

The Christian Life.

BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D.

Brothers, let every man wherein he is called, be holy as God is holy. You find that three times within the compass of a very few sentences this injunction is repeated. "As God hath distributed to every man," says the apostle in the 17th verse, "as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all churches." Then again, in the 23rd verse, "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called." And then finally in our text.

The reason for this emphatic reiteration is not difficult to ascertain. There were strong temptations to restlessness besetting the early Christians. The great change from heathenism to Christianity would seem to have swept the joints of all life, and having been swept from their charge in religion, all external things would appear to be adrift. It was most natural that a man should seek to alter the circumstances of his life, and when he was free, the freeman, in some paroxysm of disgust at his former condition, trying to become a slave. These three cases are all referred to in the context—marriage, circumcision, slavery. And for all these the apostle has the same advice to give—stop where you are. In whatever condition you were when God's invitation drew you to Himself—for that, and not being set to a "vocation" in life, is the meaning of the word "called" here—remain in it.

And then, on the other hand, there was every reason why the apostle and his co-workers should set themselves, by all means in their power, to oppose this restlessness. For, if Christianity in those early days had once degenerated into the mere instrument of social revolution, its development would have been thrown back for centuries, and the whole world and power of it, for those who first apprehended it, would have been lost. So you know Paul never said a word to encourage any precipitate attempts to change external things. He does not say, do not trouble yourselves about external circumstances; keep to your Christian profession; let those alone, they will right themselves. Art thou a slave? Seek not to be free. Art thou circumcised? Seek not to be uncircumcised. Get hold of the central, vivifying, transmuting influence, and all the rest is a question of time. But, besides this more special application of the words of my text to the primitive times, it carries with it, dear brethren, a large general principle that applies to all a principle I may say, dead in the teeth of the maxims upon which life is being ordered by the most of us. Our maxim is, "Get on! Paul's is, "Never mind about getting on, get up." Our notion is—"Try to make the circumstances of your life what you have them." Paul's is—"Leave circumstances to take care of themselves, or rather leave God to take care of the circumstances. You get close to him, and hold His hand, and everything else will right itself. Only he is not preaching this to the unconverted. His previous injunctions were—"Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called." He says that that may be misconceived and abused, and so, in his third reiteration of the precept, he puts in a word which means a flood of light upon the whole thing—"Let every man wherein he is called therein abide." Yes, but that is not all—"therein abide with God!" Aye, that is it! not an impossible stoicism; not hypocritical, fanatical contempt of the external. But whilst that gets its due force and its light, what a man yields himself in a measure to the natural tastes and inclinations which God has given him, and with the intention that he should find there subordinate guidance and impulse for his life, still let him abide wherein he is called with God, and seek to increase his fellowship with Him, as the man thing that he has to do.

I. Thus we are led from the words before us first to the thought that our chief effort in life ought to be union with God. "Abide with God," which, being put into a word which means a flood of light upon the whole thing—"Let every man wherein he is called therein abide with God!" Aye, that is it! not an impossible stoicism; not hypocritical, fanatical contempt of the external. But whilst that gets its due force and its light, what a man yields himself in a measure to the natural tastes and inclinations which God has given him, and with the intention that he should find there subordinate guidance and impulse for his life, still let him abide wherein he is called with God, and seek to increase his fellowship with Him, as the man thing that he has to do.

Most men seem to think that they have gone to the very bottom of the thing when they have classified the gifts of fortune as good or evil, according as they produce pleasure or pain. But this is a poor, superficial classification. It is like taking and arranging books by their bindings and flowers by their colors. Instead of saying, We divide life into two halves, and we put there all the joyful, and here all the sad, for that is the ruling distinction—let us rather say, The whole is one, because it all comes from one purpose, and it all tends towards one end. The only question worth asking in regard to the externals of our life is—how far does each thing help me to be a good man? How far does it open my understanding to apprehend Him? How far does it make my spirit pliable and plastic under His touch? How far does it make me capable of larger reception of greater gifts from Himself? What is its effect in preparing me for that world beyond us? Is there any greater, more satisfying, more majestic thought of life than this—the scaffolding by which souls are built up into the temple of God? And to care whether a thing is painful or pleasant is as absurd as to care whether the bricklayer's trowel is knocking the sharp corner off a brick, or plastering mortar on the one below it before he lays it carefully on its course. Is the building getting on? That is the one question that is worth thinking about.

You and I write our lives as if on one of those manifold writers which you use. A thin filmy sheet here, a bit of black paper below it; but the writing goes through upon the next page, and when the blackness that divides two worlds is swept away there—the history of each life written by ourselves remains legible in Eternity. And the question is—what sort of autobiography are we writing for the revelation of that day, and how far do our circumstances help us to transcribe fair in our lives the will of our God and the image of our Redeemer? If, then, we have once got hold of that principle that all which is—summer and winter, storm and sunshine, possession and loss, memory and hope, work and rest, and all the other antitheses of life—is equally the product of His will, and the manifestation of His mind, equally His means for our discipline, then we have the amulet and talisman which will preserve us from the fever of desire and the shivering fits of anxiety, as to things which perish. And, as they tell of a Christian father, who, riding by one of the great lakes of Switzerland, one day long on his way to the church council that was absorbing his thoughts, said to

ward evening to the deacon who was pacing beside him, "Where is the lake?" so you and I journeying along by the margin of this great flood of things when wild storm sweeps across it or when the sunbeams glint upon its blue waters, "and birds of peace are brooding on the charmed wave," shall be careless of the changeful sea if the eye looks beyond the visible and beholds the unseen, the unchanging real presences that make glory in the darkest lives, and "shinings in the shady places." Let every man wherein he is called, therein abide with God!

Another very remarkable idea suggested by a part of the context is, What is the need for my troubling myself about outward changes when I am not having the peculiarities which make any given position desirable to me? To take concrete examples—if a man is a slave he may be free in Christ. If free, he may have the joy of utter submission to an absolute master in Christ. If you and I are lonely we may feel all the delights of society by union with Him. If surrounded and distracted by companionship, and seeking for seclusion, we may get all the peace of perfect privacy in fellowship with Him. If we are rich and sometimes think that we were in a position of loss temptation, if we were poorer, we should find all the need for which we sometimes covet poverty in communion with Him. If we are poor and fancy that if we had a little more just to lift us above the grinding carking care of to-day and the anxiety of to-morrow, we should have a better chance of being able to give to Him, and so you may run through all the variety of human conditions and say to yourself, What is the use of looking for blessings flowing from them from without? Enough for us if we grasp the Lord who is all in all, and will give us in peace the joy of conflict, in conflict the calm of peace, in health the refinement of sickness, in sickness the vigor and glow of health, in memory the brightness of unyielding hope, in hope the calmness of holy memory, in wealth the lowliness of poverty, in poverty the ease of wealth; in life and death, in heaven and more than all that dazzles us by the false gleam of created brightness!

Our text is a revolutionary one. It is dead against the watchwords that you fathers give your children—"push, push, push, push, push, push, whatever you do." You have made a philosophy of it, and you say that this restless discontent with a man's present position and eager desire to get a little further ahead in the scramble—that that implies much modern civilization and progress and to be envied, and more than all that dazzles us by the false gleam of created brightness!

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These were members of her Sunday-school class, and upon them she had exerted an influence for a considerable period of time. But the other four were newly-found acquaintances, members of a family brought to the appreciation of the sweetness of fellowship by believers through this Christian worker's kindly offices, beginning with a call upon the mother of the household. Christians must not despair of being soul-winners. Ways in which they may exercise an influence for good upon either old friends or new friends will be opened up for them, if they put themselves under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and keep their eyes open that they may see and seize the blessed opportunity when it comes.—Interior.

The Greatest of These. Mary, Lucy and Ellen were sitting in the bay window working as though their lives depended on finishing those particular pieces of fancy-work while daylight lasted. They were all pretty and gracious young things, charming like the flock of English sparrows outside in the ivy. Now that the sun has come out, how different everything looks; if the fair were not coming off so soon, I should drop everything and go out.

There goes Miss Randall home from school. "How tired she looks! Her children are too much for her." "I am not going to waste any sympathy on her," said Ellen; "they say she is a good woman, but her manners seem to me to be extremely abrupt, cold and repelling."

"What expressionless hair she has, and eyes equally so," added Lucy. "Her hair would not be so bad if she would arrange it better; for my part, I think she is rather sweet-looking," said Mary, gently.

"I'll be bound, Mary, if there is anything good to see in her, you will see it, uninteresting as she is. Isn't there some chemical which always finds the gold if there is any?" "Yes," continued Lucy. "I think I could safely leave my character and person in Mary's hands, and feel sure she would give me the best she could for me behind my back. If she will do it for the merest acquaintance, she will for me."

Mary laughed and blushed while she said: "She's a kind work, or say nothing at all." The other girls regarded her affectionately, for Mary was loved by everyone. "Girls," said she, "it is much easier to keep from criticizing people than to avoid 'thinking evil.' Whenever I want to give myself good overeating, I read that thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. Dear, dear, how can one reach such a standard as that? 'Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth.'"

Nothing was said for a few moments, and then Ellen remarked: "I do enjoy saying just what I think of people once in awhile, and having it all out." "But suppose you are being dissected, and not only that, but defend yourself. I always think of that." "Oh, I take it for granted that people express their opinions of me just as I do of them. There is another thing. How can I say nice things of one I thoroughly dislike?" "Mother says it is best to say as little as possible about a person one dislikes."

"Well, Mary, how can one help thinking evil?" "I read somewhere that one can not prevent the birds from flying over one's head, but we can keep them from making nests in our hair." "I do not believe, Mary, that you and Cousin John ever think evil of any one, or it would come out sometimes." "Heigho!" exclaimed Dr. John, pushing aside the portiere and entering the room from the adjoining library. "My dear, I did not intend to be an eavesdropper, but was looking for a book, and caught some of your interesting remarks. When you began on me, I thought it was time to assert myself."

"I am sure we were just saying something complimentary," said Ellen, hastily reviewing the conversation in her mind. "Yes," replied her cousin, "it was an agreeable surprise." "Now, that is too bad," cried Ellen. "Well, you have just admitted that you like to hear your friends to pieces. French authors say if you are being bitten behind their backs there would not be four friends in the world. It sounds cynical, but sometimes I am half inclined to think it is only too true."

"Cousin John," said Mary, "do you not think it makes me happier to be on the lookout for good qualities in every one you meet?" "There is no doubt of it; and I know a pretty legend which I will tell you but first let me tell you something which will explain Miss Randall's eccentricities. She has something like a cancer, and had to endure a severe operation at the hospital a few weeks ago. She is not strong enough to think now, but is compelled to do so in order to support her mother, who is a very much of an invalid, and does not even know that her daughter has this cancer. I consider her a heroine." "Poor girl!" cried Ellen; "let us all be good to her. No wonder she is cross, if she is suffering all the time. But tell us the story, Cousin John." "You all know how the streets of Jerusalem swarm with homeless, hungry dogs of the lowest type, until they are almost a plague. An old legend tells us that one of these gaunt creatures lay dead in the street, the butt and scorn of passers-by, each of whom gave it a kick or made some scolding remark all but one, who stood for a moment, looking with pity even upon it, and said gently: 'Pearls are not whiter than thy teeth.' Then all knew that he was the Christ, for no one else had charity enough to see beyond a dead dog." "The girls were silent, but each took the lesson to heart. They loved their Saviour, though self and the world sometimes came between and obscured that love. Nothing more was said on the subject, but Dr. John was amused to see how particularly kind they were to Miss Randall after that. Ellen was seen gathering a large bouquet of roses to send her by one

of the school children on the following morning, and gradually the poor girl's life was brightened by many pleasant little attentions. When they learned to know her better, they discovered more of her true worth of character, and found that she could be an affectionate as well as lovable friend.

On the morning of the day when the famous bazaar was to come off, the girls received a package containing a beautiful slumber rug, with a note, saying: "I want to do something to show my appreciation of your kindness—your loving kindness—to me since I came here a stranger. I know that something for your fair will be more acceptable than anything else, so please accept this, which no mother has good me to make." The girls were quite overcome at the thought of her spending her precious leisure in doing this elaborate piece of work, but she assured them that it had given her, particularly her mother, the greatest pleasure to make it.

"Their gratitude is quite out of proportion to the cause," Ellen remarked privately; "and I have made up my mind never to express an opinion until I know the character of a person. It is so easy to be mistaken." "Do we not often misjudge our friends and acquaintances, because we can not know their secret hindrances and difficulties? Perhaps they have some anxiety resting heavily, which makes them seem selfish and unsympathetic. Let us be on the lookout for good, rather than disabuse ourselves, and find the bright side of people's characters—feeling sure that there is a bright side. Let us ask humbly for grace to avoid the sin of taking up a reproach against our neighbor, so that the world may have no occasion to say, ironically: 'See how these Christians love one another.'"

—That was a suggestive lament of a Connecticut deacon. Referring to twelve persons who had joined his church on profession of faith on a given Sunday, he said: "There was not one sinner among them." Alas! in these days of laxity we see so little deep conviction of sin. We can not explain it by saying that people are so much better in heart and so much more fully instructed that such deep conviction as our fathers felt is not necessary with us. It was Paul of blameless life, living "in all good conscience," who felt himself the chief of sinners. And the better a man is, the deeper will be his sense of guilt; the clearer his vision, the more plainly will he see the stains on his soul.

When a farmer wishes an abundant harvest he plows deep; when the Holy Spirit wishes an hundred fold from the seed sown in the heart, he plows deep with conviction of sin. Shallow conviction is not followed by much love. We see the same "compassion to enter the straight gate;" there is more hope that they will walk steadfastly along the narrow path without looking back or sighing for the flesh pots they have left behind. It is inspiring to see a man overwhelmed with a sense of guilt before God, feeling in his heart that he is lost and condemned, and that his damnation is just. Such a man will love all the more the Saviour who has rescued him from such guilt, and will hate sin all the more. It is "the broken and contrite heart," which God delights to accept.

There are among us a mischievous tendency to try to make salvation pleasant to the carnal heart. There is too much preaching as if all that was necessary was a willingness to accept Jesus; too much dwelling on that willingness, which is the sinners' "strait gate." Too little is heard of "golly arroy for sin," and the result is our churches are being filled with members to whom such language as David and Paul use, and such as we read in Bunyan's Grace Abounding and in Augustine's Confessions, is well nigh meaningless. Their mothers have never had such feelings of their awful state before a broken law and a holy God. This is not because the saints of old were guiltier than the men of to-day, but because they had a deeper and truer knowledge of sin.

We all have many and great sins to be forgiven, and the love we cherish toward Christ will be in proportion to our sense of the enormity of our guilt. Admit that a man can be saved without such deep contrition, yet the love of such will be small in consequence of the shallowness of their conviction. He who is crushed into the dust by a sense of his awful guilt will love much. Our love will be in proportion to our sense of sin, and that love will give us a clearer insight into God's character and our obligations, and this will give us a deeper sense of the greatness of the sins that have been forgiven, and this will strengthen our love. The road to deeper and stronger love lies through repentance, which is not ended with regeneration, but continues so long as we commit sin. Jesus said of the woman who had washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." The sicker a man feels himself to be, the more will he love the physician who heals him.—Western Recorder.

Mr. Spurgeon is much improved in health and is preaching with all his old time power. From the London Baptist we learn that Mr. Spurgeon wrote the other day to an American lady (Mrs. Ambler) who had sent him a box of a remedy for rheumatism: "The medicine has just now arrived, and as I happen to be suffering from an attack, it comes at the right time. I have already taken so many drugs that I mistake the woman who suffered many things of many physicians and was nothing bettered. Yet I will try again. May God bless the means. The newspapers represent me as soon to be done for, but I shall outlive many of them and be heard when some of their thunder is hushed in the eternal silence."—Christian Secretary.

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