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

**PHILIPPIANS-021**. **THE RULE OF THE ROAD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule."*

*Philippians 3:16*

Paul has just been laying down a great principle--viz. that if the main direction of a life be right, God will reveal to a man the points in which he is wrong. But that principle is untrue and dangerous, unless carefully guarded. It may lead to a lazy tolerance of evil, and to drawing such inferences as, Well! it does not much matter about strenuous effort, if we are right at bottom it will all come right by-and-by, and so it may become a pillow for indolence and a clog on effort. This possible abuse of a great truth seems to strike the Apostle, and so he enters here, with this Nevertheless, a caveat against that twist of his meaning. It is as if he said, Now mind! while all that is perfectly true, it is true on conditions; and if they be not attended to, it is not true. God will reveal to a man the things in which he is wrong if, and only if, he steadfastly continues in the course which he knows and sees to be right. Present attainments, then, are in some sense a standard of duty, and if we honestly and conscientiously observe that standard we shall get light as we journey. In this exhortation of the Apostle's there are many exhortations wrapped up; and in trying to draw them out I venture to adhere to the form of exhortation for the sake of impressiveness and point.

**I. First, then, I would say the Apostle means, Live up to your faith and your convictions.**

It may be a question whether that to which we have already attained means the amount of knowledge which we have won or the amount of practical righteousness which we have made our own. But I think that, instead of sharply dividing between these two, we shall follow more in the course of the Apostle's thought if we unite them together, and remember that the Bible does not make the distinct separation which we sometimes incline to make between knowledge on the one side and practice on the other, but regards the man as a living unity. And thus, both aspects of our attainments come into consideration here.

So, then, there are two main thoughts--first, live out your creed, and second, live up to your convictions.

Live out your creed. Men are meant to live, not by impulse, by accident, by inclination, but by principle. We are not intended to live by rule, but we are intended to live by law. And unless we know why we do as well as what we do, and give a rational account of our conduct, we fall beneath the height on which God intends us to walk. Impulse is all very well, but impulse is blind and needs a guide. The imitation of those around us, or the acceptance of the apparent necessities of circumstances, are, to some extent, inevitable and right. But to be driven merely by the force of externals is to surrender the highest prerogative of manhood. The highest part of human nature is the reason guided by conscience, and a man's conscience is only then rightly illuminated when it is illuminated by his creed, which is founded on the acceptance of the revelation that God has made of Himself.

And whilst we are clearly meant to be guided by the intelligent appropriation of God's truth, that truth is evidently all meant for guidance. We are not told anything in the Bible in order that we may know as an ultimate object, but we are told it all in order that, knowing, we may be, and, being, we may do, according to His will.

Just think of the intensely practical tendency of all the greatest truths of Christianity. The Cross is the law of life. The revelation that was made there was made, not merely that we might cling to it as a refuge from our sins, but that we might accept it as the rule of our conduct. All our duties to mankind are summed up in the word Love one another as I have loved you. We say that we believe in the divinity of Christ; we say that we believe in the great incarnation and sacrificial death and eternal priesthood of the loving Son of God. We say that we believe in a judgment to come and a future life. Well, then, do these truths produce any effect upon my life? have they shaped me in any measure into conformity with their great principles? Does there issue from them constraining power which grasps me and moulds me as a sculptor would a bit of clay in his hands? Am I subject to the Gospel's authority, and is the word in which God has revealed Himself to me the word which dominates and impels all my life? Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.

But we shall not do that without a distinct effort. For it is a great deal easier to live from hand to mouth than to live by principle. It is a great deal easier to accept what seems forced upon us by circumstances than to exercise control over the circumstances, and make them bend to God's holy will. It is a great deal easier to take counsel of inclination, and to put the reins in the hands of impulses, passions, desires, tastes, or even habits, than it is, at each fresh moment, to seek for fresh impulses from a fresh illumination from the ancient and yet ever fresh truth. The old kings of France used to be kept with all royal state in the palace, but they were not allowed to do anything. And there was a rough, unworshipped man that stood by their side, and who was the real ruler of the realm. That is what a great many professing Christians do with their creeds. They instal them in some inner chamber that they very seldom visit, and leave them there, in dignified idleness, and the real working ruler of their lives is found elsewhere. Let us see to it, brethren, that all our thoughts are incarnated in our deeds, and that all our deeds are brought into immediate connection with the great principles of God's word. Live by that law, and we live at liberty.

And, then, remember that this translating of creed into conduct is the only condition of growing illumination. When we act upon a belief, the belief grows. That is the source of a great deal of stupid obstinacy in this world, because men have been so long accustomed to go upon certain principles that it seems incredible to them but that these principles should be true. But that, too, is at the bottom of a great deal of intelligent and noble firmness of adherence to the true. A man who has tested a principle because he has lived upon it has confidence in it that nobody else can have.

Projectors may have beautiful specifications with attractive pictures of their new inventions; they look very well upon paper, but we must see them working before we are sure of their worth. And so, here is this great body of Divine truth, which assumes to be sufficient for guidance, for conduct, for comfort, for life. Live upon it, and thereby your grasp of it and your confidence in it will be immensely increased. And no man has a right to say I have rejected Christianity as untrue, unless he has put it to the test by living upon it; and if he has, he will never say it. A Swiss traveller goes into a shop and buys a brand-new alpenstock. Does he lean upon it with as much confidence as another man does, who has one with the names of all the mountains that it has helped him up branded on it from top to bottom? Take this staff and lean on it. Live your creed, and you will believe your creed as you never will until you do. Obedience takes a man up to an elevation from which he sees further into the deep harmonies of truth. In all regions of life the principle holds good: To him that hath shall be given. And it holds eminently in reference to our grasp of Christian principles. Use them and they grow; neglect them and they perish. Sometimes a man dies in a workhouse who has a store of guineas and notes wrapped up in rags somewhere about him; and so they have been of no use to him. If you want your capital to increase, trade with it. As the Lord said when He gave the servants their talents: Trade with them till I come. The creed that is utilised is the creed that grows. And that is why so many of you Christian people have so little real intellectual grasp of the principles of Christianity, because you have not lived upon them, nor tried to do it.

And, in like manner, another side of this thought is, be true to your convictions. There is no such barrier to a larger and wholesomer view of our duty as the neglect of anything that plainly is our duty. It stands there, an impassable cliff between us and all progress. Let us live and be what we know we ought to be, and we shall know better what we ought to be at the next moment.

**II. Secondly, let me put the Apostle's meaning in another exhortation, Go on as you have begun.**

Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk. The various points to which the men have reached are all points in one straight line; and the injunction of my text is Keep the road. There are a great many temptations to stray from it. There are nice smooth grassy bits by the side of it where it is a great deal easier walking. There are attractive things just a footstep or two out of the path--such a little deviation that it can easily be recovered. And so, like children gathering daisies in the field, we stray away from the path; and, like men on a moor, we then look round for it, and it is gone. The angle of divergence may be the acutest possible; the deviation when we begin may be scarcely visible, but if you draw a line at the sharpest angle and the least deviation from a straight line, and carry it out far enough, there will be space between it and the line from which it started ample to hold a universe. Then, let us take care of small deviations from the plain straight path, and give no heed to the seductions that lie on either side, but whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.

There are temptations, too, to slacken our speed. The river runs far more slowly in its latter course than when it came babbling and leaping down the hillside. And sometimes a Christian life seems as if it crept rather than ran, like those sluggish streams in the Fen country, which move so slowly that you cannot tell which way the water is flowing. Are not there all round us, are there not amongst ourselves instances of checked growth, of arrested development? There are people listening to me now, calling themselves--and I do not say that they have not a right to do so--Christians, who have not grown a bit for years, but stand at the very same point of attainment, both in knowledge and in purity and Christlikeness, as they were many, many days ago. I beseech you, listen to this exhortation of my text, Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk, and continue patient and persistent in the course that is set before us.

**III. The Apostle's injunction may be cast into this form, Be yourselves.**

The representation which underlies my text, and precedes it in the context, is that of the Christian community as a great body of travellers all upon one road, all with their faces turned in one direction, but at very different points on the path. The difference of position necessarily involves a difference in outlook. They see their duties, and they see the Word of God, in some respects diversely. And the Apostle's exhortation is: Let each man follow his own insight, and whereunto he has attained, by that, and not by his brother's attainment, by that let him walk. From the very fact of the diversity of advancement there follows the plain duty for each of us to use our own eyesight, and of independent faithfulness to our own measure of light, as the guide which we are bound to follow.

There is a dreadful want, in the ordinary Christian life, of any appearance of first-hand communication with Jesus Christ, and daring to be myself, and to act on the insight into His will which Christ has given me.

Conventional Godliness, Christian people cut after one pattern, a little narrow round of certain statutory duties and obligations, a parrot-like repetition of certain words, a mechanical copying of certain methods of life, an oppressive sameness, mark so much of modern religion. What a freshening up there would come into all Christian communities if every man lived by his own perception of truth and duty! If a musician in an orchestra is listening to his neighbour's note and time, he will lose many an indication from the conductor that would have kept him far more right, if he had attended to it. And if, instead of taking our beliefs and our conduct from one another, or from the average of Christian men round us, we went straight to Jesus Christ and said to Him, What wouldst Thou have me to do? there would be a different aspect over Christendom from what there is to-day. The fact of individual responsibility, according to the measure of our individual light, and faithful following of that, wheresoever it may lead us, are the grand and stirring principles that come from these words. Whereunto we have already attained, by that--and by no other man's attainment or rule--let us walk.

But do not let us forget that that same faithful independence and independent faithfulness because Christ speaks to us, and we will not let any other voice blend with His, are quite consistent with, and, indeed, demand, the frank recognition of our brother's equal right. If we more often thought of all the great body of Christian people as an army, united in its diversity, its line of march stretching for leagues, and some in the van, and some in the main body, and some in the rear, but all one, we should be more tolerant of divergences, more charitable in our judgment of the laggards, more patient in waiting for them to come up with us, and more wise and considerate in moderating our pace sometimes to meet theirs. All who love Jesus Christ are on the same road and bound for the same home. Let us be contented that they shall be at different stages on the path, seeing that we know that they will all reach the Temple above.

**IV. Lastly, cherish the consciousness of imperfection and the confidence of success.**

Whereunto we have attained implies that that is only a partial possession of a far greater whole. The road is not finished at the stage where we stand. And, on the other hand, by the same let us walk, implies that beyond the present point the road runs on equally patent and pervious to our feet. These two convictions, of my own imperfection and of the certainty of my reaching the great perfectness beyond, are indispensable to all Christian progress. As soon as a man begins to think that he has realised his ideal, Good-bye! to all advance. The artist, the student, the man of business, all must have gleaming before them an unattained object, if they are ever to be stirred to energy and to run with patience the race that is set before them.

The more distinctly that a man is conscious of his own imperfection in the Christian life, the more he will be stung and stirred into earnestness and energy of effort, if only, side by side with the consciousness of imperfection, there springs triumphant the confidence of success. That will give strength to the feeble knees; that will lift a man buoyant over difficulties; that will fire desire; that will stimulate and solidify effort; that will make the long, monotonous stretches of the road easy, the rough places plain, the crooked things straight. Over all reluctant, repellent duties it will bear us, in all weariness it will re-invigorate us. We are saved by hope, and the more brightly there burns before us, not as a tremulous hope, but as a future certainty, the thought, I shall be like Him, for I shall see Him as He is, the more shall I set my face to the loved goal and my feet to the dusty road, and press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God. Christian progress comes out of the clash and collision of these two things, like that of flint and steel--the consciousness of imperfection and the confidence of success. And they who thus are driven by the one and drawn by the other, in all their consciousness of failure are yet blessed, and are crowned at last with that which they believed before it came.

Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house--the prize won is heaven. But blessed are they in whose hearts are the ways--the prize desired and strained after is heaven upon earth. We may all live a life of continual advancement, each step leading upwards, for the road always climbs, to purer air, grander scenery, and a wider view. And yonder, progress will still be the law, for they who here have followed the Lamb, and sought to make Him their pattern and Commander, will there follow Him whithersoever He goeth. If here we walk according to that whereunto we have attained, there He shall say, They will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.