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

**JOHN-082**. **CHRIST'S FRIENDS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My name, He may give it you. These things I command you, that ye love one another."*

*John 15:14-17*

A wonderful word has just dropped from the Master's lips, when He spoke of laying down His life for His friends. He lingers on it as if the idea conveyed was too great and sweet to be taken in at once, and with soothing reiteration He assures the little group that they, even they, are His friends.

I have ventured to take these four verses for consideration now, although each of them, and each clause of them, might afford ample material for a discourse, because they have one common theme. They are a description of what Christ's friends are to Him, of what He is to them, and of what they should be to one another. So they are a little picture, in the sweetest form, of the reality, the blessedness, the obligations, of friendship with Christ.

**I. Notice what Christ's friends do for Him.**

Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. In the former verse, friendsmeans chiefly those whom He loved. Here it means mainly those who love Him. They love Him because He loves them, of course; and the two sides of the one thought cannot be parted. But still in this verse the idea of friendship to Christ is looked at from the human side, and He tells His disciples that they are His lovers as well as beloved of Him, on condition of their doing whatsoever He commands them.

He lingers, as I said, on the idea itself. As if He would meet the doubts arising from the sense of unworthiness, and from some dim perception of how He towers above them, and their limitations, He reiterates, Wonderful as it is, you poor men, half-intelligent lovers of Mine, you are My friends, beloved of Me, and loving Me, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

How wonderful that stooping love of His is, which condescends to array itself in the garments of ours! Every form of human love Christ lays His hand upon, and claims that He Himself exercises it in a transcendent degree. He that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My brother and sister and mother. That which is even sacreder, the purest and most complete union that humanity is capable of--that, too, He consecrates; for even it, sacred as it is, is capable of a higher consecration, and, sweet as it is, receives a new sweetness when we think of the Bride, the Lamb's wife, and remember the parables in which He speaks of the Marriage Supper of the Great King, and sets forth Himself as the Husband of humanity. And passing from that Holy of Holies out into this outer court, He lays His hand, too, on that more common and familiar, and yet precious and sacred, thing--the bond of friendship. The Prince makes a friend of the beggar.

Even if we do not think more loftily of Jesus Christ than do those who regard Him simply as the perfection of humanity, is it not beautiful and wonderful that He should look with such eyes of beaming love on that handful of poor, ignorant fishermen, who knew Him so dimly, and say: I pass by all the wise and the mighty, all the lofty and noble, and My heart clings to you poor, insignificant people?He stoops to make them His friends, and there are none so low but that they may be His.

This friendship lasts to-day. A peculiarity of Christianity is the strong personal tie of real love and intimacy which will bind men, to the end of time, to this Man that died nineteen hundred years ago. We look back into the wastes of antiquity: mighty names rise there that we reverence; there are great teachers from whom we have learned, and to whom, after a fashion, we are grateful. But what a gulf there is between us and the best and noblest of them! But here is a dead Man, who to-day is the Object of passionate attachment and a love deeper than life to millions of people, and will be till the end of time. There is nothing in the whole history of the world in the least like that strange bond which ties you and me to the Saviour, and the paradox of the Apostle remains a unique fact in the experience of humanity: Jesus Christ, whom, having not seen, ye love. We stretch out our hands across the waste, silent centuries, and there, amidst the mists of oblivion, thickening round all other figures in the past, we touch the warm, throbbing heart of our Friend, who lives for ever, and for ever is near us. We here, nearly two millenniums after the words fell on the nightly air on the road to Gethsemane, have them coming direct to our hearts. A perpetual bond unites men with Christ to-day; and for us, as really as in that long-past Paschal night, is it true, Ye are My friends.

There are no limitations in that friendship, no misconstructions in that heart, no alienation possible, no change to be feared. There is absolute rest for us there. Why should I be solitary if Jesus Christ is my Friend? Why should I fear if He walks by my side? Why should anything be burdensome if He lays it upon me and helps me to bear it? What is there in life that cannot be faced and borne--aye, and conquered,--if we have Him, as we all may have Him, for the Friend and the Home of our hearts?

But notice the condition, If ye do what I command you. Note the singular blending of friendship and command, involving on our parts the cultivation of the two things which are not incompatible, absolute submission and closest friendship. He commands though He is Friend; though He commands He is Friend. The conditions that He lays down are the same which have already occupied our attention in former sermons of this series, and so may be touched very lightly. Ye are My friends if ye do the things which I command you, may either correspond with His former saying, If a Man love Me he will keep My commandments, or with His later one, which immediately precedes our text, If ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love. For this is the relationship between love and obedience, in regard to Jesus Christ, that the love is the parent of the obedience, and the obedience is the guard and guarantee of the love. They who love will obey, they who obey will strengthen love by acting according to its dictates, and will be in a condition to feel and realise more the warmth of the rays that stream down upon them, and to send back more fully answering obedience from their hearts. Not in mere emotion, not in mere verbal expression, not in mere selfish realising of the blessings of His friendship, and not in mere mechanical, external acts of conformity, but in the flowing down and melting of the hard and obstinate iron will, at the warmth of His great love, is our love made perfect. The obedience, which is the child and the preserver of love, is something far deeper than the mere outward conformity with externally apprehended commandments. To submit is the expression of love, and love is deepened by submission.

**II. Secondly, note what Christ does for His friends.**

Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth. The slave may see what his lord does, but he does not know his purpose in his acts--Theirs not to reason why. In so far as the relation of master and servant goes, and still more in that of owner and slave, there is simple command on the one side and unintelligent obedience on the other. The command needs no explanation, and if the servant is in his master's confidence he is more than a servant. But, says Christ, I have called you friends; and He had called them so before He now named them so. He had called them so in act, and He points to all His past relationship, and especially to the heart-outpourings of the Upper Room, as the proof that He had called them His friends, in the fact that whatsoever He had heard of the Father He had made known to them.

Jesus Christ, then, recognises the obligation of absolute frankness, and He will tell His friends everything that He can. When He tells them what He can, the voice of the Father speaks through the Son. Every one of Christ's friends stands nearer to God than did Moses at the door of the Tabernacle, when the wondering camp beheld him face to face with the blaze of the Shekinah glory, and dimly heard the thunderous utterances of God as He spake to him as a man speaks to his friend. That was surface-speech compared with the divine depth and fullness of the communications which Jesus Christ deems Himself bound, and assumes Himself able, to make to them who love Him and whom He loves.

Of course to Christ's frankness there are limits. He will not pour out His treasures into vessels that will spill them; and as He Himself says in the subsequent part of this great discourse, I have many things to say unto you, but you are not able to carry them now. His last word was, I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it. And though here He speaks as if His communication was perfect, we are to remember that it was necessarily conditioned by the power of reception on the part of the hearers, and that there was much yet to be revealed of what God had whispered to Him, ere these men, that clustered round Him, could understand the message.

That frank speech is continued to-day. Jesus Christ recognises the obligation that binds Him to impart to each of us all that each of us is in our inmost spirits capable of receiving. By the light which He sheds on the Word, by many a suggestion through human lips, by many a blessed thought rising quietly within our hearts, and bearing the token that it comes from a sacreder source than our poor, blundering minds, He still speaks to us, His friends.

Ought not that thought of the utter frankness of Jesus make us, for one thing, very patient, intellectually and spiritually, of the gaps that are left in His communications and in our knowledge? There are so many things that we sometimes think we should like to know, things about that dark future where some of our hearts live so constantly, things about the depths of His nature and the divine character, things about the relation between God's love and God's righteousness, things about the meaning of all this dreadful mystery in which we grope our way. These and a hundred other questionings suggest to us that it would have been so easy for Him to have lifted a little corner of the veil, and let a little more of the light shine out. He holds all in His hand. Why does He thus open one finger instead of the whole palm? Because He loves. A friend exercises the right of reticence as well as the prerogative of speech. And for all the gaps that are left, let us bow quietly and believe that if it had been better for us He would have spoken. If it were not so I would have told you. Trust Me! I tell you all that it is good for you to receive.

And that frankness may well teach us another lesson, viz., the obligation of keeping our ears open and our hearts prepared to receive the speech that does come from Him. Ah, brother! many a message from your Lord flits past you, like the idle wind through an archway, because you are not listening for His voice. If we kept down the noise of that household jar within; if we silenced passion, ambition, selfishness, worldliness; if we withdrew ourselves, as we ought to do, from the Babel of this world, and hid ourselves in His pavilion from the strife of tongues; if we took less of our religion out of books and from other people, and were more accustomed to dwell in the secret place of the Most High, and to say, Speak, Friend! for Thy friend heareth, we should more often understand how real to-day is the voice of Christ to them that love Him.

Such rebounds the inward ear

Catches often from afar;

Listen, prize them, hold them dear,

For of God--of God--they are.

**III. Thirdly, notice how Christ's friends come to be so, and why they are so. Ye have not chosen, etc. (verse 16).**

Our Lord refers here, no doubt, primarily to the little group of the Apostles; the choice and ordaining as well as the fruit that abides, point, in the first place, to their apostolic office, and to the results of their apostolic labours. But we must widen out the words a great deal beyond that reference.

In all the cases of friendship between Christ and men, the origination and initiation come from Him. We love Him because He first loved us. He has told us how, in His divine alchemy, He changes by the shedding of His blood our enmity into friendship. In the previous verse He has said, Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. And as I remarked in my last sermon, the friends here are the same as the enemiesfor whom, the Apostle tells us that Christ laid down His life. Since He has thus by the blood of the Cross changed men's enmity into friendship, it is true universally that the amity between us and Christ comes entirely from Him.

But there is more than that in the words. I do not suppose that any man, whatever his theological notions and standpoint may be, who has felt the love of Christ in his own heart in however feeble a measure, but will say, as the Apostle said, I was apprehended of Christ. It is because He lays His seeking and drawing hand upon us that we ever come to love Him, and it is true that His choice of us precedes our choice of Him, and that the Shepherd always comes to seek the sheep that is lost in the wilderness.

This, then, is how we come to be His friends; because, when we were enemies, He loved us, and gave Himself for us, and ever since has been sending out the ambassadors and the messengers of His love--or, rather, the rays and beams of it, which are parts of Himself--to draw us to His heart. And the purpose which all this forthgoing of Christ's initial and originating friendship has had in view, is set forth in words which I can only touch in the lightest possible manner. The intention is twofold. First, it respects service or fruit. That ye may go; there is deep pathos and meaning in that word. He had been telling them that He was going; now He says to them, You are to go. We part here. My road lies upward; yours runs onward. Go into all the world. He gives them a quasi-independent position; He declares the necessity of separation; He declares also the reality of union in the midst of the separation; He sends them out on their course with His benediction, as He does us. Wheresoever we go in obedience to His will, we carry the consciousness of His friendship.

That ye may bring forth fruit--He goes back for a moment to the sweet emblem with which this chapter begins, and recurs to the imagery of the vine and the fruit. Keeping His commandmentsdoes not explain the whole process by which we do the things that are pleasing in His sight. We must also take this other metaphor of the bearing of fruit. Neither an effortless, instinctive bringing forth from the renewed nature and the Christlike disposition, nor a painful and strenuous effort at obedience to His law, describe the whole realities of Christian service. There must be the effort, for men do not grow Christlike in character as the vine grows its grapes; but there must also be, regulated and disciplined by the effort, the inward life, for no mere outward obedience and tinkering at duties and commandments will produce the fruit that Christ desires and rejoices to have. First comes unity of life with Him; and then effort. Take care of modern teachings that do not recognise these two as both essential to the complete ideal of Christian service--the spontaneous fruit-bearing, and the strenuous effort after obedience.

That your fruit should remain; nothing corrupts faster than fruit. There is only one kind of fruit that is permanent, incorruptible. The only life's activity that outlasts life and the world is the activity of the men who obey Christ.

The other half of the issues of this friendship is the satisfying of our desires, That whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name He may give it you. We have already had substantially the same promise in previous parts of this discourse, and therefore I may deal with it very lightly. How comes it that it is certain that Christ's friends, living close to Him and bearing fruit, will get what they want? Because what they want will be in His name--that is to say, in accordance with His disposition and will. Make your desires Christ's, and Christ's yours, and you will be satisfied.

**IV. And now, lastly, for one moment, note the mutual friendship of Christ's friends.**

We have frequently had to consider that point--the relation of the friends of Christ to each other. These things I command you, that ye love one another. This whole context is, as it were, enclosed within a golden circlet by that commandment which appeared in a former verse, at the beginning of it, This is My commandment, that ye love one another, and reappears here at the close, thus shutting off this portion from the rest of the discourse. Friends of a friend should themselves be friends. We care for the lifeless things that a dear friend has cared for; books, articles of use of various sorts. If these have been of interest to him, they are treasures and precious evermore to us. And here are living men and women, in all diversities of character and circumstances, but with this stamped upon them all--Christ's friends, lovers of and loved by Him. And how can we be indifferent to those to whom Christ is not indifferent? We are knit together by that bond. We are but poor friends of that Master unless we feel that all which is dear to Him is dear to us. Let us feel the electric thrill which ought to pass through the whole linked circle, and let us beware that we slip not our hands from the grasp of the neighbour on either side, lest, parted from them, we should be isolated from Him, and lose some of the love which we fail to transmit.