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

**JOHN-037**. **NEVER IN BONDAGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"We ... were never in bondage to any man: how sayest Thou, Ye shall be made free!"*

*John 8:33*

Never in bondage to any man? Then what about Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Syria? Was there not a Roman garrison looking down from the castle into the very Temple courts where this boastful falsehood was uttered? It required some hardihood to say, Never in bondage to any man, in the face of such a history, and such a present. But was it not just an instance of the strange power which we all have and exercise, of ignoring disagreeable facts, and by ingenious manipulation taking the wrinkles out of the photograph? The Jews were perhaps not misunderstanding Jesus Christ quite so much as these words may suggest. If He had been promising, as they chose to assume, political and external liberty, I fancy they would have risen to the bait a little more eagerly than they did to His words.

But be that as it may, this strange answer of theirs suggests that power of ignoring what we do not want to see, not only in the way in which I have suggested, but also in another. For if they had any inkling of what Jesus meant by slavery and freedom, they, by such words as these, put away from themselves the thought that they were, in any deep and inward sense, bondsmen, and that a message of liberty had any application to them. Ah, dear friends! there was a great deal of human nature in these men, who thus put up a screen between them and the penetrating words of our Lord. Were they not doing just what many of us--all of us to some extent--do: ignoring the facts of their own necessities, of their own spiritual condition, denying the plain lessons of experience? Like them, are not we too often refusing to look in the face the fact that we all, apart from Him, are really in bondage? Because we do not realise the slavery, are we not indifferent to the offer of freedom? We were never in bondage; consequently we add, How sayest Thou, Ye shall be made free?So then, my text brings us to think of three things: our bondage, our ignorance of our bondage, our consequent indifference to Christ's offer of liberty. Let me say a word or two about each of these.

First as to--

**I. Our bondage.**

Christ follows the vain boast in the text, with the calm, grave, profound explanation of what He meant: Whoso committeth sin is the slave of sin. That is true in two ways. By the act of sinning a man shows that he is the slave of an alien power that has captured him; and in the act of sinning, he rivets the chains and increases the tyranny. He is a slave, or he would not obey sin. He is more a slave because he has again obeyed it. Now, do not let us run away with the idea that when Jesus speaks of sin and its bondage, He is thinking only, or mainly, of gross outrages and contradictions of the plain law of morality and decency, that He is thinking only of external acts which all men brand as being wrong, or of those which law qualifies as crimes. We have to go far deeper than that, and into a far more inward region of life than that, before we come to apprehend the inwardness and the depth of the Christian conception of what sin is. We have to bring our whole life close up against God, and then to judge its deeds thereby. Therefore, though I know I am speaking to a mass of respectable, law-abiding people, very few of you having any knowledge of the grosser and uglier forms of transgression, and I dare say none of you having any experience of what it is to sin against human law, though I do not charge you--God forbid!--with vices, and still less with crimes, I bring to each man's conscience a far more searching word than either of these two, when I say, We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. This declaration of the universality and reality of the bondage of sin is only the turning into plain words of a fact which is of universal experience, though it may be of a very much less universal consciousness. We may not be aware of the fact, because, as I have to show you, we do not direct our attention to it. But there it is; and the truth is that every man, however noble his aspirations sometimes, however pure and high his convictions, and however honest in the main may be his attempts to do what is right, when he deals honestly with himself, becomes more or less conscious of just that experience which a great expert in soul analysis and self-examination made: I find a law--an influence working upon my heart with the inevitableness and certainty of law--that when I would do good, evil is present with me.

We all know that, whether we regard it as we ought or no. We all say Amen to that, when it is forced upon our attention. There is something in us that thwarts aspiration towards good, and inclines to evil.

What will but felt the fleshly screen?

And it is not only a screen. It not only prevents us from rising as high as we would, but it sinks us so low as to do deeds that something within us recoils from and brands as evil. Jesus teaches us that he who commits sin is the slave of sin; that is to say, that an alien power has captured and is coercing the wrongdoer. That teaching does not destroy responsibility, but it kindles hope. A foreign foe, who has invaded the land, may be driven out of the land, and all his prisoners set free, if a stronger than he comes against him. Christianity is called gloomy and stern, because it preaches the corruption of man's heart. Is it not a gospel to draw a distinction between the evil that a man does, and the self that a man may be? Is it not better, more hopeful, more of a true evangel, to say to a man, Sin dwelleth in you, than to say, What is called sin is only the necessary action of human nature? To believe that their present condition is not slavery makes men hopeless of ever gaining freedom, and the true gospel of the emancipation of humanity rests on the Christian doctrine of the bondage of sin.

Let me remind you that freedom consists not in the absence of external constraints, but in the animal in us being governed by the will, for when the flesh is free the man is a slave. And it means that the will should be governed by the conscience; and it means that the conscience should be governed by God. These are the stages. Men are built in three stories, so to speak. Down at the bottom, and to be kept there, are inclinations, passions, lust, desires, all which are but blind aimings after their appropriate satisfaction, without any question as to whether the satisfaction is right or wrong; and above that a dominant will which is meant to control, and above that a conscience. That is the public men are more and more abasing themselves to the degradation of ministering to the supposed wishes instead of cutting dead against the grain of the wishes, if necessary, in order to meet the true wants, of the people. Wherever some one strong man stands up to oppose the wild current of popular desires, he may make up his mind that the charge of being a bad citizen, unpatriotic, a lover of the enemies of the people, will be flung at him. You Christian men and women have to face the same calumnies as your Master had. The rotten eggs flung at the objects of popular execration--if I might use a somewhat violent figure--turn to roses in their flight. The praises of good men and the scoffs of loose-living and godless ones are equally valuable certificates of character. The Church which does not earn the same sort of opprobrium which attended its Master has probably failed of its duty. It is good to be called gloomyand sour-visagedby those whose only notion of pleasure is effervescent immorality; and it is good to be called intolerant by the crowd that desires us to be tolerant of vice. So, my friends, I want you to understand that you, too, have to tread in the Master's steps. The imitation of Jesusdoes not consist merely in the sanctities and secrecies of communion, and the blessings of a meek and quiet heart, but includes standing where He stood, in avowed and active opposition to widespread evils, and, if need be, in the protesting opposition to popular error. And if you are called nicknames, never mind! Remember what the Master said, They shall bring you before kings and magistrates--the tribunal of the many-headed is a more formidable judgment-bench than that of any king--and it shall turn to a testimony for you.

**II. Now, secondly, this name is the witness to what I venture to call, for want of a better term, the originality of Jesus Christ.**

It bears witness to the dim feeling which onlookers had that in Him was a new phenomenon, not to be accounted for by birth and descent, by training and education, or by the whole of what people nowadays call environment. He did not come out of these circumstances. This is not a regulation pattern type of Jew. He is a Samaritan. That is to say, He is unlike the people among whom He dwells; and betrays that other influences than those which shaped them have gone to the making of Him.

That is one of the most marked, outstanding, and important features in the teaching and in the character of Jesus Christ, that it is absolutely independent of, and incapable of being accounted for by, anything that He derived from the circumstances in which He lived. He was a Jew, and yet He was not a Jew. He was not a Samaritan, and yet He was a Samaritan. He was not a Greek, and yet He was one. He was not a Roman, nor an Englishman, nor a Hindoo, nor an Asiatic, nor an African; and yet He had all the characteristics of these races within Himself, and held them all in the ample sweep of His perfect Manhood.

If we turn to His teaching we find that, whilst no doubt to some extent it is influenced in its forms by the necessities of its adaptation to the first listeners, there is a certain element in it far beyond anything that came from Rabbis, or even from prophets and psalmists. Modern Christian scholarship has busied itself very much in these days with studying Jewish literature, so far as it is available, in order to ascertain how far it formed the teaching, or mind, of Jesus the Carpenter of Nazareth. There is a likeness, but the likeness only serves to make the unlikeness more conspicuous. And I, for my part, venture to assert that, whilst the form of our Lord's teaching may largely be traced to the influences under which He was brought up, and whilst the substance of some parts of it may have been anticipated by earlier Rabbis of His nation, the crowd that listened to Him on the mountain top had laid their fingers upon the more important fact when they wondered at His teaching, and found the characteristic difference between it, and that of the men to whom they had listened, in the note of authority with which He spoke. Jesus never argues, He asserts; He claims; and in lieu of all arguments He gives you His own Verily! verily! I say unto you.

Thus not only in its form, but in its substance, in its lofty morality, in its spiritual religion, in its revelation of the Father and the Fatherhood for all men, Christ's teaching as teaching stands absolutely alone.

If we turn to His character, the one thing that strikes us is that about it there is nothing of the limitations of time or race which stamp all other men. He is not good after the fashion of His age, or of any other age; He is simply embodied and perfect Goodness. This Tree has shot up high above the fences that enclose the grove in which it grows, and its leaf lasts for ever.

Run over, in your mind, other great names of heroes, saints, thinkers, poets; they all bear the stamp of their age and circumstances, and the type of goodness or the manner of thought which belonged to these. Jesus Christ alone stands before men absolutely free from any of the limitations which are essential in the case of every human excellence and teacher. And so He comes to us with a strange freshness, with a strange closeness; and nineteen centuries have not made Him fit less accurately to our needs than He did to those of the generation amidst which He condescended to live. Thickening mists of oblivion wrap all other great names as they recede into the past; and about the loftiest of them we have to say, This man, having served his generation, fell on sleep, and saw corruption. But Jesus Christ lasts, because there is nothing local or temporary about His teaching or His character.

Now this peculiar originality, as I venture to call it, of Christ's character is a very strong argument for the truthful accuracy of the picture drawn of Him in these four Gospels. Where did these four men get their Christ? Was it from imagination? Was it from myth? Was it from the accidental confluence of a multitude of traditions? There is an old story about a painter who, in despair of producing a certain effect of storm upon the sea, at last flung his wet sponge at the canvas, and to his astonishment found that it had done the very thing he wanted. But wet sponges cannot draw likenesses; and to allege that these four men drew such a picture, in such compass, without anybody sitting for it, seems to me about the most desperate hypothesis that ever was invented. If there were no Christ, or if the Christ that was, was not like what the Gospels paint Him as being, then the authors of these little booklets are consummate geniuses, and their works stand at the very top of the imaginative literature of the world. It is more difficult to account for the Gospels, if they are not histories, than it is to account for the Christ whom they tell us of if they are.

And then, further, there is only one key to the mystery of this originality. Christ is perfect man, high above limitations, and owing nothing to environment, because He is the Son of God. I would as soon believe that grass roots, which for years, in some meadow, had brought forth, season after season, nothing but humble green blades, shot up suddenly into a palm tree, as I would believe that simple natural descent brought all at once into the middle of the dull succession of commonplace and sinful men this radiant and unique Figure. Account for Christ, all you unbelievers! The question of to-day, round which all the battle is being fought, is the person of Jesus Christ. If He be what the Gospels tell us that He is, there is nothing left for the unbeliever worth a struggle. What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?The Jews said, Thou art a Samaritan!We say, Thou art the Christ; the Son of the living God!

**III. Lastly, the name bears witness to Christ's universality.**

I presume that, in addition to what seemed His hostility to what was taken to be true Judaism, another set of facts underlay the name--viz. those which indicated His kindly relations with the people whom it was every good Jew's pleasant duty to hate with all his heart. The story of the Samaritan woman in John's Gospel, the parable of the good Samaritan, the incident of the grateful leper, who was a Samaritan, the refusal to allow the eager Apostles to bring down fire from heaven to consume inhospitable churls in a Samaritan village, were but outstanding specimens of what must have been a characteristic of His whole career not unknown to His enemies. So they argued, If you love our enemies you must hate us; and you must be one of them, thereby distorting, but yet presenting, what is the great glory of Christ's Gospel, and of Christ Himself, that He belongs to the world; and that His salvation, the sweep of His love, and the power of His Cross, are meant for all mankind.

That universality largely arises from the absence of the limitations of which I have already spoken sufficiently. Because He belongs to no one period as regards His character, He is available for all periods as regards His efficacy. Because His teaching is not dyed in the hues of any school or of any age or of any cast of thought, it suits for all mankind. This water comes clear from the eternal rock, and has no taint of any soil through which it has flowed. Therefore the thirsty lips of a world may be glued to it, and drink and be satisfied. His one sacrifice avails for the whole world.

But let me remind you that universality means also individuality, and that Jesus Christ is the Christ for all men because He is each man's Christ. The tree of life stands in the middle of the garden that all may have equal access to it. Is this universal Christ yours; thine? That is the question. Make Him so by putting out your hand and claiming your share in Him, by casting your soul upon Him, by trusting your all to Him, by listening to His word, by obeying His commands, by drinking in the fulness of His blessing. You can do so if you will. If you do not, the universal Christ is nothing to you. Make Him thine, and be sure that the sweep of His love and the efficacy of His sacrifice embrace and include thee. He is the universal Christ; therefore He is the only Christ; neither is there salvation in any other. Through Him all men, each man, thou, must be saved. Without Him all men, every man, thou, can not be saved. Take Him for yours, and you will find that each who possesses Him, possesses Him altogether, and none hinders the other in his full enjoyment of the bread of God which came down from heaven.