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

**PHILIPPIANS-030**. **GIFTS GIVEN, SEED SOWN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And ye yourselves also know, ye Philippians, that in the beginning of the Gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving, but ye only; for even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my need. Not that I seek for the gift; but I seek for the fruit that increaseth to your account. But I have all things, and abound: I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the things that came from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God. And my God shall fulfil every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."*

*Philippians 4:15-19 (R.V.)*

Paul loved the Philippians too well and was too sure of their love to be conscious of any embarrassment in expressing his thanks for money help. His thanks are profuse and long drawn out. Our present text still strikes the note of grateful acknowledgment. It gives us a little glimpse into earlier instances of their liberality, and beautifully suggests that as they had done to him so God would do to them, and that their liberality was in a fashion a prophecy, because it was in some measure an imitation, of God's liberality. He had just said I am full, having received the things which were sent from you, and now he says, My God shall fill full all your needs. The use of the same word in these two connections is a piece of what one would call the very ingenuity of graceful courtesy, if it were not something far deeper, even the utterance of a loving and self-forgetting heart.

**I. We may note here Paul's money relations with the churches.**

We know that he habitually lived by his own labour. He could call to witness the assembled elders at Ephesus, when he declared that these hands ministered unto my necessities, and could propose himself as an illustration of the words of the Lord Jesus, It is more blessed to give than to receive. He firmly holds the right of Christian teachers to be supported by the churches, and vehemently insists upon it in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. But he waives the right in his own case, and passionately insists that it were better for him rather to die than that any man should make his glorying void. He will not use to the full his right in the Gospel that he may make a Gospel without charge, but when needed he gladly accepted money gifts, as he did from the Philippians. In our text he points back to an earlier instance of this. The history of that instance we may briefly recall. After his indignities and imprisonment in Philippi he went straight to Thessalonica, stayed there a short time till a riot drove him to take refuge in Berea, whence again he had to flee, and guided by brethren reached Athens. There he was left alone, and his guides went back to Macedonia to send on Silas and Timothy. From Athens he went to Corinth, and there was rejoined by them. According to our text, in the beginning of the Gospel, that is, of course, its beginning in Philippi, they relieved him twice in Thessalonica, and if the words in our text which date the Philippians gift may be read when I had departed from Macedonia, we should have here another reference to the same incident mentioned in 2 Corinthians, chap. 11:8-9, where he speaks of being in want there, and having the measure of my want supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia. The coincidence of these two incidental references hid away, as it were, confirms the historical truthfulness of both Epistles. And if we take into view the circumstances in which he was placed in Thessalonica and at the beginning of his stay in Corinth, his needing and receiving such aid is amply accounted for. Once again, after a long interval, when he was a prisoner in Rome, and probably unable to work for his maintenance, their care of him flourished again.

In the present circumstances of our churches, it seems necessary that the right which Paul so strongly asserted should, for the most part, not be waived, but the only true way of giving and receiving as between minister and people is when it is a matter not of payment but a gift. When it is an expression of sympathy and affection on both sides, the relationship is pleasant and may be blessed. When it comes to be a business transaction, and is to be measured by the rules applicable to such, it goes far to destroy some of the sweetest bonds, and to endanger a preacher's best influence.

**II. The lofty view here taken of such service.**

It is the fruit that increaseth to your account. Fruit, which as it were is put to their credit in the account-book of heaven, but it is called by Paul by a sacreder name as being an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God, in which metaphor all the sacred ideas of yielding up precious things to God and of the sacred fire that consumed the offering or brought to bear on the prosaic material gift.

The principle which the Apostle here lays down in reference to a money gift has, of course, a much wider application, and is as true about all Christian acts. We need not be staggered at the emphasis with which Paul states the truths of their acceptableness and rewardableness, but in order fully to understand the ground of his assurance we must remember that in his view the root of all such fruit increasing to our account, and of everything which can claim to be an odour of a sweet smell well pleasing to God, is love to Christ, and the renewal of our nature by the spirit of God dwelling in us. In us there dwells no good thing. It is only as we abide in Him and His words abide in us that we bear much fruit. Separate from Him we can do nothing. If our works are ever to smell sweet to God, they must be done for Christ, and in a very profound and real sense, done by Him.

The essential character of all work which has the right to be called good, and which is acceptable to God, is sacrifice. The one exhortation which takes the place and more than fills the place of all other commandments, and is enforced by the motive which takes the place, and more than takes the place of all other motives, is, I beseech you by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice. It is works which in the intention of the doer are offered to Him, and in which therefore there is a surrender of our own wills, or tastes, or inclinations, or passions, or possessions, that yield to Him an odour of a sweet smell. The old condition which touched the chivalrous heart of David has to be repeated by us in regard to any work which we can ever hope to make well pleasing to God; I will not offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God which cost me nothing.

There is a spurious humility which treats all the works of good men as filthy rags, but such a false depreciation is contradicted by Christ's Well done, good and faithful servant. It is true that all our deeds are stained and imperfect, but if they are offered on the altar which He provides, it will sanctify the giver and the gift. He is the great Aaron who makes atonement for the iniquity of our holy things. And whilst we are stricken silent with thankfulness for the wonderful mercy of His gracious allowance, we may humbly hope that His Well done will be spoken of us, and may labour, not without a foretaste that we do not labour in vain, that whether present or absent we may be well pleasing to Him.

The fruit is here supposed to be growing, that is, of course, in another life. We need not insist that the service and sacrifice and work of earth, if the motive be right, tell in a man's condition after death. It is not all the same how Christian men live; some gain ten talents, some five, and some two, and the difference between them is not always as the parable represents it, a difference in the original endowment. An entrance may be given into the eternal kingdom, and yet it may not be an abundant entrance.

**III. The gift that supplies the givers.**

Paul has nothing to bestow, but he serves a great God who will see to it that no man is the poorer by helping His servants. The king's honour is concerned in not letting a poor man suffer by lodging and feeding his retainers. The words here suggest to us the source from which our need may be filled full, as an empty vessel might be charged to the brim with some precious liquid, the measure or limit of the fulness, and the channel by which we receive it.

Paul was so sure that the Philippians needs would all be satisfied, because he knew that his own had been; he is generalising from his own case, and that, I think, is at all events part of the reason why he says with much emphasis, My God. As He has done to me He will do to you, but even without the my, the great name contains in itself a promise and its seal. God will supply just because He is God; that is what His name means--infinite fulness and infinite self-communicativeness and delight in giving. But is not so absolutely unlimited a promise as this convicted of complete unreality when contrasted with the facts of any life, even of the most truly Christian or the most outwardly happy? Its contradiction of the grim facts of experience is not to be slurred over by restricting it to religious needs only. The promise needs the eye of Faith to interpret the facts of experience, and to let nothing darken the clear vision that if any seeming need is left by God unfilled, it is not an indispensable need. If we do not get what we want we may be quite sure that we do not need it. The axiom of Christian faith is that whatever we do not obtain we do not require. Very desirable things may still not be necessary. Let us limit our notions of necessity by the facts of God's giving, and then we, too, shall have learned, in whatsoever state we are, therein to be content. When the Apostle says that God shall fill all our need full up to the brim, was he contemplating only such necessities as God could supply through outward gifts? Surely not. God Himself is the filler and the only filler of a human heart, and it is by this impartation of Himself and by nothing else that He bestows upon us the supply of our needs.

Unless we have been initiated into this deepest and yet simplest secret of life, it will be full of gnawing pain and unfulfilled longings. Unless we have learned that our needs are like the cracks in the parched ground, cups to hold the rain from heaven, doors by which God Himself can come to us, we shall dwell for ever in a dry and thirsty land. God Himself is the only satisfier of the soul. Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that--if I am not a fool--I desire side by side with Thee?'

But Paul here sets forth in very bold words the measure or limits of the divine supply of our need. It is according to His riches in glory. Then, all of God belongs to me, and the whole wealth of His aggregated perfections is available for stopping the crannies of my heart and filling its emptiness. My emptiness corresponds with His fulness as some concavity does with the convexity that fits into it, and the whole that He is waits to fill and to satisfy me. There is no limit really to what a man may have of God except the limitless limit of the infinite divine nature, but on the other hand this great promise is not fulfilled all at once, and whilst the actual limit is the boundlessness of God, there is a working limit, so to speak, a variable one, but a very real one. The whole riches of God's glory are available for us, but only so much of the boundless store as we desire and are at present capable of taking in will belong to us now. What is the use of owning half a continent if the owner lives on an acre of it and grows what he wants there, and has never seen the broad lands that yet belong to him? Nothing hinders a man from indefinitely increased possession of a growing measure of God, except his own arbitrarily narrowed measure of desire and capacity. Therefore it becomes a solemn question for each of us, Am I day by day becoming more and more fit to possess more of God, and enjoy more of the God whom I possess? In Him we have each a potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. Do we growingly realise that boundless possibility?

The channel by which that boundless supply is to reach us is distinctly set forth here. All these riches are stored up in Christ Jesus. A deep lake may be hidden away in the bosom of the hills that would pour blessing and fertility over a barren land if it could find a channel down into the plains, but unless there be a river flowing out of it, its land-locked waters might as well be dried up. When Paul says riches in glory, he puts them up high above our reach, but when he adds in Christ Jesus, he brings them all down amongst us. In Him is infinite riches in a narrow room. If we are in Him then we are beside our treasure, and have only to put out our hands and take the wealth that is lying there. All that we need is in Christ, and if we are in Christ it is all close at our sides.

Then the question comes to be, Am I thus near my wealth, and can I get at it whenever I want it, as I want it, and as much as I want of it? We can if we will. The path is easy to define, though our slothfulness find it hard to tread. That man is in Christ who dwells with Him by faith, whose heart is by love plunged in His love, who daily seeks to hold communion with Him amid the distractions of life, and who in practical submission obeys His will. If thus we trust, if thus we love, if thus we hold fast to Him, and if thus we link Him with all our activities in the world, need will cease to grow, and will only be an occasion for God's gift. Delight thyself in the Lord, and then the heart's desires being set upon Him, He will give thee the desire of thy heart.

Paul says to us My God shall supply all your need. Let us answer, The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.