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

**ROMANS-032**. **A TRIPLET OF GRACES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord."*

*Romans 12:11*

Paul believed that Christian doctrine was meant to influence Christian practice; and therefore, after the fundamental and profound exhibition of the central truths of Christianity which occupies the earlier portion of this great Epistle, he tacks on, with a therefore to his theological exposition, a series of plain, practical teachings. The place where conduct comes in the letter is profoundly significant, and, if the significance of it had been observed and the spirit of it carried into practice, there would have been less of a barren orthodoxy, and fewer attempts at producing righteous conduct without faith.

But not only is the place where this series of exhortations occur very significant, but the order in which they appear is also instructive. The great principle which covers all conduct, and may be broken up into all the minutenesses of practical directions is self-surrender. Give yourselves up to God; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all goodness, and wherever that foundation is really laid, on it will rise the fair building of a life which is a temple, adorned with whatever things are lovely and of good report. So after Paul has laid deep and broad the foundation of all Christian virtue in his exhortation to present ourselves as living sacrifices, he goes on to point out the several virtues in which such self-surrender will manifest itself. There runs through the most of these exhortations an arrangement in triplets--three sister Graces linked together hand-in-hand as it were--and my text presents an example of that threefoldness in grouping. Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.

**I. We have, first, the prime grace of Christian diligence.**

Not slothful in business suggests, by reason of our modern restriction of that word business to a man's daily occupation, a much more limited range to this exhortation than the Apostle meant to give it. The idea which is generally drawn from these words by English readers is that they are to do their ordinary work diligently, and, all the while, notwithstanding the cooling or distracting influences of their daily avocations, are to keep themselves fervent in spirit. That is a noble and needful conception of the command, but it does not express what is in the Apostle's mind. He does not mean by business a trade or profession, or daily occupation. But the word means zeal or earnestness. And what Paul says is just this--In regard to your earnestness in all directions, see that you are not slothful.

The force and drift of the whole precept is just the exhortation to exercise the very homely virtue of diligence, which is as much a condition of growth and maturity in the Christian as it is in any other life. The very homeliness and obviousness of the duty causes us often to lose sight of its imperativeness and necessity.

Many of us, if we would sit quietly down and think of how we go about our business, as we call it, and of how we go about our Christian life, which ought to be our highest business, would have great cause for being ashamed. We begin the one early in the morning, we keep hard at it all day, our eyes are wide open to see any opening where money is to be made; that is all right. We give our whole selves to our work whilst we are at it; that is as it should be. But why are there not the same concentration, the same wide-awakeness, the same open-eyed eagerness to find out ways of advancement, the same resolved and continuous and all-comprehending and dominating enthusiasm about our Christianity as there is about our shop, or our mill, or our success as students? Why are we all fire in the one case and all ice in the other? Why do we think that it is enough to lift the burden that Christ lays upon us with one languid finger, and to put our whole hand, or rather, as the prophet says, both hands earnestly, to the task of lifting the load of daily work? In your earnestness be not slothful.

Brethren, that is a very homely exhortation. I wonder how many of us can say, Lord! I have heard, and I have obeyed Thy precept.

**II. Diligence must be fed by a fervent spirit.**

The word translated fervent is literally boiling. The metaphor is very plain and intelligible. The spirit brought into contact with Christian truth and with the fire of the Holy Spirit will naturally have its temperature raised, and will be moved by the warm touch as heat makes water in a pot hung above a fire boil. Such emotion, produced by the touch of the fiery Spirit of God, is what Paul desires for, and enjoins on, all Christians; for such emotion is the only way by which the diligence, without which no Christian progress will be made, can be kept up.

No man will work long at a task that his heart is not in; or if he does, because he is obliged, the work will be slavery. In order, then, that diligence may neither languish and become slothfulness, nor be felt to be a heavy weight and an unwelcome necessity, Paul here bids us see to it that our hearts are moved because there is a fire below which makes the soul's depths boil in earnest.

Now, of course, I know that, as a great teacher has told us, The gods approve the depth and not the tumult of the soul, and I know that there is a great deal of emotional Christianity which is worth nothing. But it is not that kind of fervour that the Apostle is enjoining here. Whilst it is perfectly true that mere emotion often does co-exist with, and very often leads to, entire negligence as to possessing and manifesting practical excellence, the true relation between these is just the opposite--viz. that this fervour of which I speak, this wide-awakeness and enthusiasm of a spirit all quickened into rapidity of action by the warmth which it has felt from God in Christ, should drive the wheels of life. Boiling water makes steam, does it not? And what is to be done with the steam that comes off the boiling spirit? You may either let it go roaring through a waste-pipe and do nothing but make a noise and be idly dissipated in the air, or you may lead it into a cylinder and make it lift a piston, and then you will get work out of it. That is what the Apostle desires us to do with our emotion. The lightning goes careering through the sky, but we have harnessed it to tram-cars nowadays, and made it work for its living, to carry our letters and light our rooms. Fervour of a Christian spirit is all right when it is yoked to Christian work, and made to draw what else is a heavy chariot. It is not emotion, but it is indolent emotion, that is the curse of much of our fervent Christianity.

There cannot be too much fervour. There may be too little outlet provided for the fervour to work in. It may all go off in comfortable feeling, in enthusiastic prayers and Amens! and So be it, Lords! and the like, or it may come with us into our daily tasks, and make us buckle to with more earnestness, and more continuity. Diligence driven by earnestness, and fervour that works, are the true things.

And surely, surely there cannot be any genuine Christianity--certainly there cannot be any deep Christianity--which is not fervent.

We hear from certain quarters of the Church a great deal about the virtue of moderation. But it seems to me that, if you take into account what Christianity tells us, the sober feeling is fervent feeling, and tepid feeling is imperfect feeling. I cannot understand any man believing as plain matter-of-fact the truths on which the whole New Testament insists, and keeping himself cool, or, as our friends call it, moderate. Brethren, enthusiasm--which properly means the condition of being dwelt in by a god--is the wise, the reasonable attitude of Christian men, if they believe their own Christianity and are really serving Jesus Christ. They should be diligent in business, fervent--boiling--in spirit.

**III. The diligence and the fervency are both to be animated by the thought, Serving the Lord!**

Some critics, as many of you know, no doubt, would prefer to read this verse in its last clause serving the time. But that seems to me a very lame and incomplete climax for the Apostle's thought, and it breaks entirely the sequence which, as I think, is discernible in it. Much rather, he here, in the closing member of the triplet, suggests a thought which will be stimulus to the diligence and fuel to the fire that makes the spirit boil.

In effect he says, Think, when your hands begin to droop, and when your spirits begin to be cold and indifferent, and languor to steal over you, and the paralysing influences of the commonplace and the familiar, and the small begin to assert themselves--think that you are serving the Lord. Will that not freshen you up? Will that not set you boiling again? Will it not be easy to be diligent when we feel that we are ever in the great Taskmaster's eye? There are many reasons for diligence--the greatness of the work, for it is no small matter for us to get the whole lump of our nature leavened with the good leaven; the continual operation of antagonistic forces which are all round us, and are working night-shifts as well as day ones, whether we as Christians are on short time or not, the brevity of the period during which we have to work, and the tremendous issues which depend upon the completeness of our service here--all these things are reasons for our diligence. But the reason is: Thou Christ hast died for me, and livest for me; truly I am Thy slave. That is the thought that will make a man bend his back to his work, whatever it be, and bend his will to his work, too, however unwelcome it may be; and that is the thought that will stir his whole spirit to fervour and earnestness, and thus will deliver him from the temptations to languid and perfunctory work that ever creep over us.

You can carry that motive--as we all know, and as we all forget when the pinch comes--into your shop, your study, your office, your mill, your kitchen, or wherever you go. On the bells of the horses there shall be written, Holiness to the Lord, said the prophet, and every bowl in Jerusalem may be sacred as the vessels of the altar. All life may flash into beauty, and tower into greatness, and be smoothed out into easiness, and the crooked things may be made straight and the rough places plain, and the familiar and the trite be invested with freshness and wonder as of a dream, if only we write over them, For the sake of the Master. Then, whatever we do or bear, be it common, insignificant, or unpleasant, will change its aspect, and all will be sweet. Here is the secret of diligence and of fervency, I set the Lord always before me.