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

**PHILIPPIANS-010**. **COPIES OF JESUS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"14. Do all things without murmurings and disputings; 15. That ye may be blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world, 16. Holding forth the word of life."*

*Philippians 2:14-16 (R.V.)*

We are told by some superfine modern moralists, that to regard one's own salvation as the great work of our lives is a kind of selfishness, and no doubt there may be a colour of truth in the charge. At least the meaning of the injunction to work out our own salvation may have been sometimes so misunderstood, and there have been types of Christian character, such as the ascetic and monastic, which have made the representation plausible. I do not think that there is much danger of anybody so misunderstanding the precept now. But it is worthy of notice that there stand here side by side two paragraphs, in the former of which the effort to work out one's own salvation is urged in the strongest terms, and in the other of which the regard for others is predominant. We shall see that the connection between these two is not accidental, but that one great reason for working out our salvation is here set forth as being the good we may thereby do to others.

**I. We note the one great duty of cheerful yielding to God's will.**

It is clear, I think, that the precept to do all things without murmurings and disputings stands in the closest connection with what goes before. It is, in fact, the explanation of how salvation is to be wrought out. It presents the human side which corresponds to the divine activity, which has just been so earnestly insisted on. God works in us willing and doing, let us on our parts do with ready submission all the things which He so inspires to will and to do.

The murmurings are not against men but against God. The disputings are not wrangling with others but the division of mind in one's self-questionings, hesitations, and the like. So the one are more moral, the other more intellectual, and together they represent the ways in which Christian men may resist the action on their spirits of God's Spirit, willing, or the action of God's providence on their circumstances, doing. Have we never known what it was to have some course manifestly prescribed to us as right, from which we have shrunk with reluctance of will? If some course has all at once struck us as wrong which we had been long accustomed to do without hesitation, has there been no murmuring before we yielded? A voice has said to us, Give up such and such a habit, or such and such a pursuit is becoming too engrossing': do we not all know what it is not only to feel obedience an effort, but even to cherish reluctance, and to let it stifle the voice?

There are often disputings which do not get the length of murmurings. The old word which tried to weaken the plain imperative of the first command by the subtle suggestion, Yea, hath God said? still is whispered into our ears. We know what it is to answer God's commands with a But, Lord. A reluctant will is clever to drape itself with more or less honest excuses, and the only safety is in cheerful obedience and glad submission. The will of God ought not only to receive obedience, but prompt obedience, and such instantaneous and whole-souled submission is indispensable if we are to work out our own salvation, and to present an attitude of true, receptive correspondence to that of God, who works in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure. Our surrender of ourselves into the hands of God, in respect both to inward and outward things, should be complete. As has been profoundly said, that surrender consists in a continual forsaking and losing all self in the will of God, willing only what God from eternity has willed, forgetting what is past, giving up the time present to God, and leaving to His providence that which is to come, making ourselves content in the actual moment seeing it brings along with it the eternal order of God concerning us (Madame Guyon).

**II. The conscious aim in all our activity.**

What God works in us for is that for which we too are to yield ourselves to His working, without murmurings and disputings, and to co-operate with glad submission and cheerful obedience. We are to have as our distinct aim the building up of a character blameless and harmless, children of God without rebuke. The blamelessness is probably in reference to men's judgment rather than to God's, and the difficulty of coming untarnished from contact with the actions and criticisms of a crooked and perverse generation is emphasised by the very fact that such blamelessness is the first requirement for Christian conduct. It was a feather in Daniel's cap that the president and princes were foiled in their attempt to pick holes in his conduct, and had to confess that they would not find any occasion against him, except we find it concerning the laws of his God. God is working in us in order that our lives should be such that malice is dumb in their presence. Are we co-operating with Him? We are bound to satisfy the world's requirements of Christian character. They are sharp critics and sometimes unreasonable, but on the whole it would not be a bad rule for Christian people, Do what irreligious men expect you to do. The worst man knows more than the best man practises, and his conscience is quick to decide the course for other people. Our weaknesses and compromises, and love of the world, might receive a salutary rebuke if we would try to meet the expectations which the man in the street forms of us.

Harmless is more correctly pure, all of a piece, homogeneous and entire. It expresses what the Christian life should be in itself, whilst the former designation describes it more as it appears. The piece of cloth is to be so evenly and carefully woven that if held up against the light it will show no flaws nor knots. Many a professing Christian life has a veneer of godliness nailed thinly over a solid bulk of selfishness. There are many goods in the market finely dressed so as to hide that the warp is cotton and only the weft silk. No Christian man who has memory and self-knowledge can for a moment claim to have reached the height of his ideal; the best of us, at the best, are like Nebuchadnezzar's image, whose feet were iron and clay, but we ought to strain after it and to remember that a stain shows most on the whitest robe. What made David's sin glaring and memorable was its contradiction of his habitual nobler self. One spot more matters little on a robe already covered with many. The world is fully warranted in pointing gleefully or contemptuously at Christians inconsistencies, and we have no right to find fault with their most pointed sarcasms, or their severest judgments. It is those that bear the vessels of the Lord whose burden imposes on them the duty be ye clean, and makes any uncleanness more foul in them than in any other.

The Apostle sets forth the place and function of Christians in the world, by bringing together in the sharpest contrast the children of God and a crooked and perverse generation. He is thinking of the old description in Deuteronomy, where the ancient Israel is charged with forgetting Thy Father that hath bought thee, and as showing by their corruption that they are a perverse and crooked generation. The ancient Israel had been the Son of God, and yet had corrupted itself; the Christian Israel are sons of God set among a world all deformed, twisted, perverted. Perverse is a stronger word than crooked, which latter may be a metaphor for moral obliquity, like our own right and wrong, or perhaps points to personal deformity. Be that as it may, the position which the Apostle takes is plain enough. He regards the two classes as broadly separated in antagonism in the very roots of their being. Because the sons of God are set in the midst of that crooked and perverse generation constant watchfulness is needed lest they should conform, constant resort to their Father lest they should lose the sense of sonship, and constant effort that they may witness of Him.

**III. The solemn reason for this aim.**

That is drawn from a consideration of the office and function of Christian men. Their position in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation devolves on them a duty in relation to that generation. They are to appear as lights in the world. The relation between them and it is not merely one of contrast, but on their parts one of witness and example. The metaphor of light needs no explanation. We need only note that the word, are seen or appear, is indicative, a statement of fact, not imperative, a command. As the stars lighten the darkness with their myriad lucid points, so in the divine ideal Christian men are to be as twinkling lights in the abyss of darkness. Their light rays forth without effort, being an involuntary efflux. Possibly the old paradox of the Psalmist was in the Apostle's mind, which speaks of the eloquent silence, in which there is no speech nor language, and their voice is not heard, but yet their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words unto the end of the world.

Christian men appear as lights by holding forth the word of life. In themselves they have no brightness but that which comes from raying out the light that is in them. The word of life must live, giving life in us, if we are ever to be seen as lights in the world. As surely as the electric light dies out of a lamp when the current is switched off, so surely shall we be light only when we are in the Lord. There are many so-called Christians in this day who stand tragically unaware that their lamps are gone out. When the sun rises and smites the mountain tops they burn, when its light falls on Memnon's stony lips they breathe out music, Arise, shine, for thy light has come.

Undoubtedly one way of holding forth the word of life must be to speak the word, but silent living blameless and harmless and leaving the secret of the life very much to tell itself is perhaps the best way for most Christian people to bear witness. Such a witness is constant, diffused wherever the witness-bearer is seen, and free from the difficulties that beset speech, and especially from the assumption of superiority which often gives offence. It was the sight of your good deeds to which Jesus pointed as the strongest reason for men's glorifying your Father. If we lived such lives there would be less need for preachers. If any will not hear the word they may without the word be won. And reasonably so, for Christianity is a life and cannot be all told in words, and the Gospel is the proclamation of freedom from sin, and is best preached and proved by showing that we are free. The Gospel was lived as well as spoken. Christ's life was Christ's mightiest preaching.

The word was flesh and wrought With human hands the creed of creeds.

If we keep near to Him we too shall witness, and if our faces shine like Moses as he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen's in the council chamber, men will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.