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

**JOHN-069**. **LOVE AND OBEDIENCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"If ye love Me, keep My commandments."*

*John 14:15*

As we have seen in former sermons, the keyword of the preceding context is Believe!and that word passes now into Love. The order here is the order of experience. There is first the believing gaze upon the Christ as He is revealed--the image of the invisible God. That kindles love, and prompts to obedience.

There is another very beautiful and subtle link of connection between these words and the preceding. Our Lord has just been saying, Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do. Is the parallel wholly accidental or fanciful between the Lord who does as the servant asks and the servant who is to do as the Lord commands? On both sides there is love delighting to be set in motion by a message from the other side. On the one part there is love supreme which commands and delights to be asked, on the other part there is love dependent, which asks and delights to be commanded; and though the gulf between the two is great, and the difference between Christ's law and our petitions is infinite, yet there is an analogy.

I pause on these words, though they are introduced here only as the basis of the great promise which follows, because they open out into such wide fields. They contain the all-sufficient law of Christian conduct. They contain the one motive adequate to bring that law into realisation. They disclose the very roots of Christian morality, and part of the secret of Christ's unique power and influence amongst men. They come with a message of encouragement to all souls despairing of being able to do that which they would, and of freedom to all men burdened with a crowd of minute and external regulations. If ye love Me, keep My commandments--there are three points to be dwelt upon here--namely, the all-sufficient ideal or guide of life, the all-powerful motive which Christ brings to bear, and the all-subduing gaze of faith by which that motive is brought into action.

**I. We have here the all-sufficient ideal or guide for life.**

Jesus Christ is not speaking merely to that little handful of men in the upper chamber, but to all generations and to all lands, to the end of time and round the world. The authoritative tone which He assumes here is very noteworthy. He speaks as Jehovah spoke from Sinai, and quotes the very words of the old law when He speaks of keeping My commandments. There are distinctly involved in this quite incidental utterance of Christ's two startling things--one the assumption of His right to impose His will upon every human being, and the other His assumption that His will contains the all-sufficient directory for human conduct.

What, then, are His commandments? Those which He spoke are plain and simple; and people who wish to pick holes in the greatness of Christ's work in the world tell us that you can match almost all His precepts up and down amongst moralists and philosophers, and they crow very loud if, scratching amongst Rabbinical dust-heaps, they find something that looks like anything that He once said. Be it so! What does that matter? Christ's commandmentsare Christ Himself. This is the originality and uniqueness of Christ as a moral Teacher, that He says, not Do this, that, and the other thing, but Copy Me. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. His commandments are Himself; and the sum of them all is this--a character perfectly self-oblivious, and wholly penetrated and saturated with joyful, filial submission to the Father, and uttermost and entire giving Himself away to His brethren. That is Christ's commandment which He bids us keep, and His law is to be found in His life.

And then, if that be so, what a change passes on the aspect of law, when we take Christ as being our living embodiment of it! Everything that was hard, repellent, far-off, cold, vanishes. We have no longer tables of stone, but fleshy tables of the heart; and the Law stands before us, a Being to be loved, to be clung to, to be trusted, and whom it is blessedness to know and perfection to resemble. The rails upon which the train travels may be rigid, but they mean safety, and they carry men smoothly into otherwise inaccessible lands. So the life of Jesus Christ brought to us is the firm and plain track along which we are to travel; and all that was difficult and hard in the cold thought of duty becomes changed into the attraction of a living Pattern and Example. This living and breathing and loving commandment is all-sufficient for every detail and complexity of human life. It is so by the confession of believers and of unbelievers, by the joyful confession of the one, and by the frank acknowledgment of many of the others. Listen to one of them. Whatever else may be taken away from us by rational criticism, Christ is still left, a unique Figure, not more unlike all His predecessors than all His followers ... . Religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in selecting this Man as the ideal Representative and Guide of humanity; nor even now would it be easy, even for an unbeliever, to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete than to endeavour so to live that Christ would approve our life.

It is enough for conduct, it is enough for character, it is enough in all perplexities of conflicting duties, that we listen to and obey the voice that says, Keep My commandments.

**II. Now note, secondly, the all-powerful motive.**

Probably my text is best understood as the Revised Version understands it, which reads, If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments, making it an assurance and not an injunction. Christ speaks with the calm confidence that love to Him will have power enough to sway the life. His utterance here is not the addition of another commandment to the list, but rather the pointing out of how they may all be kept.

The principle that underlies these words, then, is this, that love is the foundation of obedience, and obedience is the sure outcome and result of love. That is true in regard to those lower forms of love, which may teach us something of the operation of the higher. We all know that love which is real, and not simply passion and selfishness with a mask on, delights most chiefly in knowing and conforming to the will of the beloved, and that there is nothing sweeter than to be commanded by the dear voice and to obey for dear love's sake. And you have only to take that which is the experience of every true heart, in a thousand sweet ways in daily life, and to lift it into the higher region, and to transfer it to the bond that unites us with Jesus Christ, to see that He has invoked no illusory, but an omnipotent power when He has rested the whole force of His transforming and sanctifying energy upon this one principle, If ye love Me, the Lawgiver, ye will keep the commandments of My Law.

That is exactly what distinguishes and lifts the morality of the Gospel above all other systems. The worst man in the world knows a great deal more of his duty than the best man does. It is not for want of knowledge that men go to the devil, but it is for want of power or will to live their knowledge. And what morality fails to do, with its clearest utterances of human duty, Christ comes and does. The one law is like the useless proclamations posted up in some rebellious district, where there is no army to back them, and the king's authority from whom they come is flouted. The other law gets itself obeyed. Such is the difference between the powerless morality of the world and the commandment of Jesus Christ. Here is the road plain and straight. What matters that, if there is no force to draw the cart along it? There might as well be no road at all. Here stand all your looms, polished and in perfect order, but there is no steam in the boilers; and so there is no motion, and nothing is woven. What we want is not law, but power, and what the Gospel gives us, and stands alone in giving us, is not merely the knowledge of the will of God, and the clear revelation of what we ought to be, but the power to become it.

Love does that, and love alone. That strong force brought into action in our hearts will drive out from thence all rivals, all false and low things. The true way to cleanse the Augean stables, as the old myth has it, was to turn the river into them. It would have been endless work to wheel out the filth in wheelbarrows loaded by spades: turn the stream in, and it will sweep away all the foulness. When the Ark comes into the Temple, Dagon lies, a mutilated stump, upon the threshold. When Christ comes into my heart, then all the obscene and twilight-loving shapes that lurked there, and defiled it, will vanish like ghosts at cock-crowing before His calm and pure Presence. He, and He alone, entering my heart by the portals of my love, will coerce my evil and stimulate my good. And if I love Him, I shall keep His commandments.

Now, brethren, here is a plain test and a double-barrelled one, which tries both our love and our obedience with a sharp touchstone. If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments. That implies, first, that there is no love worth calling so which does not keep the commandment. All the emotional and the mystic, and the so-called higher parts of Christian experience, have to be content to submit to this plain test--do they help us to live as Christ would have us, and that because He would have us? Love to Him that does not keep His commandments is either spurious or dangerously feeble. The true sign of its presence in the heart and the noblest of its operations is not to be found in high-pitched expressions of fervid emotion, nor even in the sacred joys of solitary communion, but in its making us, while in the rough struggle of daily life, and surrounded by trivial tasks, live near Him, and by Him, and for Him, and like Him. If I live so, I love Him; if not, not. Not that I mean to say that in regard to each individual action of a Christian man's life there must be the conscious presence of reference to the supreme love, but that each individual action of the life ought to come from a character of which that reference to the supreme love is the very formative principle and foundation. The colouring matter put in at the fountain will dye every drop of the stream; and they whose inmost hearts are tinged and tinctured with the sweet love of Jesus Christ, from their hearts will go forth issues of life all coloured and moulded thereby. Test your Christian love by your practical obedience.

And, on the other hand, there is no obedience worth calling so which is not the child of love; and all the multitude of right things which Christians do without that motive are made short work of by that consideration. Obedience which is formal, mechanical, matter-of-course, without the presence in it of a loving submission of the will; obedience which is reluctant, calculated, forced upon us by dread, imitated from others--all that is nothing; and Jesus Christ does not count it as obedience at all. This is a sieve with very small meshes, and there will be a great deal of rubbish left in it after the shaking. If ye love Me, keep My commandments. The keeping of My commandmentswhich has not love to Meunderlying it is no keeping at all.

**III. And so, lastly, notice the all-subduing gaze.**

That is not included in my text, but it is necessary in order to complete the view of the forces to which Jesus Christ here entrusts the hallowing of life and the sanctifying of our nature; and we are led to refer to it by what I have already pointed out; the connection between the loveof my text and the believeof the preceding verses. I can fancy a man saying, Keep His commandments? Woe is me! How am I to keep?The answer is Love. And I can fancy him saying Love?Yes! And how am I to love? I cannot get up love at the word of command, or by any voluntary effort. And the answer comes again, Believe!Trust Christ, and you will love Him. Love Him and you will do His will. And then the question comes again, Believe what?And the answer comes, Believe that He is the Son of God who died for you.

Nothing else will kindle a man's love than the faithful contemplation and grasp of Christ in that character and aspect. Only the redeeming Christ affords a reasonable ground for our love to Him. Here is a dead man, dead for nineteen centuries, expecting you and me to have towards Him a vivid personal affection which will influence our conduct and our character. What right has He to expect that? There is only one reasonable ground upon which I may be called to love Jesus Christ, and that is that He died for me, and such a love towards such a Christ is the only thing which will wield power sufficient to guide, to coerce, to restrain, to constrain, and to sustain my weak, wayward, rebellious, and sluggish will. All other emotions of so-called admiration and worship and reverence and affection for Jesus Christ are apt to be tepid; but this one has power and warmth in it.

Here is a unique fact in the history of the world, that not only did He make this astounding claim upon all subsequent generations; but that all subsequent generations have responded to it, and that to-day there are millions of men who love Jesus Christ with a love warm, personal, deep, powerful--the spring of all their goodness and the Lord of their lives. Why do they? For one reason only. Because they believe that He died for them individually, and that He lives an ascended yet ever-present Helper and Lover of their souls.

My brethren, that conviction, and that conviction only, as I venture to affirm, has power to send a glow of love into the heart which will move all the limbs in swift and happy obedience. That conviction, and that conviction alone, will melt the thick-ribbed ice of our spirits and will make it flow down in sweet waters. The love that has looked upon the Cross will be the fulfilling of the law of Him that speaks from the Throne. When our faith has grasped Him, as enduring that cross for us, then our love will be awakened to hear and to do His commandments.

We love Him because He first loved us, and such love will flower and fruit in obedience. I shall keep His commandments when I love Him. I shall love Him with a love that makes my will plastic and my life a glad service, when by faith I grasp Him as the Incarnate Lord, who loved me and gave Himself for me.