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

**1 TIMOTHY-004**. **THE CHIEF OF SINNERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Of whom I am chief."*

*1 Timothy 1:15*

The less teachers of religion talk about themselves the better; and yet there is a kind of personal reference, far removed from egotism and offensiveness. Few such men have ever spoken more of themselves than Paul did, and yet none have been truer to his motto: We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus. For the scope of almost all his personal references is the depreciation of self, and the magnifying of the wonderful mercy which drew him to Jesus Christ. Whenever he speaks of his conversion it is with deep emotion and with burning cheeks. Here, for instance, he adduces himself as the typical example of God's long-suffering. If he were saved none need despair.

I take it that this saying of the Apostle's, Of whom I am chief, paradoxical and exaggerated as it seems to many men, is in spirit that which all who know themselves ought to re-echo; and without which there is little strength in Christian life.

**I. And so I ask you to note, first, what this man thinks of himself.**

Of whom I am chief. Now, if we set what we know of the character of Saul of Tarsus before he was a Christian by the side of that of many who have won a bad supremacy in wickedness, the words seem entirely strange and exaggerated. But, as I have often had to say, the principle of the Apostle's estimate is to be found in his belief that, not the outward manifestation of evil in specific acts of immorality, or flagrant breaches of commandment, but the inward principle from which the deeds flowed, is the measure of a man's criminality, and that, according to the uniform teaching of Scripture, the very root of sin, and that which is common to all the things that the world's conscience and ordinary morality designate as wrong, is to be found here, that self has become the centre, the aim, and the law instead of God. This is the condemnation, said Paul's Master--not that men have done so-and-so and so-and-so, but--that light is come into the world, and men love darkness. That is the root of evil. When the Comforter is come, said Paul's Master, He will convince the world of sin. Because they have broken the commandments? Because they have been lustful, ambitious, passionate, murderous, profligate, and so on? No! Because they believe not in Me.

The common root of all sin is alienation of heart and will from God. And it is by the root, and not by the black clusters of poisonous berries that have come from it, that men are to be judged. Here is the mother-tincture. You may colour it in different ways, and you may flavour it with different essences, and you will get a whole pharmacopoeia of poisons out of it. But the mother-poison of them all is this, that men turn away from the light, which is God; and for you and me is God in Christ.

So this man, looking back from the to-day of his present devotion and love to the yesterdays of his hostility, avails himself indeed of the palliation, I did it ignorantly, in unbelief, but yet is smitten with the consciousness that whilst as touching the righteousness that is of the law he was blameless, his attitude to that incarnate love was such as now, he thinks, stamps him as the worst of men.

Brethren, there is the standard by which we have to try ourselves. If we get down below the mere surface of acts, and think, not of what we do, but of what we are, we shall then, at any rate, have in our hands the means by which we can truly estimate ourselves.

But what have we to say about that word chief? Is not that exaggeration? Well, yes and no. For every man ought to know the weak and evil places of his own heart better than he does those of any besides. And if he does so know them, he will understand that the ordinary classification of sin, according to the apparent blackness of the deed, is very superficial and misleading. Obviously, the worst of acts need not be done by the worst of men, and it does not at all follow that the man who does the awful deed stands out from his fellows in the same bad pre-eminence in which his deed stands out from theirs.

Take a concrete case. Go into the slums of Manchester, and take some of the people there, battered almost out of the semblance of humanity, and all crusted over and leprous with foul-smelling evils that you and I never come within a thousand miles of thinking it possible that we should do. Did you ever think that it is quite possible that the worst harlot, thief, drunkard, profligate in your back streets may be more innocent in their profligacy than you are in your respectability; and that we may even come to this paradox, that the worse the act, as a rule, the less guilty the doer? It is not such a paradox as it looks, because, on the one hand, the presence of temptation, and, on the other hand, the absence of light, make all the difference. And these people, who could not have been anything else, are innocent in degradation as compared with you, with all your education and culture, and opportunities of going straight, and knowledge of Christ and His love. The little transgressions that you do are far greater than the gross ones that they do. But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford, said the old preacher, when he saw a man going to the scaffold. And you and I, if we know ourselves, will not think that we have an instance of exaggeration, but only of the object nearest seeming the largest, when Paul said Of whom I am chief.

Only go and look for your sin in the way they look for Guy Fawkes at the House of Commons before the session. Take a dark lantern, and go down into the cellars. And If you do not find something there that will take all the conceit out of you, it must be because you are very short-sighted, or phenomenally self-complacent.

What does it matter though there be vineyards on the slopes of Vesuvius, and bright houses nestling at its base, and beauty lying all around like the dream of a god, if, when a man cranes his neck over the top of the crater, he sees that that cone, so graceful on the outside, is seething with fire and sulphur? Let us look down into the crater of our own hearts, and what we see there may well make us feel as Paul did when he said, Of whom I am chief.

Now, such an estimate is perfectly consistent with a clear recognition of any good that may be in the character and manifest in life. For the same Paul who says, Of whom I am chief, says, in the almost contemporaneous letter sent to the same person, I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith; and he is the same man who asserted, In nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing. The true Christian estimate of one's own evil and sin does not in the least interfere with the recognition of what God strengthens one to do, or of the progress which, by God's grace, may have been made in holiness and righteousness. The two things may lie side by side with perfect harmony, and ought to do so, in every Christian heart.

But notice one more point. The Apostle does not say I was, but I am chief. What! A man who could say, in another connection, If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature; old things are passed away--the man who could say, in another connection, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God--does he also say, I am chief? Is he speaking about his present? Are old sins bound round a man's neck for evermore? If they be, what is the meaning of the Gospel that Jesus Christ redeems us from our sins? Well, he means this. No lapse of time, nor any gift of divine pardon, nor any subsequent advancement in holiness and righteousness, can alter the fact that I, the very same I that am now rejoicing in God's salvation, am the man that did all these things; and, in a very profound sense, they remain mine through all eternity. I may be a forgiven sinner, and a cleansed sinner, and a sanctified sinner, but I am a sinner--not I was. The imperishable connection between a man and his past, which may be so tragical, and, thank God, may be so blessed, even in the case of remembered and confessed sin, is solemnly hinted at in the words before us. We carry with us ever the fact of past transgression, and no forgiveness, nor any future perfecting of holiness in the fear and by the grace of the Lord can alter that fact. Therefore, let us beware lest we bring upon our souls any more of the stains which, though they be in a blessed and sufficient sense blotted out, do yet leave the marks where they have fallen for ever.

**II. Note how this man comes to such an estimate of himself.**

He did not think so deeply and penitently of his past at the beginning of his career, true and deep as his repentance, and valid and genuine as his conversion were. But as he advanced in the love of Jesus Christ, his former active hostility became more monstrous to him, and the higher he rose, the clearer was his vision of the depth from which he had struggled; for growth in Christian holiness deepens the conviction of prior imperfection.

If God has forgiven my sin the more need for me to remember it. Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy transgressions, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done. If you, my brother, have any real and genuine hold of God's pardoning mercy, it will bow you down the more completely on your knees in the recognition of your own sin. The man who, as soon as the pressure of guilt and danger which is laid upon him seems to him to be lifted off, springs up like some elastic figure of indiarubber, and goes on his way in jaunty forgetfulness of his past evil, needs to ask himself whether he has ever passed from death unto life. Not to remember the old sin is to be blind. The surest sign that we are pardoned is the depth of our habitual penitence. Try yourselves, you Christian people who are so sure of your forgiveness, try yourselves by that test, and if you find that you are thinking less of your past evil, be doubtful whether you have ever entered into the genuine possession of the forgiving mercy of your God.

And then, still further, this penitent retrospect is the direct result of advancement in Christian characteristics. We are drawn to begin some study or enterprise by the illusion that there is but a little way to go. Alps upon alps arise when once we have climbed a short distance up the hill, and it has become as difficult to go back as to go forward.

So it is in the Christian life--the sign of growing perfection is the growing consciousness of imperfection. A spot upon a clean palm is more conspicuous than a diffuse griminess over all the hand. One stain upon a white robe spoils it which would not be noticed upon one less lustrously clean. And so the more we grow towards God in Christ, and the more we appropriate and make our own His righteousness, the more we shall be conscious of our deficiencies, and the less we shall be prepared to assert virtues for ourselves.

Thus it comes to pass that conscience is least sensitive when it is most needed, and most swift to act when it has least to do. So it comes to pass, too, that no man's acquittal of himself can be accepted as sufficient; and that he is a fool in self-knowledge who says, I am not conscious of guilt, therefore I am innocent. I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified: but He that judgeth me is the Lord. The more you become like Christ the more you will find out your unlikeness to Him.

**III. Lastly, note what this judgment of himself did for this man.**

I said in the beginning of my remarks that it seemed to me that without the reproduction of this estimate of ourselves there would be little strong Christian life in us. It seems to me that that continual remembrance which Paul carried with him of what he had been, and of Christ's marvellous love in drawing him to Himself, was the very spring of all that was noble and conspicuously Christian in his career. And I venture to say, in two or three words, what I think you and I will never have unless we have this lowly self-estimate.

Without it there will be no intensity of cleaving to Jesus Christ. If you do not know that you are ill, you will not take the medicine. If you do not believe that the house is on fire, you will not mind the escape. The life-buoy lies unnoticed on the shelf above the berth as long as the sea is calm and everything goes well. Unless you have been down into the depths of your own heart, and seen the evil that is there, you will not care for the redeeming Christ, nor will you grasp Him as a man does who knows that there is nothing between him and ruin except that strong hand. We must be driven to the Saviour as well as drawn to Him if there is to be any reality or tightness in the clutch with which we hold Him. And if you do not hold Him with a firm clutch you do not hold Him at all.

Further, without this lowly estimate there will be no fervour of grateful love. That is the reason why so much both of orthodox and heterodox religion amongst us to-day is such a tepid thing as it is. It is because men have never felt either that they need a Redeemer, or that Jesus Christ has redeemed them. I believe that there is only one power that will strike the rock of a human heart, and make the water of grateful devotion flow out, and that is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of mankind, and as my Saviour. Unless that be your faith, which it will not be except you have this conviction of my text in its spirit and essence, there will not be in your hearts the love which will glow there, an all-transforming power.

And is there anything in the world more obnoxious, more insipid, than lukewarm religion? If, with marks of quotation, I might use the coarse, strong expression of John Milton--It gives a vomit to God Himself. Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

And without it there will be little pity of, and love for, our fellows. Unless we feel the common evil, and estimate by the intensity of its working in ourselves how sad are its ravages in others, our charity to men will be as tepid as our love to God. Did you ever notice that, historically, the widest benevolence to men goes along with what some people call the narrowest theology? People tell us, for instance, to mark the contrast between the theology which is usually called evangelical and the wide benevolence usually accompanying it, and ask how the two things agree. The wide benevolence comes directly from the narrow theology. He that knows the plague of his own heart, and how Christ has redeemed him, will go, with the pity of Christ in his heart, to help to redeem others.

So, dear friends, If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.