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

**ROMANS-041**. **THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. 13. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock, or an occasion to fall, in his brother's way. 14. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. 16. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: 17. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. 18. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. 19. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. 20. For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. 21. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. 22. Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. 23. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."*

*Romans 14:12-23*

The special case in view, in the section of which this passage is part, is the difference of opinion as to the lawfulness of eating certain meats. It is of little consequence, so far as the principles involved are concerned, whether these were the food which the Mosaic ordinances made unclean, or, as in Corinth, meats offered to idols. The latter is the more probable, and would be the more important in Rome. The two opinions on the point represented two tendencies of mind, which always exist; one more scrupulous, and one more liberal. Paul has been giving the former class the lesson they needed in the former part of this chapter; and he now turns to the stronger brethren, and lays down the law for their conduct. We may, perhaps, best simply follow him, verse by verse.

We note then, first, the great thought with which he starts, that of the final judgment, in which each man shall give account of himself. What has that to do with the question in hand? This, that it ought to keep us from premature and censorious judging. We have something more pressing to do than to criticise each other. Ourselves are enough to keep our hands full, without taking a lift of our fellows conduct. And this, further, that, in view of the final judgment, we should hold a preliminary investigation on our own principles of action, and decide to adopt as the overruling law for ourselves, that we shall do nothing which will make duty harder for our brethren. Paul habitually settled small matters on large principles, and brought the solemnities of the final account to bear on the marketplace and the meal.

In verse 13 he lays down the supreme principle for settling the case in hand. No Christian is blameless if he voluntarily acts so as to lay a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in another's path. Are these two things the same? Possibly, but a man may stumble, and not fall, and that which makes him stumble may possibly indicate a temptation to a less grave evil than that which makes him fall does. It may be noticed that in the sequel we hear of a brother's being grieved first, and then of his being overthrown. In any case, there is no mistake about the principle laid down and repeated in verse 21. It is a hard saying for some of us. Is my liberty to be restricted by the narrow scruples of strait-laced Christians? Yes. Does not that make them masters, and attach too much importance to their narrowness? No. It recognises Christ as Master, and all His servants as brethren. If the scrupulous ones go so far as to say to the more liberal, You cannot be Christians if you do not do as we do then the limits of concession have been reached, and we are to do as Paul did, when he flatly refused to yield one hair's-breadth to the Judaisers. If a man says, You must adopt this, that, or the other limitation in conduct, or else you shall be unchurched, the only answer is, I will not. We are to be flexible as long as possible, and let weak brethren's scruples restrain our action. But if they insist on things indifferent as essential, a yet higher duty than that of regard to their weak consciences comes in, and faithfulness to Christ limits concession to His servants.

But, short of that extreme case, Paul lays down the law of curbing liberty in deference to narrowness. In verse 14 he states with equal breadth the extreme principle of the liberal party, that nothing is unclean of itself. He has learned that in the Lord Jesus. Before he was in Him, he had been entangled in cobwebs of legal cleanness and uncleanness; but now he is free. But he adds an exception, which must be kept in mind by the liberal-minded section--namely, that a clean thing is unclean to a man who thinks it is. Of course, these principles do not affect the eternal distinctions of right and wrong. Paul is not playing fast and loose with the solemn, divine law which makes sin and righteousness independent of men's notions. He is speaking of things indifferent--ceremonial observances and the like; and the modern analogies of these are conventional pieces of conduct, in regard to amusements and the like, which, in themselves, a Christian man can do or abstain from without sin.

Verse 15 is difficult to understand, if the for at the beginning is taken strictly. Some commentators would read instead of it a simple but which smooths the flow of thought. But possibly the verse assigns a reason for the law in verse 13, rather than for the statements in verse 14. And surely there is no stronger reason for tender consideration for even the narrowest scruples of Christians than the obligation to walk in love. Our common brotherhood binds us to do nothing that would even grieve one of the family. For instance, Christian men have different views of the obligations of Sunday observance. It is conceivable that a very broad Christian might see no harm in playing lawn-tennis in his garden on a Sunday; but if his doing so scandalised, or, as Paul says, grieved Christian people of less advanced views, he would be sinning against the law of love if he did it.

There are many other applications of the principle readily suggested. The principle is the thing to keep clearly in view. It has a wide field for its exercise in our times, and when the Christian brotherhood includes such diversities of culture and social condition. And that is a solemn deepening of it, Destroy not with thy meat him for whom Christ died. Note the almost bitter emphasis on thy, which brings out not only the smallness of the gratification for which the mischief is done, but the selfishness of the man who will not yield up so small a thing to shield from evil which may prove fatal, a brother for whom Christ did not shrink from yielding up life. If He is our pattern, any sacrifice of tastes and liberties for our brother's sake is plain duty, and cannot be neglected without selfish sin. One great reason, then, for the conduct enjoined, is set forth in verse 15. It is the clear dictate of Christian love.

Another reason is urged in verses 16 to 18. It displays the true character of Christianity, and so reflects honour on the doer. Your good is an expression for the whole sum of the blessings obtained by becoming Christians, and is closely connected with what is here meant by the kingdom of God. That latter phrase seems here to be substantially equivalent to the inward condition in which they are who have submitted to the dominion of the will of God. It is the kingdom within us which is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. What have you won by your Christianity? the Apostle in effect says, Do you think that its purpose is mainly to give you greater licence in regard to these matters in question? If the most obvious thing in your conduct is your eating and drinking, your whole Christian standing will be misconceived, and men will fancy that your religion permits laxity of life. But if, on the other hand, you show that you are Christ's servants by righteousness, peace, and joy, you will be pleasing to God, and men will recognise that your religion is from Him, and that you are consistent professors of it.

Modern liberal-minded brethren can easily translate all this for to-day's use. Take care that you do not give the impression that your Christianity has its main operation in permitting you to do what your weaker brethren have scruples about. If you do not yield to them, but flaunt your liberty in their and the world's faces, your advanced enlightenment will be taken by rough-and-ready observers as mainly cherished because it procures you these immunities. Show by your life that you have the true spiritual gifts. Think more about them than about your breadth, and superiority to narrow prejudices. Realise the purpose of the Gospel as concerns your own moral perfecting, and the questions in hand will fall into their right place.

In verses 19 and 20 two more reasons are given for restricting liberty in deference to others scruples. Such conduct contributes to peace. If truth is imperilled, or Christ's name in danger of being tarnished, counsels of peace are counsels of treachery; but there are not many things worth buying at the price of Christian concord. Such conduct tends to build up our own and others Christian character. Concessions to the weak may help them to become strong, but flying in the face of their scruples is sure to hurt them, in one way or another.

In verse 15, the case was supposed of a brother's being grieved by what he felt to be laxity. That case corresponded to the stumbling-block of verse 13. A worse result seems contemplated in verse 20,--that of the weak brother, still believing that laxity was wrong, and yet being tempted by the example of the stronger to indulge in it. In that event, the responsibility of overthrowing what God had built lies at the door of the tempter. The metaphor of overthrowing is suggested by the previous one of edifying. Christian duty is mutual building up of character; inconsiderate exercise of liberty may lead to pulling down, by inducing to imitation which conscience condemns.

From this point onwards, the Apostle first reiterates in inverse order his two broad principles, that clean things are unclean to the man who thinks them so, and that Christian obligation requires abstinence from permitted things if our indulgence tends to a brother's hurt. The application of the latter principle to the duty of total abstinence from intoxicants for the sake of others is perfectly legitimate, but it is an application, not the direct purpose of the Apostle's injunctions.

In verses 22 and 23, the section is closed by two exhortations, in which both parties, the strong and the weak, are addressed. The former is spoken to in verse 22, the latter in verse 23. The strong brother is bid to be content with having his wider views, or faith--that is, certainty that his liberty is in accordance with Christ's will. It is enough that he should enjoy that conviction, only let him make sure that he can hold it as in God's sight, and do not let him flourish it in the faces of brethren whom it would grieve, or might lead to imitating his practice, without having risen to his conviction. And let him be quite sure that his conscience is entirely convinced, and not bribed by inclination; for many a man condemns himself by letting wishes dictate to conscience.

On the other hand, there is a danger that those who have scruples should, by the example of those who have not, be tempted to do what they are not quite sure is right. If you have any doubts, says Paul, the safe course is to abstain from the conduct in question. Perhaps a brother can go to the theatre without harm, if he believes it right to do so; but if you have any hesitation as to the propriety of going, you will be condemned as sinning if you do. You must not measure your corn by another man's bushel. Your convictions, not his, are to be your guides. Faith is used here in a somewhat unusual sense. It means certitude of judgment. The last words of verse 23 have no such meaning as is sometimes extracted from them; namely, that actions, however pure and good, done by unbelievers, are of the nature of sin. They simply mean that whatever a Christian man does without clear warrant of his judgment and conscience is sin to him, whatever it is to others.