enriches the pauper. It is not the poor leaden pipe, but the water that flows through it, that fills the cistern, and cleanses it, whilst it fills. It is not your faith, but the Christ whom your faith brings into your heart and conscience, that purges the one, and makes the other void of offence towards God and man.

So, brethren, let us learn the secret of all nobility, of all power, of all righteousness of character and conduct. Put your foot on the lowest round of the ladder, and then aspire and climb, and you will reach the summit. Take the first step, and be true to it after you have taken it, and the last will surely come. He that can say, We have known and believed the love that God hath to us, will also be able to say, We love Him because He first loved us. And this commandment have we of God, that he who loves God loves his brother also.