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

**2 CORINTHIANS-013**. **HOPE AND HOLINESS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Having therefore these promises ... let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."*

*2 Corinthians 7:1*

It is often made a charge against professing Christians that their religion has very little to do with common morality. The taunt has sharpened multitudes of gibes and been echoed in all sorts of tones: it is very often too true and perfectly just, but if ever it is, let it be distinctly understood that it is not so because of Christian men's religion but in spite of it. Their bitterest enemy does not condemn them half so emphatically as their own religion does: the sharpest censure of others is not so sharp as the rebukes of the New Testament. If there is one thing which it insists upon more than another, it is that religion without morality is nothing--that the one test to which, after all, every man must submit is, what sort of character has he and how has he behaved--is he pure or foul? All high-flown pretension, all fervid emotion has at last to face the question which little children ask, Was he a good man?'

The Apostle has been speaking about very high and mystical truths, about all Christians being the temple of God, about God dwelling in men, about men and women being His sons and daughters; these are the very truths on which so often fervid imaginations have built up a mystical piety that had little to do with the common rules of right and wrong. But Paul keeps true to the intensely practical purpose of his preaching and brings his heroes down to the prosaic earth with the homely common sense of this far-reaching exhortation, which he gives as the fitting conclusion for such celestial visions.

**I. A Christian life should be a life of constant self-purifying.**

This epistle is addressed to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints which are in all Achaia.

Looking out over that wide region, Paul saw scattered over godless masses a little dispersed company to each of whom the sacred name of Saint applied. They had been deeply stained with the vices of their age and place, and after a black list of criminals he had had to say to them such were some of you, and he lays his finger on the miracle that had changed them and hesitates not to say of them all, But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

The first thing, then, that every Christian has is a cleansing which accompanies forgiveness, and however his garment may have been spotted by the flesh, it is washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. Strange cleansing by which black stains melt out of garments plunged in red blood! With the cleansing of forgiveness and justification comes, wherever they come, the gift of the Holy Spirit--a new life springing up within the old life, and untouched by any contact with its evils. These gifts belong universally to the initial stage of the Christian life and require for their possession only the receptiveness of faith. They admit of no co-operation of human effort, and to possess them men have only to take the things that are freely given to them of God. But of the subsequent stages of the Christian life, the laborious and constant effort to develop and apply that free gift is as essential as, in the earliest stage, it is worse than useless. The gift received has to be wrought into the very substance of the soul, and to be wrought out in all the endless varieties of life and conduct. Christians are cleansed to begin with, but they have still daily to cleanse themselves: the leaven is hid in the three measures of meal, but 'tis a life-long task till the lump be leavened, and no man, even though he has the life that was in Jesus within him, will grow up into the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ unless, by patient and persistent effort, he is ever pressing on to the things that are before and daily striving to draw nearer to the prize of his high calling. We are cleansed, but we have still to cleanse ourselves.

Yet another paradox attaches to the Christian life, inasmuch as God cleanses us, but we have to cleanse ourselves. The great truth that the spirit of God in a man is the fontal source of all his goodness, and that Christ's righteousness is given to us, is no pillow on which to rest an idle head, but should rather be a trumpet-call to effort which is thereby made certain of success. If we were left to the task of self-purifying by our own efforts we might well fling it up as impossible. It is as easy for a man to lift himself from the ground by gripping his own shoulders as it is for us to rise to greater heights of moral conduct by our own efforts; but if we can believe that God gives the impulse after purity, and the vision of what purity is, and imparts the power of attaining it, strengthening at once our dim sight and stirring our feeble desires and energising our crippled limbs, then we can run with patience the race that is set before us.

We must note the thoroughness of the cleansing which the Apostle here enjoins. What is to be got rid of is not this or that defect or vice, but all filthiness of flesh and spirit. The former, of course, refers primarily to sins of impurity which in the eyes of the Greeks of Corinth were scarcely sins at all, and the latter to a state of mind when fancy, imagination, and memory were enlisted in the service of evil. Both are rampant in our day as they were in Corinth. Much modern literature and the new gospel of Art for Art's sake minister to both, and every man carries in himself inclinations to either. It is no partial cleansing with which Paul would have us to be satisfied: all filthiness is to be cast out. Like careful housewives who are never content to cease their scrubbing while a speck remains upon furniture, Christian men are to regard their work as unfinished as long as the least trace of the unclean thing remains in their flesh or in their spirit. The ideal may be far from being realised at any moment, but it is at the peril of the whole sincerity and peacefulness of their lives if they, in the smallest degree, lower the perfection of their ideal in deference to the imperfection of their realisation of it.

It must be abundantly clear from our own experience that any such cleansing is a very long process. No character is made, whether it be good or bad, but by a slow building up: no man becomes most wicked all at once, and no man is sanctified by a wish or at a jump. As long as men are in a world so abounding with temptation, he that is washed will need daily to wash his feet that have been stained in the foul ways of life, if he is to be clean every whit.

As long as the spirit is imprisoned in the body and has it for its instrument there will be need for much effort at purifying. We must be content to overcome one foe at a time, and however strong may be the pilgrim's spirit in us, we must be content to take one step at a time, and to advance by very slow degrees. Nor is it to be forgotten that as we get nearer what we ought to be, we should be more conscious of the things in which we are not what we ought to be. The nearer we get to Jesus Christ, the more will our consciences be enlightened as to the particulars in which we are still distant from Him. A speck on a polished shield will show plain that would never have been seen on a rusty one. The saint who is nearest God will think more of his sins than the man who is furthest from him. So new work of purifying will open before us as we grow more pure, and this will last as long as life itself.

**II. The Christian life is to be not merely a continual getting rid of evil, but a continual becoming good.**

Paul here draws a distinction between cleansing ourselves from filthiness and perfecting holiness, and these two, though closely connected and capable of being regarded as being but the positive and negative sides of one process, are in reality different, though in practice the former is never achieved without the latter, nor the latter accomplished without the former. Holiness is more than purity; it is consecration. That is holy which is devoted to God, and a saint is one whose daily effort is to devote his whole self, in all his faculties and nature, thoughts, heart, and will, more and more, to God, and to receive into himself more and more of God.

The purifying which Paul has been enjoining will only be successful in the measure of our consecration, and the consecration will only be genuine in the measure of our purifying. Herein lies the broad and blessed distinction between the world's morality and Christian ethics. The former fails just because it lacks the attitude towards a Person who is the very foundation of Christian morality, and changes a hard and impossible law into love. There is no more futile waste of breath than that of teachers of morality who have no message but Be good! Be good! and no motive by which to urge it but the pleasures of virtue and the disadvantages of vice, but when the vagueness of the abstract thought of goodness solidifies into a living Person and that Person makes his appeal first to our hearts and bids us love him, and then opens before us the unstained light of his own character and beseeches us to be like him, the repellent becomes attractive: the impossible becomes possible, and if ye love Me keep My commandments becomes a constraining power and a victorious impulse in our lives.

**III. The Christian life of purifying and consecration is to be animated by hope and fear.**

The Apostle seems to connect hope more immediately with the cleansing, and holiness with the fear of God, but probably both hope and fear are in his mind as the double foundation on which both purity and consecration are to rest, or the double emotion which is to produce them both. These promises refer directly to the immediately preceding words, I will be a Father unto you and ye shall be My sons and daughters, in which all the blessings which God can give or men can receive are fused together in one lustrous and all-comprehensive whole. So all the great truths of the Gospel and all the blessed emotions of sonship which can spring up in a human heart are intended to find their practical result in holy and pure living. For this end God has spoken to us out of the thick darkness; for this end Christ has come into our darkness; for this end He has lived; for this end He died; for this end He rose again; for this end He sends His Spirit and administers the providence of the world. The purpose of all the Divine activity as regards us men is not merely to make us happy, but to make us happy in order that we may be good. He whom what he calls his religion has only saved from the wrath of God and the fear of hell has not learned the alphabet of religion. Unless God's promises evoke men's goodness it will be of little avail that they seem to quicken their hope. Joyful confidence in our sonship is only warranted in the measure in which we are like our Father. Hope often deludes and makes men dreamy and unpractical. It generally paints pictures far lovelier than the realities, and without any of their shadows; it is too often the stimulus and ally of ignoble lives, and seldom stirs to heroism or endurance, but its many defects are not due to itself but to its false choice of objects on which to fix. The hope which is lifted from trailing along the earth and twining round creatures and which rises to grasp these promises ought to be, and in the measure of its reality is the ally of all patient endurance and noble self-sacrifice. Its vision of coming good is all directed to the coming Christ, and every man that hath this hope in Him, purifieth himself even as He is pure.

In Paul's experience there was no contrariety between hope set on Jesus and fear directed towards God. It is in the fear of God that holiness is to be perfected. There is a fear which has no torment. Yet more, there is no love in sons or daughters without fear. The reverential awe with which God's children draw near to God has in it nothing slavish and no terror. Their love is not only joyful but lowly. The worshipping gaze upon His Divine majesty, the reverential and adoring contemplation of His ineffable holiness, and the poignant consciousness, after all effort, of the distance between us and Him will bow the hearts that love Him most in lowliest prostration before Him. These two, hope and fear, confidence and awe, are like the poles on which the whole round world turns and are united here in one result. They who set their hope in God must not forget the works of God but keep His commandments; they who call Him Father, who without respect of persons judgeth must pass the time of their sojourning here in fear, and their hopes and their fears must drive the wheels of life, purify them from all filthiness and perfect them in all holiness.