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

**ROMANS-030**. **GRACE AND GRACES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6. Having then gifts, differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7. Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8. Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness."*

*Romans 12:6-8*

The Apostle here proceeds to build upon the great thought of the unity of believers in the one body a series of practical exhortations. In the first words of our text, he, with characteristic delicacy, identifies himself with the Roman Christians as a recipient, like them, of the grace that is given to us, and as, therefore, subject to the same precepts which he commends to them. He does not stand isolated by the grace that is given to him; nor does he look down as from the height of his apostleship on the multitude below, saying to them,--Go. As one of themselves he stands amongst them, and with brotherly exhortation says,--Come. If that had been the spirit in which all Christian teachers had besought men, their exhortations would less frequently have been breath spent in vain.

We may note

**I. The grace that gives the gifts.**

The connection between these two is more emphatically suggested by the original Greek, in which the word for gifts is a derivative of that for grace. The relation between these two can scarcely be verbally reproduced in English; but it may be, though imperfectly, suggested by reading graces instead of gifts. The gifts are represented as being the direct product of, and cognate with, the grace bestowed. As we have had already occasion to remark, they are in Paul's language a designation of natural capacities strengthened by the access of the life of the Spirit of Christ. As a candle plunged in a vase of oxygen leaps up into more brilliant flame, so all the faculties of the human soul are made a hundred times themselves when the quickening power of the life of Christ enters into them.

It is to be observed that the Apostle here assumes that every Christian possesses, in some form, that grace which gives graces. To him a believing soul without Christ-given gifts is a monstrosity. No one is without some graces, and therefore no one is without some duties. No one who considers the multitude of professing Christians who hamper all our churches to-day, and reflects on the modern need to urge on the multitude of idlers forms of Christian activity, will fail to recognise signs of terribly weakened vitality. The humility, which in response to all invitations to work for Christ pleads unfitness is, if true, more tragical than it at first seems, for it is a confession that the man who alleges it has no real hold of the Christ in whom he professes to trust. If a Christian man is fit for no Christian work, it is time that he gravely ask himself whether he has any Christian life. Having gifts is the basis of all the Apostle's exhortations. It is to him inconceivable that any Christian should not possess, and be conscious of possessing, some endowment from the life of Christ which will fit him for, and bind him to, a course of active service.

The universality of this possession is affirmed, if we note that, according to the Greek, it was given at a special time in the experience of each of these Roman Christians. The rendering was given might be more accurately exchanged for has been given, and that expression is best taken as referring to a definite moment in the history of each believer namely, his conversion. When we yield ourselves to God, as Paul exhorts us to do in the beginning of this chapter, as the commencement of all true life of conformity to His will, Christ yields Himself to us. The possession of these gifts of grace is no prerogative of officials; and, indeed, in all the exhortations which follow there is no reference to officials, though of course such were in existence in the Roman Church. They had their special functions and special qualifications for these. But what Paul is dealing with now is the grace that is inseparable from individual surrender to Christ, and has been bestowed upon all who are His. To limit the gifts to officials, and to suppose that the universal gifts in any degree militate against the recognition of officials in the Church, are equally mistakes, and confound essentially different subjects.

**II. The graces that flow from the grace.**

The Apostle's catalogue of these is not exhaustive, nor logically arranged; but yet a certain loose order may be noted, which may be profitable for us to trace. They are in number seven--the sacred number; and are capable of being divided, as so many of the series of sevens are, into two portions, one containing four and the other three. The former include more public works, to each of which a man might be specially devoted as his life work for and in the Church. Three are more private, and may be conceived to have a wider relation to the world. There are some difficulties of construction and rendering in the list, which need not concern us here; and we may substantially follow the Authorised Version.

The first group of four seems to fall into two pairs, the first of which, prophecy and ministry, seem to be bracketed together by reason of the difference between them. Prophecy is a very high form of special inspiration, and implies a direct reception of special revelation, but not necessarily of future events. The prophet is usually coupled in Paul's writings with the apostle, and was obviously amongst those to whom was given one of the highest forms of the gifts of Christ. It is very beautiful to note that by natural contrast the Apostle at once passes to one of the forms of service which a vulgar estimate would regard as remotest from the special revelation of the prophet, and is confined to lowly service. Side by side with the exalted gift of prophecy Paul puts the lowly gift of ministry. Very significant is the juxtaposition of these two extremes. It teaches us that the lowliest office is as truly allotted by Jesus as the most sacred, and that His highest gifts find an adequate field for manifestation in him who is servant of all. Ministry to be rightly discharged needs spiritual character. The original seven were men full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, though all they had to do was to hand their pittances to poor widows. It may be difficult to decide for what reason other than the emphasising of this contrast the Apostle links together ministry and prophecy, and so breaks a natural sequence which would have connected the second pair of graces with the first member of the first pair. We should have expected that here, as elsewhere, prophet, teacher, exhorter, would have been closely connected, and there seems no reason why they should not have been so, except that which we have suggested, namely, the wish to bring together the highest and the lowest forms of service.

The second pair seem to be linked together by likeness. The teacher probably had for his function, primarily, the narration of the facts of the Gospel, and the setting forth in a form addressed chiefly to the understanding the truths thereby revealed; whilst the exhorter rather addressed himself to the will, presenting the same truth, but in forms more intended to influence the emotions. The word here rendered exhort is found in Paul's writings as bearing special meanings, such as consoling, stimulating, encouraging, rebuking and others. Of course these two forms of service would often be associated, and each would be imperfect when alone; but it would appear that in the early Church there were persons in whom the one or the other of these two elements was so preponderant that their office was thereby designated. Each received a special gift from the one Source. The man who could only say to his brother, Be of good cheer, was as much the recipient of the Spirit as the man who could connect and elaborate a systematic presentation of the truths of the Gospel.

These four graces are followed by a group of three, which may be regarded as being more private, as not pointing to permanent offices so much as to individual acts. They are giving, ruling, showing pity, concerning which we need only note that the second of these can hardly be the ecclesiastical office, and that it stands between two which are closely related, as if it were of the same kind. The gifts of money, or of direction, or of pity, are one in kind. The right use of wealth comes from the gift of God's grace; so does the right use of any sway which any of us have over any of our brethren; and so does the glow of compassion, the exercise of the natural human sympathy which belongs to all, and is deepened and made tenderer and intenser by the gift of the Spirit. It would be a very different Church, and a very different world, if Christians, who were not conscious of possessing gifts which made them fit to be either prophets, or teachers, or exhorters, and were scarcely endowed even for any special form of ministry, felt that a gift from their hands, or a wave of pity from their hearts, was a true token of the movement of God's Spirit on their spirits. The fruit of the Spirit is to be found in the wide fields of everyday life, and the vine bears many clusters for the thirsty lips of wearied men who may little know what gives them their bloom and sweetness. It would be better for both giver and receiver if Christian beneficence were more clearly recognised as one of the manifestations of spiritual life.

**III. The exercise of the graces.**

There are some difficulties in reference to the grammatical construction of the words of our text, into which it is not necessary that we should enter here. We may substantially follow the Authorised and Revised Versions in supplying verbs in the various clauses, so as to make of the text a series of exhortations. The first of these is to prophesy according to the proportion of faith; a commandment which is best explained by remembering that in the preceding verse the measure of faith has been stated as being the measure of the gifts. The prophet then is to exercise his gifts in proportion to his faith. He is to speak his convictions fully and openly, and to let his utterances be shaped by the indwelling life. This exhortation may well sink into the heart of preachers in this day. It is but the echo of Jeremiah's strong words: He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not my word like as fire, saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? The ancient prophet's woe falls with double weight on those who use their words as a veil to obscure their real beliefs, and who prophesy, not according to the proportion of faith, but according to the expectations of the hearers, whose faith is as vague as theirs.

In the original, the next three exhortations are alike in grammatical construction, which is represented in the Authorised Version by the supplement let us wait on, and in the Revised Version by let us give ourselves to; we might with advantage substitute for either the still more simple form be in, after the example of Paul's exhortation to Timothy be in these things; that is, as our Version has it, give thyself wholly to them. The various gifts are each represented as a sphere within which its possessor is to move, for the opportunities for the exercise of which he is carefully to watch, and within the limits of which he is humbly to keep. That general law applies equally to ministry, and teaching and exhorting. We are to seek to discern our spheres; we are to be occupied with, if not absorbed in, them. At the least we are diligently to use the gift which we discover ourselves to possess, and thus filling our several spheres, we are to keep within them, recognising that each is sacred as the manifestation of God's will for each of us. The divergence of forms is unimportant, and it matters nothing whether the Giver of all grants less or more. The main thing is that each be faithful in the administration of what he has received, and not seek to imitate his brother who is diversely endowed, or to monopolise for himself another's gifts. To insist that our brethren's gifts should be like ours, and to try to make ours like theirs, are equally sins against the great truth, of which the Church as a whole is the example, that there are diversities of operations but the same Spirit.

The remaining three exhortations are in like manner thrown together by a similarity of construction in which the personality of the doer is put in the foreground, and the emphasis of the commandment is rested on the manner in which the grace is exercised. The reason for that may be that in these three especially the manner will show the grace. Giving is to be with simplicity. There are to be no sidelong looks to self-interest; no flinging of a gift from a height, as a bone might be flung to a dog; no seeking for gratitude; no ostentation in the gift. Any taint of such mixed motives as these infuses poison into our gifts, and makes them taste bitter to the receiver, and recoil in hurt upon ourselves. To give with simplicity is to give as God gives.

Diligence is the characteristic prescribed for the man that rules. We have already pointed out that this exhortation includes a much wider area than that of any ecclesiastical officials. It points to another kind of rule, and the natural gifts needed for any kind of rule are diligence and zeal. Slackly-held reins make stumbling steeds; and any man on whose shoulders is laid the weight of government is bound to feel it as a weight. The history of many a nation, and of many a family, teaches that where the rule is slothful all evils grow apace; and it is that natural energy and earnestness, deepened and hallowed by the Christian life, which here is enjoined as the true Christian way of discharging the function of ruling, which, in some form or another, devolves on almost all of us.

He that showeth mercy with cheerfulness. The glow of natural human sympathy is heightened so as to become a gift, and the way in which it is exercised is defined as being with cheerfulness. That injunction is but partially understood if it is taken to mean no more than that sympathy is not to be rendered grudgingly, or as by necessity. No sympathy is indeed possible on such terms; unless the heart is in it, it is nought. And that it should thus flow forth spontaneously wherever sorrow and desolation evoke it, there must be a continual repression of self, and a heart disengaged from the entanglements of its own circumstances, and at leisure to make a brother's burden its very own. But the exhortation may, perhaps, rather mean that the truest sympathy carries a bright face into darkness, and comes like sunshine in a shady place.