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

**JOHN-005**. **GRACE AND TRUTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."*

*John 1:17*

There are scarcely any traces, in the writings of the Apostle John, of that great controversy as to the relation of the Law and the Gospel which occupied and embittered so much of the work of the Apostle Paul. We have floated into an entirely different region in John's writings. The old controversies are dead--settled, I suppose, mainly by Paul's own words, and also to a large extent by the logic of events. This verse is almost the only one in which John touches upon that extinct controversy, and here the Law is introduced simply as a foil to set off the brightness of the Gospel. All artists know the value of contrast in giving prominence. A dark background flashes up brighter colours into brilliancy. White is never so white as when it is relieved against black. And so here the special preciousness and distinctive peculiarities of what we receive in Christ are made more vivid and more distinct by contrast with what in old days was given by Moses.

Every word in this verse is significant. Lawis set against grace and truth. It was given; they came. Moses is contrasted with Christ. So we have a threefold antithesis as between Law and Gospel: in reference to their respective contents; in reference to the manner of their communication; and in reference to the person of their Founders. And I think, if we look at these three points, we shall get some clear apprehension of the glories of that Gospel which the Apostle would thereby commend to our affection and to our faith.

**I. First of all, then, we have here the special glory of the contents of the Gospel heightened by the contrast with Law.**

Law has no tenderness, no pity, no feeling. Tables of stone and a pen of iron are its fitting vehicles. Flashing lightnings and rolling thunders symbolise the fierce light which it casts upon men's duty and the terrors of its retribution. Inflexible, and with no compassion for human weakness, it tells us what we ought to be, but it does not help us to be it. It binds heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, upon men's consciences, but puts not forth the tip of a fingerto enable men to bear them. And this is true about law in all forms, whether it be the Mosaic Law, or whether it be the law of our own country, or whether it be the laws written upon men's consciences. These all partake of the one characteristic, that they help nothing to the fulfilment of their own behests, and that they are barbed with threatenings of retribution. Like some avenging goddess, law comes down amongst men, terrible in her purity, awful in her beauty, with a hard light in her clear grey eyes--in the one hand the tables of stone, bearing the commandments which we have broken, and in the other a sharp two-edged sword.

And this is the opposite of all that comes to us in the Gospel. The contrast divides into two portions. The Lawis set against grace and truth. Let us look at these two in order.

What we have in Christ is not law, but grace. Law, as I said, has no heart; the meaning of the Gospel is the unveiling of the heart of God. Law commands and demands; it says: This shalt thou do, or else--; and it has nothing more that it can say. What is the use of standing beside a lame man, and pointing to a shining summit, and saying to him, Get up there, and you will breathe a purer atmosphere? He is lying lame at the foot of it. There is no help for any soul in law. Men are not perishing because they do not know what they ought to do. Men are not bad because they doubt as to what their duty is. The worst man in the world knows a great deal more of what he ought to do than the best man in the world practises. So it is not for want of precepts that so many of us are going to destruction, but it is for want of power to fulfil the precepts.

Grace is love giving. Law demands, grace bestows. Law comes saying Do this, and our consciences respond to the imperativeness of the obligation. But grace comes and says, I will help thee to do it. Law is God requiring; grace is God bestowing. Give what Thou commandest, and then command what Thou wilt.

Oh, brethren! we have all of us written upon the fleshly tablets of our hearts solemn commandments which we know are binding upon us; and which we sometimes would fain keep, but cannot. Is this not a message of hope and blessedness that comes to us? Grace has drawn near in Jesus Christ, and a giving God, who bestows upon us a life that will unfold itself in accordance with the highest law, holds out the fulness of His gift in that Incarnate Word. Law has no heart; the Gospel is the unveiling of the heart of God. Law commands; grace is God bestowing Himself.

And still further, law condemns. Grace is love that bends down to an evildoer, and deals not on the footing of strict retribution with the infirmities and the sins of us poor weaklings. And so, seeing that no man that lives but hears in his heart an accusing voice, and that every one of us knows what it is to gaze upon lofty duties that we have shrunk from, upon plain obligations from the yoke of which we have selfishly and cowardly withdrawn our necks; seeing that every man, woman, and child listening to me now has, lurking in some corner of their hearts, a memory that only needs to be quickened to be a torture, and deeds that only need to have the veil drawn away from them to terrify and shame them--oh! surely it ought to be a word of gladness for every one of us that, in front of any law that condemns us, stands forth the gentle, gracious form of the Christ that brings pardon, and the grace of God that bringeth salvation unto all men. Thank God! law needed to be given, but it was only the foundation on which was to be reared a better thing. The law was given By Moses--a schoolmaster, as conscience is to-day, to bring us to Christby whom comes the grace that loves, that stoops, that gives, and that pardons.

Still further, there is another antithesis here. The Gospel which comes by Christ is not law, but truth. The object of law is to regulate conduct, and only subordinately to inform the mind or to enlighten the understanding. The Mosaic Law had for its foundation, of course, a revelation of God. But that revelation of God was less prominent, proportionately, than the prescription for man's conduct. The Gospel is the opposite of this. It has for its object the regulation of conduct; but that object is less prominent, proportionately, than the other, the manifestation and the revelation of God. The Old Testament says Thou shalt; the New Testament says God is. The Old was Law; the New is Truth.

And so we may draw the inference, on which I do not need to dwell, how miserably inadequate and shallow a conception of Christianity that is which sets it forth as being mainly a means of regulating conduct, and how false and foolish that loose talk is that we hear many a time.--Never mind about theological subtleties; conduct is the main thing. Not so. The Gospel is not law; the Gospel is truth. It is a revelation of God to the understanding and to the heart, in order that thereby the will may be subdued, and that then the conduct may be shaped and moulded. But let us begin where it begins, and let us remember that the morality of the New Testament has never long been held up high and pure, where the theology of the New Testament has been neglected and despised. The law came by Moses; truth came by Jesus Christ.

But, still further, let me remind you that, in the revelation of a God who is gracious, giving to our emptiness and forgiving our sins--that is to say, in the revelation of grace--we have a far deeper, nobler, more blessed conception of the divine nature than in law. It is great to think of a righteous God, it is great and ennobling to think of One whose pure eyes cannot look upon sin, and who wills that men should live pure and noble and Godlike lives. But it is far more and more blessed, transcending all the old teaching, when we sit at the feet of the Christ who gives, and who pardons, and look up into His deep eyes, with the tears of compassion shining in them, and say: Lo! This is our God! We have waited for Him and He will save us. That is a better truth, a deeper truth than prophets and righteous men of old possessed; and to us there has come, borne on the wings of the mighty angel of His grace, the precious revelation of the Father-God whose heart is love. The law was given by Moses, but brighter than the gleam of the presence between the Cherubim is the lambent light of gentle tenderness that shines from the face of Jesus Christ. Grace, and therefore truth, a deeper truth, came by Him.

And, still further, let me remind you of how this contrast is borne out by the fact that all that previous system was an adumbration, a shadow and a premonition of the perfect revelation that was to come. Temple, priest, sacrifice, law, the whole body of the Mosaic constitution of things was, as it were, a shadow thrown along the road in advance by the swiftly coming King. The shadow fell before Him, but when He came the shadow disappeared. The former was a system of types, symbols, pictures. Here is the reality that antiquates and fulfils and transcends them all. The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

**II. Now, secondly, look at the other contrast that is here, between giving and coming.**

I do not know that I have quite succeeded in making clear to my own mind the precise force of this antithesis. Certainly there is a profound meaning if one can fathom it; perhaps one might put it best in something like the following fashion.

The word rendered camemight be more correctly translated became, or came into being. The law was given; grace and truth came to be.

Now, what do we mean when we talk about a law being given? We simply mean, I suppose, that it is promulgated, either in oral or in written words. It is, after all, no more than so many words. It is given when it is spoken or published. It is a verbal communication at the best. But grace and truth came to be. They are realities; they are not words. They are not communicated by sentences, they are actual existences; and they spring into being as far as man's historical possession and experience of them are concerned--they spring into being in Jesus Christ, and through Him they belong to us all. Not that there was no grace, no manifest lore of God, in the world, nor any true knowledge of Him before the Incarnation, but the earlier portions of this chapter remind us that all of grace, however restrained and partial, that all of truth, however imperfect and shadowy it may have been, which were in the world before Christ came, were owing to the operation of that Eternal Word Who became flesh and dwelt among us, and that these, in comparison with the affluence and the fulness and the nearness of grace and truth after Christ's coming, were so small and remote that it is not an exaggeration to say that, as far as man's possession and experience of them are concerned, the giving love of God and the clear and true knowledge of His deep heart of tenderness and grace, sprang into being with the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ the Lord.

He comes to reveal by no words. His gift is not like the gift that Moses brought down from the mountain, merely a writing upon tables; His gift is not the letter of an outward commandment, nor the letter of an outward revelation. It is the thing itself which He reveals by being it. He does not speak about grace, He brings it; He does not show us God by His words, He shows us God by His acts. He does not preach about Him, but He lives Him, He manifests Him. His gentleness, His compassion, His miracles, His wisdom, His patience, His tears, His promises; all these are the very Deity in action before our eyes; and instead of a mere verbal revelation, which is so imperfect and so worthless, grace and truth, the living realities, are flashed upon a darkened world in the face of Jesus Christ. How cold, how hard, how superficial, in comparison with that fleshly table of the heart of Christ on which grace and truth were written, are the stony tables of law, which bore after all, for all their majesty, only words which are breath and nothing besides.

**III. And so, lastly, look at the contrast that is drawn here between the persons of the Founders.**

I do not suppose that we are to take into consideration the difference between the limitations of the one and the completeness of the other. I do not suppose that the Apostle was thinking about the difference between the reluctant service of the Lawgiver and the glad obedience of the Son; or between the passion and the pride that sometimes marred Moseswork, and the continual calmness and patient meekness that perfected the sacrifice of Jesus. Nor do I suppose that there flashed before his memory the difference between that strange tomb where God buried the prophet, unknown of men, in the stern solitude of the desert, true symbol of the solemn mystery and awful solitude with which the law which we have broken invests death, to our trembling consciences, and the grave in the garden with the spring flowers bursting round it, and visited by white-robed angels, who spoke comfort to weeping friends, true picture of what His death makes the grave for all His followers.

But I suppose he was mainly thinking of the contrast between the relation of Moses to his law, and of Christ to His Gospel. Moses was but a medium. His personality had nothing to do with his message. You may take away Moses, and the law stands all the same. But Christ is so interwoven with Christ's message that you cannot rend the two apart; you cannot have the figure of Christ melt away, and the gift that Christ brought remain. If you extinguish the sun you cannot keep the sunlight; if you put away Christ in the fulness of His manhood and of His divinity, in the power of His Incarnation and the omnipotence of His cross--if you put away Christ from Christianity, it collapses into dust and nothingness.

So, dear brethren, do not let any of us try that perilous experiment. You cannot melt away Jesus and keep grace and truth. You cannot tamper with His character, with His nature, with the mystery of His passion, with the atoning power of His cross, and preserve the blessings that He has brought to the world. If you want the grace which is the unveiling of the heart of God, the gift of a giving God and the pardon of a forgiving Judge; or if you want the truth, the reality of the knowledge of Him, you can only get them by accepting Christ. I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life. There is a law given which gives life, and righteousness is by that law. There is a Person who is the Truth, and our knowledge of the truth is through that Person, and through Him alone. By humble faith receive Him into your hearts, and He will come bringing to you the fulness of grace and truth.