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

**1 TIMOTHY-008**. **SPIRITUAL ATHLETICS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Exercise thyself unto Godliness."*

*1 Timothy 4:7*

Timothy seems to have been not a very strong character: sensitive, easily discouraged, and perhaps with a constitutional tendency to indolence. At all events, it is very touching to notice how the old Apostle--a prisoner, soon to be a martyr--forgot all about his own anxieties and burdens, and, through both of his letters to his young helper, gives himself to the task of bracing him up. Thus he says to him, in my text, amongst other trumpet-tongued exhortations, Exercise thyself unto godliness.

If I were preaching to ministers, I should have a good deal to say about the necessity of this precept for them, and to remind them that it was first spoken, not to a private member of the Church, as an injunction for the Christian life in general, but as having a special bearing on the temptations and necessities of those who stand in official positions in the Church. For there is nothing that is more likely to sap a man's devotion, and to eat out the earnestness and sincerity of a Christian life, than that he should be--as I, for instance, and every man in my position has to be--constantly occupied with presenting God's Word to other people. We are apt to look upon it as, in some sense, our stock-in-trade, and to forget to apply it to ourselves. So it was with a very special bearing on the particular occupation and temptation of his correspondent that Paul said Exercise thyself unto godliness before you begin to talk to other people.

But that would not be appropriate to my present audience. And I take this injunction as one of universal application.

**I. Notice, then, here expressed the ever-present and universal aim of the Christian life.**

Paul does not say be godly; but exercise thyself unto--with a view towards--godliness. In other words, to him godliness is the great aim which every Christian man should set before him as the one supreme purpose of his life.

Now I am not going to spend any time on mere verbal criticism, but I must point to the somewhat unusual word which the Apostle here employs for godliness. It is all but exclusively confined to these last letters of the Apostle. It was evidently a word that had unfolded the depth and fulness and comprehensiveness of its meaning to him in the last stage of his religious experience. For it is only once employed in the Acts of the Apostles, and some two or three times in the doubtful second Epistle of St. Peter. And all the other instances of its use lie in these three letters--the one to Titus and two to Timothy; and eight of them are in this first one. The old Apostle keeps perpetually recurring to this one idea of godliness. What does he mean by it? The etymological meaning of the word is well-directed reverence, but it is to be noticed that the context specifically points to one form of well-directed reverence, viz. as shown in conduct. Active godliness is the meaning of the word; religion embodied in deeds, emotions, and sentiments, and creeds, put into fact.

This noble and pregnant word teaches us, first of all, that all true religion finds its ultimate sphere and best manifestation in the conduct of daily life. That sounds like a platitude. I wish it were. If we believed that, and worked it out, we should be very different people from what the most of us are; and our chapels would be very different places, and the professing Church would have a new breath of life over it. Religion must have its foundation laid deep in the truths revealed by God for our acceptance. And does God tell us anything simply that we may believe it, and there an end? What is the purpose of all the principles and facts which make up the body of the Christian revelation? To enlighten us? Yes! To enlighten us only? A hundred times no! The destination of a principle, of a truth, is to pass out from the understanding into the whole nature of man.

And if, as I said, the foundation of religion is laid in truths, principles, facts, the second story of the building is certain emotions, sentiments, feelings, desires, and affections, and experiences--as people call them--which follow from the acceptance of these truths and principles. And is that all? A thousand times no! What do we get the emotions for? What does God give you a Revelation of Himself for, that kindles your love if you believe it? That you may love? Yes! Only that you may love? Certainly not. And so the top story is conduct, based upon the beliefs, and inspired by the emotions.

In former centuries, the period between the Reformation and our fathers time, the tendency of the Protestant Church was very largely to let the conception of religion as a body of truths overshadow everything else. And nowadays, amongst a great many people, the temptation is to take the second story for the main one, and to think that if a man loves, and has the glow at his heart of the conscious reception of God's love, and has longings and yearnings, and Christian hopes and desires, and passes into the sweetnesses of communion with God, in his solitary moments, and plunges deep into the truths of God's Word, that is godliness. But the true exhortation to us is--Do not stop with putting in the foundations of a correct creed, nor at the second stage of an emotional religion. Both are needful. Number one and number two are infinitely precious, but both exist for number three. And true religion has its sphere in conduct. Exercise thyself unto godliness. That does not mean only--for it does include that--cultivate devout emotions, or realise the facts and the principles of the Gospel, but it means, take these along with you into your daily life, and work them out there. Bring all the facts and truths of your creed, and all the sweet and select, the secret and sacred, emotions which you have felt, to bear upon your daily life. The soil in which the tree grows, and the roots of the tree, its stem and its blossoms, are all means to the end--fruit. What is the use of the clearest conceptions, and of the most tender, delicate, holy emotions, if they do not drive the wheels of action? God does not give us the Gospel to make us wise, nor even to make us blessed, but He gives it to us to make us good men and women, working His work in our daily tasks. All true religion has its sphere in conduct.

But then there is another side to that. All true conduct must have its root in religion, and I, for my part--though of course it is extremely narrow and antiquated to profess it--I, for my part, do not believe that in the long-run, and in general, you will get noble living apart from the emotions and sentiments which the truths of Christianity, accepted and fed upon, are sure to produce. And so this day, with its very general depreciation of the importance of accurate conceptions of revealed truth, and its exaltation of conduct, is on the verge of a very serious error. Godliness, well-directed reverence, is the parent of all noble living, and the one infallible way to produce a noble life is faith in Christ, and love which flows from the faith.

If all that is so, if godliness is, not singing psalms, not praying, not saying How sweet it is to feel the love of God, still less saying I accept the principles of Christianity as they are laid down in the Bible; but carrying out beliefs and emotions in deeds, then the true aim which we should have continually before us as Christians is plain enough. We may not reach it completely, but we can approximate indefinitely towards it. Aim is more important than achievement. Direction is more vital in determining the character of a life than progress actually made. Note the form of the exhortation, exercise thyself towards godliness, which involves the same thought as is expressed in Paul's other utterance of irrepressible aspiration and effort, Not as if I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after, or as he had just said, press towards the mark, in continual approximation to the ideal. A complete penetration of all our actions by the principles and emotions of the Gospel is what is set before us here.

And that is the only aim that corresponds to what and where I am and to what I need. I fall back upon the grandly simple old words, very dear to some of us, perhaps, by boyish associations, Man's chief end is to glorify God, and (so) to enjoy Him for ever. Unto Godliness is to be the aim of every true life, and it is the only aim which corresponds to our circumstances and our relations, our powers and possibilities.

**II. Notice the discipline which such an aim demands.**

Exercise thyself. Now, I have no doubt that the bulk of my hearers know that the word here rendered exercise is drawn from the athlete's training-ground, and is, in fact, akin to the word which is transported into English under the form gymnasium. The Apostle's notion is that, just as the athlete, racer, or boxer goes through a course of training, so there is a training as severe, necessary for the godliness which Paul regards as the one true aim of life.

You Christian people ought to train your spirits at least as carefully as the athlete does his muscles. There are plenty of people, calling themselves Christians, who never give one-hundredth part as much systematic and diligent pains to fulfil the ideal of their Christian life as men will take to learn to ride a bicycle or to pull the stroke oar in a college boat. The self-denial and persistence and concentration which are freely spent upon excellence in athletic pursuits might well put to shame the way in which Christians go about the task of doing their religion.

I suppose there never was a time, in England's history at any rate, whatever it may have been in Greece, when modern instances might give more point to an old saw than to-day does for this text, when athletic sports of all kinds are taking up so much of the time and the energy of our young men. I do not want to throw cold water on that, but I do say it is a miserable thing to think that so many professing Christians will give a great deal more pains to learn to play lawn tennis than ever they did to learn to be good, Christian people.

Exercise thyself unto godliness. Make a business of living your Christianity. Be in earnest about it. A tragically large number of professing Christians never were in earnest about mending themselves. And that is why they are so far, far behind. Exercise thyself. You say, How?

Well, I say, first of all, concentration. This one thing I do. That does not mean narrowing, because this one thing can be done by means of all the legitimate things that we have to do in the world. Next Friday, when you go on Change, you can be exercising yourself to godliness there. Whatever may be the form of our daily occupation, it is the gymnasium where God has put us to exercise our muscles in, and so to gain the wrestling thews that throw the world. Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. The concentration for which I plead does not shut us out from any place but the devil's wrestling-ground. All that is legitimate, all that is innocent, may be made a means for manifesting and for increasing our godliness. Only you have to take God with you into your life, and to try, more and more consciously, to make Him the motive-power of all that you do. Then the old saying which is profoundly true as it was originally meant, and has of late years been so misused as to become profoundly false, will be true again, Laborare est orare. Yes! it is; if worship underlies the work, but not else.

Again I say, exercise yourselves by abstinence. How many things did the athlete at Corinth do without in his training? How many things do prizefighters and rowing men do without when in training to-day? How rigidly, for a while at any rate, they abstain--whether they recompense themselves afterwards or not has nothing to do with my present purpose. And is it not a shame that some sensual man shall, for the sake of winning a medal or a cup, be able gladly to abandon the delights of sense--eating, drinking, and the like--and content himself with a hermit's Spartan fare, and that Christian people so seldom, and so reluctantly, and so partially turn away from the poisoned cups and the indigestible dainties which the world provides for them? I think that any Christian man who complains of the things which he is shut out from doing if he is to cultivate the godliness which should be his life need only go to any place where horse-jockeys congregate to get a lesson that he may well lay to heart. Exercise thyself, for it is unto godliness.

And then what I said in a former part of this sermon about the various stages of religion may suggest another view of the method of discipline proper to the Christian life. The strenuous exercise of all our powers is called for. But if it is true that the godliness of my text is the last outcome of the emotions which spring from the reception of certain truths, then if we work backwards, as it were, we shall get the best way of producing the godliness. That is to say, the main effort for all men who are in earnest in regard to their own growth in Christlikeness is to keep themselves in touch with the truths of the Gospel, and in the exercise of the sentiments and emotions which flow from these. Or, to put it into other words, the gymnastic is to be, mainly, the man's clinging, with all his might of mind and heart, to Christ, and the truths that are wrapped up in Him; and the cultivation of the habit of continual faith and love turned to that Lord. If I see to number one--the creed, and to number two--the emotions, they will see to number three--the conduct. Keep the truths of the Gospel well in your minds, and keep yourselves well in the attitude of contact with Jesus Christ, and power for life will come into you. But if the fountain is choked, the bed of the stream will be dry. They tell us that away up in Abyssinia there form across the bed of one of the branches of the Nile great fields of weed. And as long as they continue unbroken the lower river is shrunken. But when the stream at the back of them bursts its way through them, then come the inundations down in Egypt, and bring fertility. And there are hundreds of professing Christians whose fields lie barren and baked in the sunshine, because they have stopped with weeds, far away up amongst the hills, the stream that would water them. Clear out the weeds, and the water will do the rest.

And exercise thyself unto godliness by keeping the crown and the prize often and clear in view. Paul the aged in this very letter says: I have finished my course, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of glory. He had said, in the midst of the strife: Not as though I had already attained--I press toward the mark for the prize. And the prize which gleamed before him through all the dust of the arena now shone still more brightly when his hand had all but clasped it. If we desire to run with perseverance the race that is set before us we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and see in Him, not only the Rewarder, but the Reward, of the exercise unto godliness.