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

**JOHN-081. THE ONENESS OF THE BRANCHES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"This is My commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."*

*John 15:12, 13*

The union between Christ and His disciples has been tenderly set forth in the parable of the Vine and the branches. We now turn to the union between the disciples, which is the consequence of their common union to the Lord. The branches are parts of one whole, and necessarily bear a relation to each other. We may modify for our present purpose the analogous statement of the Apostle in reference to the Lord's Supper, and as He says, We being many, are one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread, so we may say--The branches, being many, are one Vine, for they are all partakers of that one Vine. Of this union amongst the branches, which results from their common inherence in the Vine, the natural expression and manifestation is the mutual love, which Christ here gives as the commandment, and commends to us all by His own solemn example.

There are four things suggested to me by the words of our text--the Obligation, the Sufficiency, the Pattern, and the Motive, of Christian love.

**I. First, the Obligation of love.**

The two ideas of commandment and love do not go well together. You cannot pump up love to order, and if you try you generally produce, what we see in abundance in the world and in the Church, sentimental hypocrisy, hollow and unreal. But whilst that is true, and whilst it seems strange to say that we are commanded to love, still we can do a great deal, directly and indirectly, for the cultivation and strengthening of any emotion. We can either cast ourselves into the attitude which is favourable or unfavourable to it. We can either look at the facts which will create it or at those who will check it. We can go about with a sharp eye for the lovable or for the unlovable in man. We can either consciously war against or lazily acquiesce in our own predominant self-absorption and selfishness. And in these and in a number of other ways, our feelings towards other Christian people are very largely under our own control, and therefore are fitting subjects for commandment.

Our Lord lays down the obligation which devolves upon all Christian people, of cherishing a kindly and loving regard to all others who find their place within the charmed circle of His Church. It is an obligation because He commands it. He puts Himself here in the position of the absolute Lawgiver, who has the right of entire and authoritative control over men's affections and hearts. And it is further obligatory because such an attitude is the only fitting expression of the mutual relation of Christian men, through their common relation to the Vine. If there be the one life-sap circling through all parts of the mighty whole, how anomalous and how contradictory it is that these parts should not be harmoniously concordant among themselves! However unlike any two Christian people are to each other in character, in culture, in circumstances, the bond that knits those who have the same relations to Jesus Christ one to another is far deeper, far more real, and ought to be far closer, than the bond that knits either of them to the men or women to whom they are likest in all these other respects, and to whom they are unlike in this central one. Christian men! you are closer to every other Christian man, down in the depths of your being, however he may be differenced from you by things that are very hard to get over, than you are to the people that you like best, and love most, if they do not participate with you in this common love to Jesus Christ.

I dread talking mere sentiment about this matter, for there is perhaps no part of Christian duty which has been so vulgarised and pawed over by mere unctuous talk, as that of the fellowship that should subsist between all Christians. But I have one plain question to put,--Does anybody believe that the present condition of Christendom, and the relations to one another even of good Christian people in the various churches and communions of our own and of other lands, is the sort of thing that Jesus Christ meant, or is anything like a fair and adequate representation of the deep, essential unity that knits us all together?

We need far more to realise the fact that our emotions towards our brother Christians are not matters in which our own inclinations may have their way, but that there is a simple commandment given to us, and that we are bound to cherish love to every man who loves Jesus Christ. Never mind though he does not hold your theology; never mind though he be very ignorant and narrow as compared with you; never mind though your outlook on the world may be entirely unlike his. Never mind though you be a rich man and he a poor one, or you a poor one and he rich, which is just as hard to get over. Let all these secondary grounds of union and of separation be relegated to their proper subordinate place; and let us recognise this, that the children of one Father are brethren. And do not let it be possible that it shall be said, as so often has been said, and said truly, that brethrenin the Church means a great deal less than brothers in the world. Lift your eyes beyond the walls of the little sheepfold in which you live, and hearken to the bleating of the flocks away out yonder, and feel--Other sheep He has which are not of this fold; and recognise the solemn obligation of the commandment of love.

**II. Note, secondly, the Sufficiency of love.**

Our Lord has been speaking in a former verse about the keeping of His commandments. Now He gathers them all up into one. This is my commandment, that ye love one anotherAll duties to our fellows, and all duties to our brethren, are summed up in, or resolved into, this one germinal, encyclopaediacal, all-comprehensive simplification of duty, into the one word love.

Where the heart is right the conduct will be right. Love will soften the tones, will instinctively teach what we ought to be and do; will take the bitterness out of opposition and diversity, will make even rebuke, when needful, only a form of expressing itself. If the heart be right all else will be right; and if there be a deficiency of love nothing will be right. You cannot help anybody except on condition of having an honest, beneficent, and benevolent regard towards him. You cannot do any man in the world any good unless there is a shoot of love in your heart towards him. You may pitch him benefits, and you will neither get nor deserve thanks for them; you may try to teach him, and your words will be hopeless and profitless. The one thing that is required to bind Christian men together is this common affection. That being there, everything will come. It is the germ out of which all is developed. As we read in that great chapter to the Corinthians--the lyric praise of Charity,--all kinds of blessing and sweetness and gladness come out of this, It is the central force which, being present, secures that all shall be right, which, being absent, ensures that all shall be wrong.

And is it not beautiful to see how Jesus Christ, leaving the little flock of His followers in the world, gave them no other instruction for their mutual relationship? He did not instruct them about institutions and organisations, about orders of the ministry and sacraments, or Church polity and the like. He knew that all these would come. His one commandment was, Love one another, and that will make you wise. Love one another, and you will shape yourselves into the right forms. He knew that they needed no exhortations such as ecclesiastics would have put in the foreground. It was not worth while to talk to them about organisations and officers. These would come to them at the right time and in the right way. The one thing needfulwas that they should be knit together as true participators of His life. Love was sufficient as their law and as their guide.

**III. Note, further, the Pattern of love.**

As I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Christ sets Himself forward then, here and in this aspect, as He does in all aspects of human conduct and character, as being the realised Ideal of them all. And although the thought is a digression from my present purpose, I cannot but pause for a moment to reflect upon the strangeness of a man thus calmly saying to the whole world, I am the embodiment of all that love ought to be. You cannot get beyond Me, nor have anything more pure, more deep, more self-sacrificing, more perfect, than the love which I have borne to you.

But passing that, the pattern that He proposes for us is even more august than appears at first sight. For, if you remember, a verse or two before our Lord had said, As the Father hath loved Me so I have loved you. Now He says, Love one another as I have loved you. There stand the three, as it were, the Father, the Son, the disciple. The Son in the midst receives and transmits the Father's love to the disciple, and the disciple is to love his fellows, in some deep and august sense, as the Father loved the Son. The divinest thing in God, and that in which men can be like God, is love. In all our other attitudes to Him we rather correspond than copy. His fullness is met by our emptiness, His giving by our recipiency, His faithfulness by our faith, His command by our obedience, His light by our eye. But here it is not a case of correspondence only, but of similarity. My faith answers God's gift to me, but my love is like God's love. Be ye, therefore, imitators of God as beloved children; and having received that love into your hearts, ray it out, and walk in love as God also hath loved us.

But then our Lord here, in a very wonderful manner, sets forth the very central point of His work, even His death upon the Cross for us, as being the pattern to which our poor affection ought to aspire, and after which it must tend to be conformed. I need not remind you, I suppose, that our Lord here is not speaking of the propitiatory character of His death, nor of the issues which depend upon it, and upon it alone, viz., the redemption and salvation of the world. He is not speaking, either, of the peculiar and unique sense in which He lays down His life for us, His friends and brethren, as none other can do. He is speaking about it simply in its aspect of being a voluntary surrender, at the bidding of love, for the good of those whom He loved, and that, He tells us--that, and nothing else--is the true pattern and model towards which all our love is bound to tend and to aspire. That is to say, the heart of the love which He commands is self-sacrifice, reaching to death if death be needful. And no man loves as Christ would have him love who does not bear in his heart affection which has so conquered selfishness that, if need be, he is ready to die.

The expression of Christian life is not to be found in honeyed words, or the indolent indulgence in benevolent emotion, but in self-sacrifice, modelled after that of Christ's sacrificial death, which is imitable by us.

Brethren, it is a solemn obligation, which may well make us tremble, that is laid on us in these words, As I have loved you. Calvary was less than twenty-four hours off, and He says to us, That is your pattern!Contrast our love at its height with His--a drop to an ocean, a poor little flickering rushlight held up beside the sun. My love, at its best, has so far conquered my selfishness that now and then I am ready to suffer a little inconvenience, to sacrifice a little leisure, to give away a little money, to spend a little dribble of sympathy upon the people who are its objects. Christ's love nailed Him to the Cross, and led Him down from the throne, and shut for a time the gates of the glory behind Him. And He says, That is your pattern!

Oh, let us bow down and confess how His word, which commands us, puts us to shame, when we think of how miserably we have obeyed.

Remember, too, that the restriction which here seems to be cast around the flow of His love is not a restriction in reality, but rather a deepening of it. He says, Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. But evidently He calls them so from His point of view, and as He sees them, not from their point of view, as they see Him--that is to say, He means by friendsnot those who love Him, but those whom He loves. The friendsfor whom He dies are the same persons as the Apostle, in his sweet variation upon the words of my text, has called by the opposite name, when He says that He died for His enemies.

There is an old, wild ballad that tells of how a knight found, coiling round a tree in a dismal forest, a loathly dragon breathing out poison; and how, undeterred by its hideousness and foulness, he cast his arms round it and kissed it on the mouth. Three times he did it undisgusted, and at the third the shape changed into a fair lady, and he won his bride. Christ kisses with the kisses of His mouthHis enemies, and makes them His friends because He loves them. If He had never died for His enemiessays one of the old fathers, He would never have possessed His friends. And so He teaches us here in what seems to be a restriction of the purpose of His death and the sweep of His love, that the way by which we are to meet even alienation and hostility is by pouring upon it the treasures of an unselfish, self-sacrificing affection which will conquer at the last.

Christ's death is the pattern for our lives as well as the hope of our hearts.

**IV. Lastly, we have here by implication, though not by direct statement, the Motive of the love.**

Surely that, too, is contained in the words, As I have loved you. Christ's commandment of love is a new commandment, not so much because it is a revelation of a new duty, though it is the casting of an old duty into new prominence, as because it is not merely a revelation of an obligation, but the communication of power to fulfil it. The novelty of Christian morality lies here, that in its law there is a self-fulfilling force. We have not to look to one place for the knowledge of our duty, and somewhere else for the strength to do it, but both are given to us in the one thing, the gift of the dying Christ and His immortal love.

That love, received into our hearts, will conquer, and it alone will conquer, our selfishness. That love, received into our hearts, will mould, and it alone will mould, them into its own likeness. That love, received into our hearts, will knit, and it alone will knit, all those who participate in it into a common bond, sweet, deep, sacred, and all-victorious.

And so, brethren, if we would know the blessedness and the sweetness of victory over these miserable, selfish hearts of ours, and to walk in the liberty of love, we can only get it by keeping close to Jesus Christ. In any circle, the nearer the points of the circumference are to the centre, the closer they will necessarily be to one another. As we draw nearer, each for himself, to our Centre, we shall feel that we have approximated to all those who stand round the same centre, and draw from it the same life. In the early spring, when the wheat is green and young, and scarcely appears above the ground, it comes up in the lines in which it was sown, parted from one another and distinctly showing their separation and the furrows. But when the full corn in the ear waves on the autumn plain, all the lines and separations have disappeared, and there is one unbroken tract of sunny fruitfulness. And so when the life in Christ is low and feeble, His servants may be separated and drawn up in rigid lines of denominations, and churches, and sects; but as they grow the lines disappear. If to the churches of England to-day there came a sudden accession of knowledge of Christ, and of union with Him, the first thing that would go would be the wretched barriers that separate us from one another. For if we have the life of Christ in any adequate measure in ourselves, we shall certainly have grown up above the fences behind which we began to grow, and shall be able to reach out to all that love the Lord Jesus Christ, and feel with thankfulness that we are one in Him.