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

**ROMANS-002**. **PRIVILEGE AND OBLIGATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints."*

*Romans 1:7*

This is the address of the Epistle. The first thing to be noticed about it, by way of introduction, is the universality of this designation of Christians. Paul had never been in Rome, and knew very little about the religious stature of the converts there. But he has no hesitation in declaring that they are all beloved of God and saints. There were plenty of imperfect Christians amongst them; many things to rebuke; much deadness, coldness, inconsistency, and yet none of these in the slightest degree interfered with the application of these great designations to them. So, then, beloved of God and saints are not distinctions of classes within the pale of Christianity, but belong to the whole community, and to each member of the body.

The next thing to note, I think, is how these two great terms, beloved of God and saints, cover almost the whole ground of the Christian life. They are connected with each other very closely, as I shall have occasion to show presently, but in the meantime it may be sufficient to mark how the one carries us deep into the heart of God and the other extends over the whole ground of our relation to Him. The one is a statement of a universal prerogative, the other an enforcement of a universal obligation. Let us look, then, at these two points, the universal privilege and the universal obligation of the Christian life.

**I. The universal privilege of the Christian life.**

Beloved of God. Now we are so familiar with the juxtaposition of the two ideas, love and God, that we cease to feel the wonderfulness of their union. But until Jesus Christ had done His work no man believed that the two thoughts could be brought together.

Does God love any one? We think the question too plain to need to be put, and the answer instinctive. But it is not by any means instinctive, and the fact is that until Christ answered it for us, the world stood dumb before the question that its own heart raised, and when tortured spirits asked, Is there care in heaven, and is there love? there was no voice, nor answer, nor any that regarded. Think of the facts of life; think of the facts of nature. Think of sorrows and miseries and pains, and sins, and wasted lives and storms, and tempests, and diseases, and convulsions; and let us feel how true the grim saying is, that

Nature, red in tooth and claw,

With rapine, shrieks against the creed

that God is love.

And think of what the world has worshipped, and of all the varieties of monstrosity, not the less monstrous because sometimes beautiful, before which men have bowed. Cruel, lustful, rapacious, capricious, selfish, indifferent deities they have adored. And then, God hath established, proved, demonstrated His love to us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Oh, brethren, do not let us kick down the ladder by which we have climbed; or, in the name of a loving God, put away the Christian teaching which has begotten the conception in humanity of a God that loves. There are men to-day who would never have come within sight of that sunlight truth, even as a glimmering star, away down upon the horizon, if it had not been for the Gospel; and who now turn round upon that very Gospel which has given them the conception, and accuse it of narrow and hard thoughts of the love of God.

One of the Scripture truths against which the assailant often turns his sharpest weapons is that which is involved in my text, the Scripture answer to the other question, Does not God love all? Yes! yes! a thousand times, yes! But there is another question, Does the love of God, to all, make His special designation of Christian men as His beloved the least unlikely? Surely there is no kind of contradiction between the broadest proclamation of the universality of the love of God and Paul's decisive declaration that, in a very deep and real manner, they who are in Christ are the beloved of God. Surely special affection is not in its nature, inconsistent with universal beneficence and benevolence. Surely it is no exaltation, but rather a degradation of the conception of the divine love, if we proclaim its utter indifference to men's characters. Surely you are not honouring God when you say, It is all the same to Him whether a man loves Him and serves Him, or lifts himself up in rebellion against Him, and makes himself his own centre, and earth his aim and his all. Surely to imagine a God who not only makes His sun to shine and His rains and dews to fall on the unthankful and the evil, that He may draw them to love Him, but who also is conceived as taking the sinful creature who yet cleaves to his sins to His heart, as He does the penitent soul that longs for His image to be produced in it, is to blaspheme, and not to honour the love, the universal love of God.

God forbid that any words that ever drop from my lips should seem to cast the smallest shadow of doubt on that great truth, God so loved the world that He gave His Son! But God forbid, equally, that any words of mine should seem to favour the, to me, repellent idea that the infinite love of God disregards the character of the man on whom it falls. There are manifestations of that loving heart which any man can receive; and each man gets as much of the love of God as it is possible to pour upon him. But granite rock does not drink in the dew as a flower does; and the nature of the man on whom God's love falls determines how much, and what manner of its manifestations shall pass into his true possession, and what shall remain without.

So, on the whole, we have to answer the questions, Does God love any? Does not God love all? Does God specially love some? with the one monosyllable, Yes.

And so, dear brethren, let us learn the path by which we can pass into that blessed community of those on whom the fullness and sweetness and tenderest tenderness of the Father's heart will fall. If a man love Me, he will keep My words; and My Father will love him. Myths tell us that the light which, at the beginning, had been diffused through a nebulous mass, was next gathered into a sun. So the universal love of God is concentrated in Jesus Christ; and if we have Him we have it; and if we have faith we have Him, and can say, Neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**II. Then, secondly, mark the universal obligation of the Christian life.**

Called to be saints, says my text. Now you will observe that the two little words to be are inserted here as a supplement. They may be correct enough, but they are open to the possibility of misunderstanding, as if the saintship, to which all Christian people are called was something future, and not realised at the moment. Now, in the context, the Apostle employs the same form of expression with regard to himself in a clause which illuminates the meaning of my text. Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ says he, in the first verse, called to be an Apostle or, more correctly, a called Apostle. The apostleship coincided in time with the call, was contemporaneous with that which was its cause. And if Paul was an Apostle since he was called, saints are saints since they are called. The beloved of God are the called saints.

I need only observe, further, that the word called here does not mean named or designated but summoned. It describes not the name by which Christian men are known, but the thing which they are invited, summoned, called by God to be. It is their vocation, not their designation. Now, then, I need not, I suppose, remind you that saint and holy convey precisely the same idea: the one expressing it in a word of Teutonic, and the other in one of classic derivation.

We notice that the true idea of this universal holiness which, ipso facto, belongs to all Christian people, is consecration to God. In the old days temple, altars, sacrifices, sacrificial vessels, persons such as priests, periods like Sabbaths and feasts, were called holy. The common idea running through all these uses of the word is belonging to God, and that is the root notion of the New Testament saint a man who is God's. God has claimed us for Himself when He gave us Jesus Christ. We respond to the claim when we accept Christ. Henceforth we are not our own, but consecrated--that is, saints.

Now the next step is purity, which is the ordinary idea of sanctity. Purity will follow consecration, and would not be worth much without it, even if it was possible to be attained. Now, look what a far deeper and nobler idea of the service and conditions of moral goodness this derivation of it from surrender to God gives, than does a God-ignoring morality which talks and talks about acts and dispositions, and never goes down to the root of the whole matter; and how much nobler it is than a shallow religion which in like manner is ever straining after acts of righteousness, and forgets that in order to be right there must be prior surrender to God. Get a man to yield himself up to God and no fear about the righteousness. Virtue, goodness, purity, righteousness, all these synonyms express very noble things; but deep down below them all lies the New Testament idea of holiness, consecration of myself to God, which is the parent of them all.

And then the next thing to remind you of is that this consecration is to be applied all through a man's nature. Yielding yourselves to God is the talismanic secret of all righteousness, as I have said; and every part of our complex, manifold being is capable of such consecration. I hallow my heart if its love twines round His heart. I hallow my thoughts if I take His truth for my guide, and ever seek to be led thereby in practice and in belief. I hallow my will when it bows and says, Speak, Lord! Thy servant heareth! I hallow my senses when I use them as from Him, with recognition of Him and for Him. In fact, there are two ways of living in the world; and, narrow as it sounds, I venture to say there are only two. Either God is my centre, and that is holiness; or self is my centre, in more or less subtle forms, and that is sin.

Then the next step is that this consecration, which will issue in all purity, and will cover the whole ground of a human life, is only possible when we have drunk in the blessed thought beloved of God. My yielding of myself to Him can only be the echo of His giving of Himself to me. He must be the first to love. You cannot argue a man into loving God, any more than you can hammer a rosebud open. If you do you spoil its petals. But He can love us into loving Him, and the sunshine, falling on the closed flower, will expand it, and it will grow by its reception of the light, and grow sunlike in its measure and according to its nature. So a God who has only claims upon us will never be a God to whom we yield ourselves. A God who has love for us will be a God to whom it is blessed that we should be consecrated, and so saints.

Then, still further, this consecration, thus built upon the reception of the divine love, and influencing our whole nature, and leading to all purity, is a universal characteristic of Christians. There is no faith which does not lead to surrender. There is no aristocracy in the Christian Church which deserves to have the family name given especially to it. Saint this, and Saint that, and Saint the other--these titles cannot be used without darkening the truth that this honour and obligation of being saints belong equally to all that love Jesus Christ. All the men whom thus God has drawn to Himself, by His love in His Son, they are all, if I may so say, objectively holy; they belong to God. But consecration may be cultivated, and must be cultivated and increased. There is a solemn obligation laid upon every one of us who call ourselves Christians, to be saints, in the sense that we have consciously yielded up our whole lives to Him; and are trying, body, soul, and spirit, to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord.

Paul's letter, addressed to the beloved in God, the called saints that are in Rome, found its way to the people for whom it was meant. If a letter so addressed were dropped in our streets, do you think anybody would bring it to you, or to any Christian society as a whole, recognising that we were the people for whom it was meant? The world has taunted us often enough with the name of saints; and laughed at the profession which they thought was included in the word. Would that their taunts had been undeserved, and that it were not true that saints in the Church sometimes means less than good men out of the Church! Seeing that we have these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit; perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.