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

**ROMANS-007**. **NO DIFFERENCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"There is no difference."*

*Romans 3:22*

The things in which all men are alike are far more important than those in which they differ. The diversities are superficial, the identities are deep as life. Physical processes and wants are the same for everybody. All men, be they kings or beggars, civilised or savage, rich or poor, wise or foolish, cultured or illiterate, breathe the same breath, hunger and thirst, eat and drink, sleep, are smitten by the same diseases, and die at last the same death. We have all of us one human heart. Tears and grief, gladness and smiles, move us all. Hope, fear, love, play the same music upon all heart-strings. The same great law of duty over-arches every man, and the same heaven of God bends above him.

Religion has to do with the deep-seated identities and not with the superficial differences. And though there have been many aristocratic religions in the world, it is the great glory of Christianity that it goes straight to the central similarities, and brushes aside, as of altogether secondary importance, all the subordinate diversities, grappling with the great facts which are common to humanity, and with the large hopes which all may inherit.

Paul here, in his grand way, triumphs and rises above all these small differences between man and man, more pure or less pure, Jew or Gentile, wise or foolish, and avers that, in regard of the deepest and most important things, there is no difference, and so his Gospel is a Gospel for the world, because it deals with all men on the same level. Now I wish to work out this great glory and characteristic of the Gospel system in a few remarks, and to point out to you the more important of these things in which all men, be they what or who they may, stand in one category and have identical experiences and interests.

**I. First, there is no difference in the fact of sin.**

Now let us understand that the Gospel does not assert that there is no difference in the degrees of sin. Christianity does not teach, howsoever some of its apostles may seem to have taught, or unconsciously lent themselves to representations which imply the view that there was no difference between a man who did by nature the things contained in the law, as Paul says, and the man who set himself to violate law. There is no such monstrous teaching in the New Testament as that all blacks are the same shade, all sin of the same gravity, no such teaching as that a man that tries according to his light to do what is right stands on exactly the same level as the man who flouts all such obligations, and has driven the chariots of his lusts and passions through every law that may stand in his way.

But even whilst we have to insist upon that, that the teaching of my text is not of an absolute identity of criminality, but only an universal participation in criminality, do not let us forget that, if you take the two extremes, and suppose it possible that there were a best man in all the world, and a worst man in all the world, the difference between these two is not perhaps so great as at first sight it looks. For we have to remember that motives make actions, and that you cannot judge of these by considering those, that as a man thinketh in his heart, and not as a man does with his hands, so is he. We have to remember, also, that there may be lives, sedulously and immaculately respectable and pure, which are white rather with the unwholesome leprosy of disease than with the wholesome purity of health.

In Queen Elizabeth's time, the way in which they cleaned the hall of a castle, the floor of which might be covered with remnants of food and all manner of abominations, was to strew another layer of rushes over the top of the filth, and then they thought themselves quite neat and respectable. And that is what a great many of you do, cover the filth well up with a sweet smelling layer of conventional proprieties, and think yourselves clean, and the pinks of perfection. God forbid that I should say one word that would seem to cast any kind of slur upon the effort that any man makes to do what he knows to be right, but this I proclaim, or rather my text proclaims for me, that, giving full weight and value to all that, and admitting the existence of variations in degree, the identity is deeper than the diversity; and there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not.

Oh, dear friends! it is not a question of degree, but of direction; not how far the ship has gone on her voyage, but how she heads. Good and evil are the same in essence, whatever be their intensity and whatever be their magnitude. Arsenic is arsenic, whether you have a ton of it or a grain; and a very small dose will be enough to poison. The Gospel starts with the assertion that there is no difference in the fact of sin. The assertion is abundantly confirmed. Does not conscience assent? We all admit faults, do we not? We all acknowledge imperfections. It is that little word sin which seems to bring in another order of considerations, and to command the assent of conscience less readily. But sin is nothing except fault considered in reference to God's law. Bring the notion of God into the life, and faults and slips and weaknesses, and all the other names by which we try to smooth down the ugliness of the ugly thing, start up at once into their tone, magnitude, and importance, and stand avowed as sins.

Well now, if there be, therefore, this universal consciousness of imperfection, and if that consciousness of imperfection has only need to be brought into contact with God, as it were, to flame thus, let me remind you, too, that this fact of universal sinfulness puts us all in one class, no matter what may be the superficial difference. Shakespeare and the Australian savage, the biggest brain and the smallest, the loftiest and the lowest of us, the purest and the foulest of us, we all come into the same order. It is a question of classification. The Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that is to say, has shut all men up as in a prison. You remember in the French Revolution, all manner of people were huddled indiscriminately into the same dungeon of the Paris prisons. You would find a princess and some daughter of shame from the gutters; a boor from the country and a landlord, a count, a marquis, a savant, a philosopher and an illiterate workman, all together in the dungeons. They kept up the distinctions of society and of class with a ghastly mockery, even to the very moment when the tumbrils came for them. And so here are we all, in some sense inclosed within the solemn cells of this great prison-house, and whether we be wise or foolish, we are prisoners, whether we have titles or not, we are prisoners. You may be a student, but you are a sinner: you may be a rich Manchester merchant, but you are a sinner; you may be a man of rank, but you are a sinner. Naaman went to Elisha and was very much offended because Elisha treated him as a leper who happened to be a nobleman. He wanted to be treated as a nobleman who happened to be a leper. And that is the way with a great many of us; we do not like to be driven into one class with all the crowd of evildoers. But, my friend, there is no difference. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

**II. Again, there is no difference in the fact of God's love to us.**

God does not love men because of what they are, therefore He does not cease to love them because of what they are. His love to the sons of men is not drawn out by their goodness, their morality, their obedience, but it wells up from the depths of His own heart, because it is His nature and property, and if I may so say, He cannot help loving. You do not need to pump up that great affection by any machinery of obedience and of merits; it rises like the water in an Artesian well, of its own impulse, with ebullient power from the central heat, and spreads its great streams everywhere. And therefore, though our sin may awfully disturb our relations with God, and may hurt and harm us in a hundred ways, there is one thing it cannot do, it cannot stop Him from loving us. It cannot dam back His great love, which flows out for ever towards all His creatures, and laves them all in its gentle, strong flood, from which nothing can draw them away. In Him we live, and move, and have our being, and to live in Him, whatever else it may mean--and it means a great deal more--is most certainly to live in His love. A man can as soon pass out of the atmosphere in which he breathes as he can pass out of the love of God. We can no more travel beyond that great over-arching firmament of everlasting love which spans all the universe than a star set in the blue heavens can transcend the liquid arch and get beyond its range. There is no difference in the fact that all men, unthankful and evil as they are, are grasped and held in the love of God.

But there is a difference. Sin cannot dam God's love back, but sin has a terrible power in reference to the love of God. Two things it can do. It can make us incapable of receiving the highest blessings of that love. There are many mercies which God pours upon the unthankful and the evil. These are His least gifts; His highest and best cannot be given to the unthankful and the evil. They would if they could, but they cannot, because they cannot be received by them. You can shut the shutters against the light; you can close the vase against the stream. You cannot prevent its shining, you cannot prevent its flowing, but you can prevent yourself from receiving its loftiest and best blessings.

And another awful power that my sin has in reference to God's love is, that it can modify the form which God's love takes in its dealings with me. We may force Him to do His work, His strange work, as Isaiah calls it, and to punish when He would fain only succour and comfort and bless. Just as a fog in the sky does not touch the sun, but turns it to our eyes into a fiery ball, red and lurid, so the mist of my sin coming between me and God, may, to my apprehension and to my capacity of reception, solemnly make different that great love of His. But yet there is no difference in the fact of God's love to us.

**III. Thirdly, there is no difference in the purpose and power of Christ's Cross for us all.**

He died for all. The area over which the purpose and the power of Christ's death extend is precisely conterminous with the area over which the power of sin extends. It cannot be--blessed be God!--that the raven Sin shall fly further than the dove with the olive branch in its mouth. It cannot be that the disease shall go wider than the cure. And so, dear friends, I have to come to you now with this message. No matter what a man is, how far he has gone, how sinful he has been, how long he has stayed away from the sweetness and grace of that great sacrifice on the Cross, that death was for him. The power of Christ's sacrifice makes possible the forgiveness of all the sins of all the world, past, present, and to come. The worth of that sacrifice, which was made by the willing surrender of the Incarnate Son of God to the death of the Cross, is sufficient for the ransom price of all the sins of all men.

Nor is it only the power of the Cross which is all embracing, but its purpose also. In the very hour of Christ's death, there stood, clear and distinct, before His divine omniscience, each man, woman, and child of the race. And for them all, grasping them all in the tenderness of His sympathy and in the clearness of His knowledge, in the design of His sufferings for them all, He died, so that every human being may lay his hand on the head of the sacrifice, and know his guilt was there, and may say, with as triumphant and appropriating faith as Paul did, He loved me, and in that hour of agony and love gave Himself for me.

To go back to a metaphor already employed, the prisoners are gathered together in the prison, not that they may be slain, but God hath included them all, shut them all up, that He might have mercy upon all. And so, as it was in the days of Christ's life upon earth, so is it now, and so will it be for ever. All the crowd may come to Him, and whosoever comes is made whole of whatsoever disease he had. There are no incurables nor outcasts. There is no difference.

**IV. Lastly, there is no difference in the way which we must take for salvation.**

The only thing that unites men to Jesus Christ is faith. You must trust Him, you must trust the power of His sacrifice, you must trust the might of His living love. You must trust Him with a trust which is self-distrust. You must trust Him out and out. The people with whom Paul is fighting, in this chapter, were quite willing to admit that faith was the thing that made Christians, but they wanted to tack on something besides. They wanted to tack on the rites of Judaism and obedience to the moral law. And ever since men have been going on in that erroneous rut. Sometimes it has been that people have sought to add a little of their own morality; sometimes to add ceremonies and sacraments. Sometimes it has been one thing and sometimes it has been another; but there are not two ways to the Cross of Christ, and to the salvation which He gives. There is only one road, and all sorts of men have to come by it. You cannot lean half upon Christ and half upon yourselves, like the timid cripple that is not quite sure of the support of the friendly arm. You cannot eke out the robe with which He will clothe you with a little bit of stuff of your own weaving. It is an insult to a host to offer to pay for entertainment. The Gospel feast that Christ provides is not a social meal to which every guest brings a dish. Our part is simple reception, we have to bring empty hands if we would receive the blessing.

We must put away superficial differences. The Gospel is for the world, therefore the act by which we receive it must be one which all men can perform, not one which only some can do. Not wisdom, nor righteousness, but faith joins us to Christ. And, therefore, people who fancy themselves wise or righteous are offended that special terms are not made with them. They would prefer to have a private portion for themselves. It grates against the pride of the aristocratic class, whether it be aristocratic by culture--and that is the most aristocratic of all--or by position, or anything else--it grates against their pride to be told: You have to go in by that same door that the beggar is going in at; and there is no difference. Therefore, the very width of the doorway, that is wide enough for all the world, gets to be thought narrowness, and becomes a hindrance to our entering. As Naaman's servant put a common-sense question to him, so may I to you. If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? Ay! that you would! How much more when He says "Wash and be clean!" There is only one way of getting dirt off, and that is by water. There is only one way of getting sin off, and that is by the blood of Jesus Christ. There is only one way of having that blood applied to your heart, and that is trusting Him. The common salvation becomes ours when we exercise the common faith. There is no difference in our sins. Thank God! there is no difference in the fact that He grasps us with His love. There is no difference in the fact that Jesus Christ has died for us all. Let there be no difference in our faith, or there will be a difference, deep as the difference between Heaven and Hell; the difference between them that believe and them that believe not, which will darken and widen into the difference between them that are saved and them that perish.