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

**MATTHEW-070**. **THE FRIEND OF PUBLICANS AND SINNERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children."*

*Matthew 11:19*

Jesus very seldom took notice of His enemiesslanders. When He was reviled He reviled not again. If ever He did, it was for the sake of those whom it harmed to distort His beauty. Thus, here He speaks, without the slightest trace of irritation, of the capricious inconsistency of condemning Himself and John on precisely opposite grounds. John will not suit them because he neither eats nor drinks. Well, one would think that Jesus would be hailed since He does both. But He pleases them just as little. What was at the root of this contrary working dislike? It was the dislike for the truths they both preached, the rejection of the wisdom of which they were the messengers. When men do not like the message, nothing that the messengers do, or are, is right. Never mind consistency, but object to this form of Christian teaching that it is too harsh, and to that, that it is too soft; to this man that he is always thundering condemnation, to that, that he is always preaching mercy; to one, that he has too much to say about duty, to another, that he dwells too much on grace; to this presentation of the gospel, that it is too learned and doctrinal, to that, that it is too sentimental and emotional, and so on, and so on. The generation of children who neither like piping nor lamenting, lives still.

But my purpose now is not to dwell on the conduct with which our Lord is dealing, but on this caricature of Him which His own lips repeat without a sign of anger. It is the only calumny of antagonists reported by Himself. We owe our knowledge of its currency to this saying. Like other words of His enemies, this saying is a distorted refraction of His glory. The facts it embodies are facts; the conclusions it draws are false. If Jesus had not come eating and drinking, He could not have been called gluttonous and a wine-bibber. If He had not drawn publicans and sinners to Him in a conspicuous manner and degree, He could not have been called their friend. The charge, like all others, is a tribute. Let us try to see what was the blessed truth that it caricatured. We may take the two points separately, for though closely connected they are distinct, and cover different ground.

**I. His enemies witness to Christ's participation in common life.**

**(a)** That participation witnesses to His true manhood.

Significant use of Son of Manin context.

Because He is so, He must pass into all human circumstances.

Looked at in the light of incarnation, the simple fact that He shared our common lot in all things assumes proportions of majestic condescension.

Extend to all physical necessities, and to simple material pleasures.

What a witness this hostile criticism is to Christ's genial identification of Himself with homely feasters!

**(b)** It sets forth the highest type of manhood.

John could be ascetic, but the Pattern Man could not.

The true perfecting of humanity is not the extirpation, but the control, of the flesh by the spirit. And in accordance with this thought, we may see in the eating and drinking Christ, the pattern for the religious life. Asceticism is not the noblest form of sanctity. There is nothing more striking in Old Testament than the way in which its heroes and saints mingle in all ordinary duties. They are warriors, statesmen, shepherds, they buy, they sell. Asceticism came later, along with formalisms of other sorts. When devotion cools, it is crusted with superstition and external marks of godliness. Propriety in posturing in worship, casuistry in the interpretation of law, and abstinence from common enjoyments, came in Pharisaic times. And into such a world Jesus came, eating and drinking.

But His bearing in these matters is example for us. They were rigidly kept in subordination. They were all done in communion with God.

So He has hallowed all by taking part in them.

Christ should be present in all our material enjoyments. If you cannot think that He is with you, if you cannot conceive of His being there, that is no place for you. If you cannot feel that He approves, that is no fit enjoyment for you.

The tendency of this day is to take a wider view of the liberty allowed to Christians in regard to partaking in material enjoyment, and I dare say that many of you who have thought that I spoke well in insisting on all things belonging to the Christian, will think that I am dropping back into the old narrow groove in my next remark, that all such thoughts need guarding.

One has heard the example of Christ invoked to justify unchristian laxity and excess. Therefore I wish to say that the liberty permitted to Christians in these matters is to be limited within the limits within which Christ's was confined.

The excessive use of innocent things is not justified by His example, nor is the use of things innocent in themselves, which are mixed up with harmful things.

Christ's example does not warrant the importance attached to luxury, the waste on mere eating and drinking. It is sometimes quoted as against total abstinence. It has no bearing on the question. But if He gave up heaven for His brethren, I think that they who give up an indulgence for the sake of theirs are in the line of His action. I venture to think that if Jesus Christ lived in England to-day, He would be a total abstinence fanatic.

If thy hand offend thee, cut it off. Asceticism is not the highest, but it is sometimes necessary. If my indulgence in innocent things hurts me, or if my abstinence from them would help others, or increase my power for good, or if innocent things are intertwisted with things not innocent, then it is vain to try to shelter under Christ's example, and the only right course for His disciple is to abridge his liberty. He came eating and drinking, therefore His followers may use all innocent earthly blessings and bodily pleasures, subject to this one law: Whether ye eat or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God, and to this solemn warning: He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.

**II. His enemies witness to Jesus as the friend of the outcasts.**

The fact was that He drew them to Himself and evidently was glad to have them round Him. The inference natural to low natures was noscitur a sociis and that the bond between Him and them was common evil tendencies and ways. His censors could not conceive of any one's seeking the outcasts from pity and for their good.

**(a)** Christ's consorting with these was the revelation of His love to them.

* It meant no complicity with, nor minimising of, sinfulness.
* His sternness is as conspicuous as His love.
* He warned, rebuked, tried to win back.
* The highest purity is not repellent to sinners.
* So in Jesus is the combination of tenderest love and intense moral earnestness.

How difficult for anything but actual sight of such a life to have painted it! Where did the evangelists get such an embodiment of two attitudes so unlike each other, and which we so seldom see united in fact? I venture to think that the combination in perfect harmony and proportion of these, is a strong presumption in favour of the historical truth of the Christ of the gospels.

But remember that if we take His own statement (He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father), we are to see in this kindly consorting with sinners not only the love of a perfectly pure manhood, but a revelation of the heart of God. And that adds wonderfulness and awe to the fact. This man to whom sinners were drawn by strange attraction, in whom they found the highest purity and yet softest tenderness, therein revealed God.

**(b)** It witnesses to His boundless hope.

No outcasts were hopeless in His view. To man's eyes there are hopeless classes, but He sees deeper. Perhaps a spark lies hid. There are dormant possibilities in all souls.

* None are so hard as that they cannot be melted by the high temperature of love, just as there are no metals that cannot be volatilised if exposed to intense heat.
* Carry the most thick-ribbed ice into the sun and it will thaw.
* So the Christian view of mankind is much more hopeful than that of mere educationists or moralists.
* None of them paint human nature so black as it does, but none of them have such boundless confidence in the possibility of making it lustrously white.

Urge, then, that none are beyond the power of Christ's gospel. His divine Spirit can change any man. There are no incurables in the judgment of the great Physician.

**(c)** It witnesses to the truth that gross sin does not shut out from Him so much as does self-complacent ignorance of our own need.

They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. Where should the physician be but at the sick man's bedside?

The one impassable barrier between us and Christ is fancying that we are not sinners and do not need Him.

This boundless hopefulness and seeking after the outcasts is the unique glory of Christianity. What has been the mainspring of all movements for their elevation? What broke the chains of slavery? What has sent men to the ends of the earth for the elevation of savage races? What is the motive power in the benevolent works of this day? Is it philosophical altruism or is it Christian faith? No doubt, there are some sporadic movements among people who do not accept the gospel. At present, I do not ask how far these are due to the underground influence of Christianity filtering to men who stand apart from it. But I gravely doubt whether you will ever get any large, continuous, self-sacrificing efforts for the outcasts, unless they are the direct result of the spirit of Christ moving on men who owe their own deliverance to Him. We have not yet seen agnostic missionary societies or the like.

This spirit must mark all living Christianity. If ever churches forget their obligations to the publicans and sinners, they will cease to grow. It will be a sign that they have lost their hold of Christ. They will soon die, and no mourners will attend their funerals. It is a good sign to-day that all Christian churches are waking up to feel more their obligations to the outcasts. Only, we must take heed that we go to them as Christ did, making no compromise with sin, speaking no false flatteries, and bent on one thing, their emancipation from the evil which is slaying them.

Let us all take the blessed thought for ourselves, that Jesus Christ is our friend because He is the friend of sinners, and we are sinners. Degrees of sinfulness vary, but the fact is invariable. The universality of sinfulness makes the universality of Christ's love the more wonderful and blessed. If He did not love sinners, there would be none for Him to love. We may be His enemies, or may neglect all His beseechings; but He is still our friend, wishing us well, and desiring to bless us. But He cannot give us His deepest friendship unless we are willing to recognise our sin. We must come to Him on the footing of transgressors if we are to come to Him at all.

* He will deliver us from our sins.
* Appeal to give hearts to Him.
* How has He shown His friendship? Greater love hath no man than this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
* To be friends of Christ is the highest honour and blessing.
* Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you.

He was called the friend of God. Abraham's name in Mohammedan lands is still El Khalil, the companion or friend. That is our highest title. Christ's friends will not continue sinners.