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

**2 CORINTHIANS-010**. **PLEASING CHRIST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We labour that whether present or absent we may be accepted of Him."*

*2 Corinthians 5:9*

We do not usually care very much for, or very much trust, a man's own statement of the motives of his life, especially if in the statement he takes credit for lofty and noble ones. And it would be rather a dangerous experiment for the ordinary run of so-called Christian people to stand up and say what Paul says here, that the supreme design and aim towards which all their lives are directed is to please Jesus Christ. In his case the tree was known by its fruits. Certainly there never was a life of more noble self-abnegation, of more continuous heroism, of loftier aspiration and lowlier service than the life of which we see the very pulse in these words.

But Paul is not only professing his own faith, he is speaking in the name of all his brethren. We, ought to include every man and woman who calls himself or herself a Christian. It is this setting of the will of Jesus Christ high up above all other commandments, and proposing to one's self as the aim that swallows up all other aims, that I may please Him--it is this, and not creeds, forms, opinions, professions, or even a faith that simply trusts in Him for salvation, that makes a true Christian. You are a Christian in the precise measure in which Christ's will is uppermost and exclusive in your life, and for all your professions and your orthodoxy and your worship and your faith, not one hair's-breadth further. Here is the signature and the common characteristic of all real Christians, We labour that whether present or absent we may be well-pleasing to Him.

So then in looking together at these words now, I take three points, the supreme aim of the Christian life; the concentration of effort which that aim demands; and the insignificance to which it reduces all external things.

**I. First, then, let me deal with that supreme aim of the Christian life.**

The word which is, correctly enough, rendered accepted, may more literally, and perhaps with a closer correspondence to the Apostle's meaning, be translated well-pleasing, and the aim is this, not merely that we may be accepted, but that we may bring a smile into His face, and some joy and complacent delight in us into His heart, when He looks upon our doings. That pleasure of Jesus Christ in them that fear Him, and in them that hope in His mercy and do His will is a present emotion that fills His heart in looking upon His followers, and it will be especially declared in the solemn, final judgment. We must keep in view both of these periods, if we would rightly understand the sweep of the aim which ought to be uppermost in all Christian people. Here and now in our present acts, we should so live as to occasion a present sentiment of complacent delight in us, in the heart of the Christ who sees us here and now and always. We should so live as that at that far-off future day when we shall all be manifested before the Judgment-seat of Christ, the Judge may bend from His tribunal, and welcome us into His presence with a word of congratulation and an outstretched hand of loving reception. Set that two-fold aim before you, Christian men and women, else you will fail to experience the full stimulus of this thought.

Now such an aim as this implies a very wonderful conception of Jesus Christ's present relations to us. It is a truth that we may minister to His joy. It is a truth that just as really as you mothers are glad when you hear from a far-off land that your boy is doing well, and getting on, so Jesus Christ's heart fills with gladness when He sees you and me walking in the paths in which He would have us go. We often think about our dear dead that they cannot know of us and our doings here, because the sorrow that would sometimes come from the contemplation of our evil, or of our misfortunes, would trouble them in their serene rest. We know not how that may be, but this at least we do know, that the Man Jesus Christ, who, like those dear ones, was dead, and is alive for evermore, in His human nature has knowledge of all His children's failures, as well as successes, and is affected with some shadow of regret, or with some reality of delight, according as they follow or stray from the paths in which He would have them walk. If it be so with Him it may be so with them; and though it be not so with them it must be so with Him. So this strange, sweet, tender, and powerful thought is a piece of plain prose, that Christ is glad when you and I are good.

Does it need any word to emphasise the force of that motive to a Christian heart that loves the Master? Surely this is the great and blessed peculiarity of all the morality of Christianity that it has all a personal bearing and aspect, and that just as the sum of all our duty is gathered up in the one command, Imitate Christ, so the motive for all our duty lies in If you love Me, keep My commandments, and the reward which ought to stimulate more than anything besides is the one thought, not, of what I shall get because I am good, but of what I shall give Him by my obedience, a joy in the heart that was stabbed through and through by sorrow for my sake. That we may please Him who pleased not Himself, is surely the grandest motive on which the pursuit of holiness, and the imitation of Jesus Christ can ever be made to rest. Oh! how different, and how much more blessed such a motive and aim is than all the lower reasons for which men are sometimes exhorted and encouraged to be good! What a difference it is when we say, Do that thing because it is right, and when we say, Do that thing because you will be happier if you do, or when we say, Do it because He would like you to do it. The one is all cold and abstract. To stand before a man and simply say: Now go and do your duty, is a poor way of setting his feet upon a rock and establishing his goings. Duty is not a word that stirs men's hearts, however it may awe their consciences. It rises up before us like some goddess statuesque and serene, with purity, indeed, in her deep and solemn eyes, but with nothing appealing to our affections in her stern lineaments. But when the thought of You ought melts into For my sake, and through the dissolving face of the cold marble goddess there shine the beloved lineaments of Him who wears the Godhead's most benignant grace, the smile upon His face becomes a motive that touches all hearts. Transmute obligation into gratitude, and in front of duty and appeals to self put Christ, and all the harshness and difficulty and burden and self-sacrifice of obedience becomes easy and a joy.

Then let me remind you that this one supreme aim of pleasing Jesus Christ can be carried on through all life in every varying form, great or small. A blessed unity is given to our whole being when the little things and the big things, the easy things and the hard things, deeds which are conspicuous and deeds which no eye sees, are all brought under the influence of the one motive and made co-operant to the one end. Drive that one steadfast aim through your lives like a bar of iron, and it will give the lives strength and consistency--not rigidity, because they may still be flexible. Nothing will be too small to be consecrated by that motive; nothing too great to own its power. You can please Him everywhere and always. The only thing that is inconsistent with pleasing Him is the thing which, alas! we do at all times and should do at no time, and that is to sin against Him. If we bear with us this as a conscious motive in every part of our day's work it will give us a quick discernment as to what is evil, which I believe nothing else will so surely give. If you desire life to be noble, uniform, dignified, great in its minutest acts and solemn in its very trifles, and if you would have some continual test and standard by which you can detect all spurious, apparent virtues, and discover lurking and masked temptations, carry this one aim clear and high above all else, and make it the purpose of the whole life, to be well-pleasing unto Him.

**II. Now, in the next place, notice the concentrated effort which this aim requires.**

The word rendered in my text labour is a peculiar one, very seldom employed in Scripture. It means, in its most literal signification, to be fond of honour, or to be actuated by a love of honour; and hence it comes, by a very natural transition, to mean to strive to gain something for the sake of the honour connected with it. That is to say, it not only expresses the notion of diligent, strenuous effort, but it reveals the reason for that diligence and strenuousness in what I may call (for the word might almost be so rendered) the ambition of being honoured by pleasing Christ. So that the labour of my text covers the whole ground, not only of the act but of its motive. The concentration of effort which such an aim requires may be enforced by one or two simple exhortations.

First, let me say that we ought, as Christian people, to cultivate this noble ambition of pleasing Jesus Christ. Men have all got the love of approbation deep in them. God put it there for a good purpose, not that we might shape our lives so as to get others to pat us on the back, and say, Well done! but that, in addition to the other solemn and sovereign motives for following the paths of righteousness, we might have this highest ambition to impel us on the road. And it is the duty of all Christians to see to it that they discipline themselves so as, in their own feelings, to put high above all the approbation or censure of their fellows the approbation or censure of Jesus Christ. That will take some cultivation. It is a great deal easier to shape our courses so as to get one another's praise. I remember a quaint saying in a German book. An old schoolmaster tried to please this one and that one, and it failed. "Well, then," said he, "I will try to please Christ." And that succeeded.

And let me remind you that a second part of the concentration of effort which this aim requires is to strive with the utmost energy in the accomplishment of it. Paul did not believe that anybody could please Jesus Christ without a fight for it. His notion of acceptable service was service which a man suppressed much to render, and overcame much to bring. And I urge upon you this, dear brethren, that with all the mob of faces round about us which shut out Christ's face, and with all the temptations to follow other aims, and with the weaknesses of our own characters, it never was, is not, nor ever will be, an easy thing, or a thing to be done without a struggle and a dead lift, to live so as to be well-pleasing to Him.

Look at Paul's metaphors with which he sets forth the Christian life--a warfare, a race, a struggle, a building up of some great temple structure, and the like--all suggesting at the least the idea of patient, persistent, continuous toil, and most of them suggesting also the idea of struggle with antagonistic forces and difficulties, either within or without. So we must set our shoulders to the wheel, put our backs into our work. Do not think that you are going to be carried into the condition of conformity with Jesus Christ in a dream, or that the road to heaven is a primrose path, to be trodden in silver slippers. I will not offer unto the Lord that which doth cost me nothing, and if you do, it will be worth exactly what it costs. There must be concentration of effort if we are to be well-pleasing to Him.

But then do not forget, on the other hand, that deeper than all effort, and the very spring and life of it, there must be the opening of our hearts for the entrance of His life and spirit, by the presence of which only are we well-pleasing to Christ. That which pleases Him in you and me is our likeness to Him. According to the old Puritan illustration, the refiner sat by the furnace until he could see in the molten metal his own face mirrored, and then he knew it was pure. So what pleases Christ in us is the reflection of Himself. And how can we get that likeness to Himself except by receiving into our hearts the Spirit that was in Christ Jesus, and will dwell in us, and will produce in us in our measure the same image that it formed in Him? Work out your own salvation, because it is God that worketh in you. Labour, concentrate effort, and above all open the heart to the entrance of that transforming power.

**III. Lastly, let me suggest the utter insignificance to which this aim reduces all externals.**

We labour, says Paul, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted. What differences of condition are covered by that parenthetical phrase--present or absent! He talks about it as if it was a very small matter, does he not? And what is included in it? Whether a man shall be in the body or out of it; that is to say, whether he be alive or dead. Here is an aim then, so great, so lofty, so all-comprehensive that it reduces the difference between living in the world and being out of it, to a trifle. And if we stand so high up that these two varieties of condition dwindle into insignificance and seem to have melted into one, do you think that there is anything else that will be very big? If the difference between life and death is dwindled and dwarfed, what else do you suppose will remain? Nothing, I should think.

So if we only, by God's help, which will be given to us if we want it, keep this clear before us as the motive of all our life, then all the possible alternatives of human condition and circumstance will sink into insignificance, and from that lofty summit will show scarce so gross as beetles in the air beneath our lofty station.

Whether we be rich or poor, solitary or beset by friends, happy or sad, hopeful or despairing, young or old, wearied or buoyant, learned or foolish, it matters not. The one aim lifts itself before us, and they in whose eyes shine the light of that great issue are careless of the road along which they pass. Do you enlist yourselves in the company that fires at the long range, and all those that take aim at the shorter ones will seem to be very pitifully limiting their powers.

Then remember that this same aim, and this same result may be equally pursued and attained whether here or yonder. It is something to have a course of life which runs straight along, unbent aside, and not cut short off, by the change from earth to Heaven. And this felicity he only has who, amidst things temporal and insignificant, sees and seeks the eternal smile on the face of his unchanging Saviour. On earth, in death, through eternity, such a life will be homogeneous and of a piece; and when all other aims are hull down below the horizon, forgotten and out of sight, then still this will be the purpose, and yonder it will be the accomplished purpose, of each, to please the Lord Jesus Christ.

My dear friend, remember that in its full meaning this aim regards the future, and points onward to that great judgment-seat where you and I will certainly each of us give account of himself. Do you think that you will please Christ then? Do you think that when that day dawns, a smile of welcome will come into His eyes, and a glow of gladness at the meeting into yours? Or have you cause to fear that you will call on the rocks and the hills to cover you from the face of Him that sitteth on the Throne?'

We are all close by one another; our voices are very audible to each other. Do you learn, Christian people, that the first,--or at least a prime--condition of all Christian and Christ-pleasing life, is a wholesome disregard of what anybody says but Himself. The old Lacedæmonians used to stir themselves to heroism by the thought: What will they say of us in Sparta? The governor of some outlying English colony minds very little what the people that he is set to rule think about him. He reports to Downing Street, and it is the opinion of the Home Government that influences him. You report to headquarters. Never mind what anybody else thinks of you. Your business is to please Christ, and the less you trouble yourselves about pleasing men the more you will succeed in doing it. Be deaf to the tittle tattle of your fellow soldiers in the ranks. It is your Commander's smile that will be your highest reward.

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,

But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,

And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;

As he pronounces lastly on each deed,

Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.