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

**ROMANS-003**. **PAUL'S LONGING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11.* *I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; 12. That is, that I may be comforted together with you, by the mutual faith both of you and me."*

*Romans 1:11-12*

I am not wont to indulge in personal references in the pulpit, but I cannot but yield to the impulse to make an exception now, and to let our happy circumstances mould my remarks. I speak mainly to mine own people, and I must trust that other friends who may hear or read my words will forgive my doing so.

In taking such a text as this, I desire to shelter myself behind Paul, and in expounding his feelings to express my own, and to draw such lessons as may be helpful and profitable to us all. And so there are three things in this text that I desire to note: the manly expression of Christian affection; the lofty consciousness of the purpose of their meeting; and the lowly sense that there was much to be received as well as much to be given. A word or two about each of these things is all on which I can venture.

**I. First, then, notice the manly expression of Christian affection which the Apostle allows himself here.**

Very few Christian teachers could or should venture to talk so much about themselves as Paul did. The strong infusion of the personal element in all his letters is so transparently simple, so obviously sincere, so free from any jarring note of affectation or unctuous sentiment that it attracts rather than repels. If I might venture upon a paradox, his personal references are instances of self-oblivion in the midst of self-consciousness.

He had never been in Rome when he wrote these words; he had no personal relations with the believers there; he had never looked them in the face; there were no sympathy and confidence between them, as the growth of years. But still his heart went out towards them, and he was not ashamed to show it. I long to see you,--in the original the word expresses a very intense amount of yearning blended with something of regret that he had been so long kept from them.

Now it is not a good thing for people to make many professions of affection, and I think a public teacher has something better to do than to parade such feelings before his audiences. But there are exceptions to all rules, and I suppose I may venture to let my heart speak, and to say how gladly I come back to the old place, dear to me by so many sacred memories and associations, and how gladly I reknit the bonds of an affection which has been unbroken, and deepening on both sides through thirty long years.

Dear friends! let us together thank God to-day if He has knit our hearts together in mutual affection; and if you and I can look each other, as I believe we can, in the eyes, with the assurance that I see only the faces of friends, and that you see the face of one who gladly resumes the old work and associations.

But now, dear brethren, let us draw one lesson. Unless there be this manly, honest, though oftenest silent, Christian affection, the sooner you and I part the better. Unless it be in my heart I can do you no good. No man ever touched another with the sweet constraining forces that lie in Christ's Gospel unless the heart of the speaker went out to grapple the hearts of the hearers. And no audience ever listen with any profit to a man when they come in the spirit of carping criticism, or of cold admiration, or of stolid indifference. There must be for this simple relationship which alone binds a Nonconformist preacher to his congregation, as a sine qua non of all higher things and of all spiritual good, a real, though oftenest it be a concealed, mutual affection and regard. We have to thank God for much of it; let us try to get more. That is all I want to say about the first point here.

**II. Note the lofty consciousness of the purpose of their meeting.**

I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift. Paul knew that he had something which he could give to these people, and he calls it by a very comprehensive term, some spiritual gift--a gift of some sort which, coming from the Divine Spirit, was to be received into the human spirit.

Now that expression--a spiritual gift--in the New Testament has a variety of applications. Sometimes it refers to what we call miraculous endowments, sometimes it refers to what we may call official capacity; but here it is evidently neither the one nor the other of these more limited and special things, but the general idea of a divine operation upon the human spirit which fills it with Christian graces--knowledge, faith, love. Or, in simpler words, what Paul wanted to give them was a firmer grasp and fuller possession of Jesus Christ, His love and power, which would secure a deepening and strengthening of their whole Christian life. He was quite sure he had this to give, and that he could impart it, if they would listen to what he would say to them. But whilst thus he rises into the lofty conception of the purpose and possible result of his meeting the Roman Christians, he is just as conscious of the limitations of his power in the matter as he is of the greatness of his function. These are indicated plainly. The word which he employs here, gift is never used in the New Testament for a thing that one man can give to another, but is always employed for the concrete results of the grace of God bestowed upon men. The very expression, then, shows that Paul thought of himself, not as the original giver, but simply as a channel through which was communicated what God had given. In the same direction points the adjective which accompanies the noun--a spiritual gift--which probably describes the origin of the gift as being the Spirit of God, rather than defines the seat of it when received as being the spirit of the receiver. Notice, too, as bearing on the limits of Paul's part in the gift, the propriety and delicacy of the language in his statement of the ultimate purpose of the gift. He does not say that I may strengthen you, which might have sounded too egotistical, and would have assumed too much to himself, but he says that ye may be strengthened, for the true strengthener is not Paul, but the Spirit of God.

So, on the one hand, the Christian teacher is bound to rise to the height of the consciousness of his lofty vocation as having in possession a gift that he can bestow; on the other hand, he is bound ever to remember the limitations within which that is true--viz. that the gift is not his, but God's, and that the Spirit of the Lord is the true Giver of all the graces which may blossom when His word, ministered by human agents, is received into human hearts.

And, now, what are the lessons that I take from this? Two very simple ones. First, no Christian teacher has any business to open his mouth, unless he is sure that he has received something to impart to men as a gift from the Divine Spirit. To preach our doubts, to preach our own opinions, to preach poor platitudes, to talk about politics and morals and taste and literature and the like in the pulpit, is profanation and blasphemy. Let no man open his lips unless he can say: The Lord hath showed me this; and this I bring to you as His word. Nor has a Christian organisation any right to exist, unless it recognises the communication and reception and further spreading of this spiritual gift as its great function. Churches which have lost that consciousness, and, instead of a divine gift, have little more to offer than formal worship, or music, or entertainments, or mere intellectual discourse, whether orthodox or advanced, have no right to be; and by the law of the survival of the fittest will not long be. The one thing that warrants such a relationship as subsists between you and me is this, my consciousness that I have a message from God, and your belief that you hear such from my lips. Unless that be our bond the sooner these walls crumble, and this voice ceases, and these pews are emptied, the better. I have, says, Paul, a gift to impart; and I long to see you that I may impart it to you. Oh! for more, in all our pulpits, of that burdened consciousness of a divine message which needs the relief of speech, and longs with a longing caught from Christ to impart its richest treasures.

That is the one lesson. And the other one is this. Have you, dear friends, received the gift that I have, under the limitations already spoken of, to bestow? There are some of you who have listened to my voice ever since you were children--some of you, though not many, have heard it for well on to thirty years. Have you taken the thing that all these years I have been--God knows how poorly, but God knows how honestly--trying to bring to you? That is, have you taken Christ, and have you faith in Him? And, as for those of you who say that you are Christians, many blessings have passed between you and me through all these years; but, dear friends, has the chief blessing been attained? Are you being strengthened day by day for the burdens and the annoyances and the sorrows of life by your coming here? Do I do you any good in that way; are you better men than when we first met together? Is Christ dearer, and more real and nearer to you; and are your lives more transparently consecrated, more manifestly the result of a hidden union with Him? Do you walk in the world like the Master, because you are members of this congregation? If so, its purpose has been accomplished. If not, it has miserably failed.

I have said that I have to thank God for the unbroken affection that has knit us together. But what is the use of such love if it does not lead onwards to this? I have had enough, and more than enough, of what you call popularity and appreciation, undeserved enough, but rendered unstintedly by you. I do not care the snap of a finger for it by comparison with this other thing. And oh, dear brethren! if all that comes of our meeting here Sunday after Sunday is either praise or criticism of my poor words and ways, our relationship is a curse, and not a blessing, and we come together for the worse and not for the better. The purpose of the Church, and the purpose of the ministry, and the meaning of our assembling are, that spiritual gifts may be imparted, not by me alone, but by you, too, and by me in my place and measure, and if that purpose be not accomplished, all other purposes, that are accomplished, are of no account, and worse than nothing.

**III. And now, lastly, note the lowly consciousness that much was to be received as well as much to be given.**

The Apostle corrects himself after he has said that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, by adding, that is, that I may be comforted (or rather, encouraged) together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. If his language were not so transparently sincere, and springing from deep interest in the relationship between himself and these people, we should say that it was exquisite courtesy and beautiful delicacy. But it moves in a region far more real than the region of courtesy, and it speaks the inmost truth about the conditions on which the Roman Christians should receive--viz. that they should also give. There is only one Giver who is only a Giver, and that is God. All other givers are also receivers. Paul desired to see his Roman brethren that he might be encouraged; and when he did see them, as he marched along the Appian Way, a shipwrecked prisoner, the Acts of the Apostles tells us, He thanked God and took courage. The sight of them strengthened him and prepared him for what lay before him.

Paul's was a richly complicated nature--firm as a rock in its will, tremulously sensitive in its sympathies; like some strongly-rooted tree with its stable stem and a green cloud of fluttering foliage that moves in the lightest air. So his spirit rose and fell according to the reception that he met from his brethren, and the manifestation of their faith quickened and strengthened his.

And he is but one instance of a universal law. All teachers, the more genuine they are, the more sympathetic they are, are the more sensitive of their environment. The very oratorical temperament places a man at the mercy of surroundings. All earnest work has ever travelling with it as its shadow seasons of deep depression; and the Christian teacher does not escape these. I am not going to speak about myself, but this is unquestionably true, that every Elijah, after the mightiest effort of prophecy, is apt to cover his head in his mantle and to say, Take me away; I am not better than my fathers. And when a man for thirty years, amidst all the changes incident to a great city congregation in that time, has to stand up Sunday after Sunday before the same people, and mark how some of them are stolidly indifferent, and note how others are dropping away from their faithfulness, and see empty places where loving forms used to sit--no wonder that the mood comes ever and anon, Then, said I, surely I have laboured in vain and spent my strength for nought. The hearer reacts on the speaker quite as much as the speaker does on the hearer. If you have ice in the pews, that brings down the temperature up here. It is hard to be fervid amidst people that are all but dead. It is difficult to keep a fire alight when it is kindled on the top of an iceberg. And the unbelief and low-toned religion of a congregation are always pulling down the faith and the fervour of their minister, if he be better and holier, as they expect him to be, than they are.

He did not many works because of their unbelief. Christ knew the hampering and the restrictions of His power which came from being surrounded by a chill, unsympathetic environment. My strength and my weakness are largely due to you. And if you want your minister to preach better, and in all ways to do his work more joyfully and faithfully, the means lie largely in your own hands. Icy indifference, ill-natured interpretations, carping criticisms, swift forgetfulness of one's words, all these things kill the fervour of the pulpit.

On the other hand, the true encouragement to give a man when he is trying to do God's will, to preach Christ's Gospel, is not to pat him on the back and say, What a remarkable sermon that was of yours! what a genius! what an orator! not to go about praising it, but to come and say, Thy words have led me to Christ, and from thee I have taken the gift of gifts.

Dear brethren, the encouragement of the minister is in the conversion and the growth of the hearers. And I pray that in this new lease of united fellowship which we have taken out, be it longer or shorter--and advancing years tell me that at the longest it must be comparatively short--I may come to you ever more and more with the lofty and humbling consciousness that I have a message which Christ has given to me, and that you may come more and more receptive--not of my words, God forbid--but of Christ's truth; and that so we may be helpers one of another, and encourage each other in the warfare and work to which we all are called and consecrated.

[Sermon preached after a long absence on account of illness.]