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

**PHILIPPIANS-002**. **A COMPREHENSIVE PRAYER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"9. And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; 10. So that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ; 11. Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God."*

*Philippians 1:9-11 (R.V.)*

What a blessed friendship is that of which the natural language is prayer! We have many ways, thank God, of showing our love and of helping one another, but the best way is by praying for one another. All that is selfish and low is purged out of our hearts in the act, suspicions and doubts fade away when we pray for those whom we love. Many an alienation would have melted like morning mists if it had been prayed about, added tenderness and delicacy come to our friendships so like the bloom on ripening grapes. We may test our loves by this simple criterion--Can we pray about them? If not, should we have them? Are they blessings to us or to others?

This prayer, like all those in Paul's epistles, is wonderfully full. His deep affection for, and joy in, the Philippian church breathes in every word of it. Even his jealous watchfulness saw nothing in them to desire but progress in what they possessed. Such a desire is the highest that love can frame. We can wish nothing better for one another than growth in the love of God. Paul's estimate of the highest good of those who were dearest to him was that they should be more and more completely filled with the love of God and with its fruits of holiness and purity, and what was his supreme desire for the Philippians is the highest purpose of the gospel for us all, and should be the aim of our effort and longing, dominating all others as some sovereign mountain peak towers above the valleys. Looking then at this prayer as containing an outline of true progress in the Christian life, we may note:

**I. The growth in keenness of conscience founded on growth in love.**

Paul does not merely desire that their love may abound, but that it may become more and more rich in knowledge and all discernment. The former is perhaps accurate knowledge, and the latter the application of it. Discernment literally means sense, and here, of course, when employed about spiritual and moral things it means the power of apprehending good and bad as such. It is, I suppose, substantially equivalent to conscience, the moral tact or touch of the soul by which, in a manner analogous to bodily sense, it ascertains the moral character of things. This growth of love in the power of spiritual and moral discernment is desired in order to its exercise in proving things that differ. It is a process of discrimination and testing that is meant, which is, I think, fairly represented by the more modern expression which I have used--keenness of conscience.

I need spend little time in remarking on the absolute need of such a process of discrimination. We are surrounded by temptations to evil, and live in a world where maxims and principles not in accordance with the gospel abound. Our own natures are but partially sanctified. The shows of things must be tested. Apparent good must be proved. The Christian life is not merely to unfold itself in peace and order, but through conflict. We are not merely to follow impulses, or to live as angels do, who are above sin, or as animals do who are beneath it. When false coin is current it is folly to accept any without a test. All around us there is glamour, and so within us there is need for careful watchfulness and quick discrimination.

This keenness of conscience follows on the growth of love. Nothing makes a man more sensitive to evil than a hearty love to God. Such a heart is keener to discern what is contrary to its love than any ethical maxims can make it. A man who lives in love will be delivered from the blinding influence of his own evil tastes, and a heart steadfast in love will not be swayed by lower temptations. Communion with God will, from its very familiarity with Him, instinctively discern the evil of evil, as a man coming out of pure air is conscious of vitiated atmosphere which those who dwell in it do not perceive. It used to be said that Venice glass would shiver into fragments if poison were poured into the cup. As evil spirits were supposed to be cast out by the presence of an innocent child or a pure virgin, so the ugly shapes that sometimes tempt us by assuming fair disguises will be shown in their native hideousness when confronted with a heart filled with the love of God.

Such keenness of judgment is capable of indefinite increase. Our consciences should become more and more sensitive: we should always be advancing in our discovery of our own evils, and be more conscious of our sins, the fewer we have of them. Twilight in a chamber may reveal some foul things, and the growing light will disclose more. Secret faults will cease to be secret when our love abounds more and more in knowledge, and in all discernment.

**II. The purity and completeness of character flowing from this keenness of conscience.**

The Apostle desires that the knowledge which he asks for his Philippian friends may pass over into character, and he describes the sort of men which he desires them to be in two clauses, sincere and void of offence being the one, filled with the fruits of righteousness being the other. The former is perhaps predominantly negative, the latter positive. That which is sincere is so because when held up to the light it shows no flaws, and that which is without offence is so because the stones in the path have been cleared away by the power of discrimination, so that there is no stumbling. The life which discerns keenly will bring forth the fruit which consists of righteousness, and that fruit is to fill the whole nature so that no part shall be without it.

Nothing lower than this is the lofty standard towards which each Christian life is to aim, and to which it can indefinitely approximate. It is not enough to aim at the negative virtue of sincerity so that the most searching scrutiny of the web of our lives shall detect no flaws in the weaving, and no threads dropped or broken. There must also be the actual presence of positive righteousness filling life in all its parts. That lofty standard is pressed upon us by a solemn motive, unto the day of Christ. We are ever to keep before us the thought that in that coming day all our works will be made manifest, and that all of them should be done, so that when we have to give account of them we shall not be ashamed.

The Apostle takes it for granted here that if the Philippian Christians know what is right and what is wrong, they will immediately choose and do the right. Is he forgetting the great gulf between knowledge and practice? Not so, but he is strong in the faith that love needs only to know in order to do. The love which abounds more and more in knowledge and in all discernment will be the soul of obedience, and will delight in fulfilling the law which it has delighted in beholding. Other knowledge has no tendency to lead to practice, but this knowledge which is the fruit of love has for its fruit righteousness.

**III. The great Name in which this completeness is secured.**

The Apostle's prayer dwells not only on the way by which a Christian life may increase itself, but in its close reaches the yet deeper thought that all that growth comes through Jesus Christ. He is the Giver of it all, so that we are not so much called to a painful toil as to a glad reception. Our love fills us with the fruits of righteousness, because it takes all these from His hands. It is from His gift that conscience derives its sensitiveness. It is by His inspiration that conscience becomes strong enough to determine action, and that even our dull hearts are quickened into a glow of desiring to have in our lives, the law of the spirit of life, that was in Christ Jesus, and to make our own all that we see in Him of things that are lovely and of good report.

The prayer closes with a reference to the highest end of all our perfecting--the glory and praise of God; the former referring rather to the transcendent majesty of God in itself, and the latter to the exaltation of it by men. The highest glory of God comes from the gradual increase in redeemed men's likeness to Him. They are the secretaries of His praise, and some portion of that great honour and responsibility lies on each of us. If all Christian men were what they all might be and should be, swift and sure in their condemnation of evil and loyal fidelity to conscience, and if their lives were richly hung with ripened clusters of the fruits of righteousness, the glory of God would be more resplendent in the world, and new tongues would break into praise of Him who had made men so like Himself.