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

**ROMANS-004**. **DEBTORS TO ALL MEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"I am a debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise."*

*Romans 1:14*

No doubt Paul is here referring to the special obligation laid upon him by his divine call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was entrusted with the Gospel as a steward, and was therefore bound to carry it to all sorts and conditions of men. But the principle underlying the statement applies to all Christians. The indebtedness referred to is no peculiarity of the Apostolic order, but attaches to every believer. Every servant of Jesus Christ, who has received the truth for himself, has received it as a steward, and is, as such, indebted to God, from whom he got the trust, and to the men for whom he got it. The only limit to the obligation is, as Paul says in the context, as much as in me is. Capacity, determined by faculties, opportunities, and circumstances, prescribes the kind and the degree of the work to be done in discharge of the obligation; but the obligation is universal. We are not at liberty to choose whether we shall do our part in spreading the name of Jesus Christ. It is a debt that we owe to God and to men. Is that the view of duty which the average Christian man takes? I am afraid it is not. If it were, our treasuries would be full, and great would be the multitude of them that preached the Word.

It is no very exalted degree of virtue to pay our debts. We do not expect to be praised for that; and we do not consider that we are at liberty to choose whether we shall do it or not. We are dishonest if we do not. It is no merit in us to be honest. Would that all Christian people applied that principle to their religion. The world would be different, and the Church would be different, if they did.

Let me try, then, to enforce this thought of indebtedness and of common honesty in discharging the indebtedness, which underlies these words. Paul thought that he went a long way to pay his debts to humanity by carrying to everybody whom he could reach the Name that is above every name.

**I. Now, first, let me say that we Christians are debtors to all men by our common manhood.**

It is not the least of the gifts which Christianity has brought to the world, that it has introduced the new thought of the brotherhood of mankind. The very word humanity is a Christian coinage, and it was coined to express the new thought that began to throb in men's hearts, as soon as they accepted the message that Jesus Christ came to give, the message of the Fatherhood of God. For it is on that belief of God's Fatherhood that the belief of man's brotherhood rests, and on it alone can it be secured and permanently based.

Here is a Jew writing to Latins in the Greek language. The phenomenon itself is a sign of a new order of things, of the rising of a flood that had surged over, and in the course of ages would sap away and dissolve, the barriers between men. The Apostle points to two of the widest gulfs that separated men, in the words of my text. Greeks and Barbarians divides mankind, according to race and language. Wise and unwise divides them according to culture and intellectual capacity. Both gulfs exist still, though they have been wonderfully filled up by the influence, direct and indirect, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The fiercest antagonisms of race which still subsist are felt to belong to a decaying order, and to be sure, sooner or later, to pass away. I suppose that the gulf made by the increased culture of modern society between civilised and the savage peoples, and, within the limits of our own land, the gulf made by education between the higher and the lower layers of our community--I speak not of higher and lower in regard to wealth or station, but in regard to intellectual acquirement and capacity--are greater than, perhaps, they ever were in the past. But yet over the gulf a bridge is thrown, and the gulf itself is being filled up. High above all the superficial distinctions which separate Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian, educated and illiterate, scientific and unscientific, wise and unwise, there stretches the great rainbow of the truth that all are one in Christ Jesus. Fraternity without Fatherhood is a ghastly mockery that ended a hundred years ago in the guillotine, and to-day will end in disappointment; and it is little more than cant. But when Christianity comes and tells us that we have one Father and one Redeemer, then the unity of the race is secured.

And that oneness which makes us debtors to all men is shown to be real by the fact that, beneath all superficial distinctions of culture, race, age, or station, there are the primal necessities and yearnings and possibilities that lie in every human soul. All men, savage or cultivated, breathe the same air, see by the same light, are fed by the same food and drink, have the same yearning hearts, the same lofty aspirations that unfulfilled are torture; the same experience of the same guilt, and, blessed be God! the same Saviour and the same salvation.

Because, then, we are all members of the one family, every man is bound to regard all that he possesses, and is, and can do, as committed to him in stewardship to be imparted to his fellows. We are not sponges to absorb, but we are pipes placed in the spring, that we may give forth the precious water of life.

Cain is not a very good model, but his question is the world's question, and it implies the expectation of a negative answer--Am I my brother's keeper? Surely, the very language answers itself, and, although Cain thinks that the only answer is No, wisdom sees that the only answer is Yes. For if I am my brother's brother, then surely I am my brother's keeper. We have a better example. There is another Elder Brother who has come to give to His brethren all that Himself possessed, and we but poorly follow our Master's pattern unless we feel that the mystic tie which binds us in brotherhood to every man makes us every man's debtor to the extent of our possessions. That is the Christian truth that underlies the modern Socialistic idea, and, whatever the form in which it is ultimately brought into practice as the rule of mankind, the principle will triumph one day; and we are bound, as Christian men, to hasten the coming of its victory. We are debtors by reason of our common humanity.

**II. We are debtors by our possession of the universal salvation.**

The principle which I have already been laying down applies all round, to everything that we have, are, or can do. But its most stringent obligation, and the noblest field for its operations, are found in reference to the Christian man's possession of the Gospel for the joy of his own heart, and to the duties that are therein involved. Christ draws men to Himself for their own sakes, blessed be His name! but not for their own sakes only. He draws them to Himself, that they, in their turn, may draw others with whose hands theirs are linked, and so may swell the numbers of the flock that gathers round the one Shepherd. He puts the dew of His blessing into the chalice of the tiniest flower, that it may share its dewdrop with another near. Just as every particle of inert dough as it is leavened becomes in its turn leaven, and the medium for leavening the particle contiguous to it, so every Christian is bound, or, to use the metaphor of my text, is a debtor to God and man, to impart the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Greek and Barbarian, says Paul, wise or unwise; all distinctions vanish. If I can get at a man, no matter what colour, his race, his language, his capacity, his acquirements, he is my creditor, and I am defrauding him of what he has a right to expect from me if I do not do my best to bring him to Jesus Christ.

This obligation receives additional weight from the proved adaptation of the Gospel to all sorts and conditions of men. Alone of all religions has Christianity proved itself capable of dominating every type of character, of influencing every stage of civilisation, of assuming the speech of every tongue, and of wearing the garb of every race. There are other religions which are evidently destined only to a narrow field of operations, and are rigidly limited by geographical conditions, or by stages of civilisation. There are wines that are ruined by a sea voyage, and can only be drunk in the land where the vintage was gathered; and that is the condition of all the ethnic religions. Christianity alone passes through the whole earth, and influences all men. The history of missions shows us that. There has yet to be found the race that is incapable of receiving, or is beyond the need of possessing, or cannot be elevated by the operation of, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So to all men we are bound, as much as in us is, to carry the Gospel. The distinction that is drawn so often by the people who never move a finger to help the heathen either at home or abroad, between the home and the foreign field of work, vanishes altogether when we stand at the true Christian standpoint. Here is a man who wants the Gospel; I have it; I can give it to him. That constitutes a summons as imperative as if we were called by name from Heaven, and bade to go, and as much as in us is to preach the Gospel. Brethren! we do not obey the command, Owe no man anything, unless, to the extent of our ability, or over the whole field which we can influence at home or abroad, we seek to spread the name of Christ and the salvation that is in Him.

**III. We are debtors by benefits received.**

I am speaking to men and women a very large proportion of whom get their living, and some of whom amass their wealth, by trade with lands that need the Gospel. It is not for nothing that England has won the great empire that she possesses--won it, alas! far too often by deeds that will not bear investigation in the light of Christian principle, but won it.

What do we owe to the lands that we call heathen? The very speech by which we communicate with one another; the beginning of our civilisation; wide fields for expanding population and emigration; treasures of wisdom of many kinds; an empire about which we are too fond of crowing and too reluctant to recognise its responsibilities--and Manchester its commerce and prosperity! Did God put us where we are as a nation only in order that we might carry the gifts of our literature, great as that is; of our science, great as that is; of our law, blessed as that is; of our manufactures, to those distant lands? The best thing that we can give is the thing that all of us can help to give--the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'

**IV. Lastly, we are debtors by injuries inflicted.**

Many subject-races seem destined to fade away by contact with our race; and if we think of the nameless cruelties, and the iliad of woes which England's possession of this great Colonial Empire has had accompanying it, we may feel that the harm in many aspects outweighs the good, and that it had been better for these men to be left suckled in creeds outworn, and ignorant of our civilisation, than to receive from us the fatal gifts that they often have received. I do not wish to exaggerate, but if you will take the facts of the case as brought out by people that have no Christian prejudices to serve, I think you will acknowledge that we as a nation owe a debt of reparation to the barbarians and the unwise.

What about killing African tribes by the thousand with the vile stuff that we call rum, and send to them in exchange for their poor commodities? What about introducing new diseases, the offspring of vice, into the South Sea Islands, decimating and all but destroying the population? Is it not true that, as the prophet wailed of old about a degenerate Israel, we may wail about the beach-combers and other loafers that go amongst savage lands from England--Through you the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles. A Hindoo once said to a missionary, Your Book is very good. If you were as good as your Book you would conquer India in five years. That may be true or it may not, but it gives us the impression that is produced by godless Englishmen on heathen peoples. We are taking away their religion from them, necessarily, as the result of education and contact with European thought. And if we do not substitute for it the one faith that elevates and saves, the last state of that man will be worse than the first.

We can almost hear the rattle of the guns on the north-west frontier of India to-day. There is another specimen of the injuries inflicted. This is not the place to talk politics, but I feel that this is the place to ask this question, Are Christian principles to have anything to do in determining national actions? Is it Christian to impose our yoke on unwilling tribes who have as deep a love for independence as the proudest Englishmen of us all, and as good a right to it? Are punitive expeditions and Maxim guns instalments of our debt to all men? I wonder what Jesus Christ, who died for Afridis and Orakzais and all the rest of them, thinks about such conduct?

Brethren, we are debtors to all men. Let us do our best to influence national action in accordance with the brotherhood which has been revealed to us by the Elder Brother of us all; and let us, at least for our own parts, recognise, and, as much as in us is, discharge the debt which, by our common humanity, and by our possession of the universal Gospel we owe to all men, and which is made more weighty by the benefits we receive from many, and by the injuries which England has inflicted on not a few. Else shall we hear rise above all the voices that palliate crime, on the plea of State necessity, the stern words of the Master, In thy skirts is found the blood of the souls of poor innocents. We are debtors; let us pay our debts.