Constraining Love.

REV. ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D.D.

"The love of Christ constraineth us."—2 Cor. 5:14

We do not usually pay much attention to a man analyzing his own motives, especially if he lays claim to heroic and noble ones. But now and then we have to take men at their own valuation; and foremost among these select, transparent souls is Paul. Here he is laying bare his heart for us. There seldom if ever has been a religious teacher who spoke so much about himself as this Apostle did, and in all of his references there is not one note that sounds insincere or false.

Here he tells us that Jesus Christ's love to him has laid such a strong, tender, sinless grasp upon him as that he is shut up to devote himself to the service of Christ and the good of his fellows; even to the point of being charged with madness. The life confirmed the profession. If we want to know the secret of one of the most heroic careers ever lived, we have it here. If we want to make our lives pure and noble, we have to take Paul's motto for ours, "The love of Christ constraineth us."

Now this profession, as doubtful ordinarily, and as nobly vindicated by the facts of the life in the case of the man that made it, suggests to me one or two questions.

1. First, where lies the power of Christ upon men?

"The love of Christ constrains us," says Paul. Now, here, "the love of Christ" means, of course, not mine to Him, but His to me. The constraining influence is outside of me, not within me. It is the love wherewith Christ loved Paul that laid its grasp upon him; not the love wherewith Paul loved Christ. Observe, too, that the true meaning of the word rendered "constraineth" scarcely seems to be that which that word has in our modern language. We mean by it, *obliged, compelled*, generally with some suggestion of unwillingness in the constraint. Paul meant by it one of two things; and it is somewhat difficult to decide which he intended here, as the word lends itself to either. In one view he meant that the love of Christ had laid hold upon him and held him tight; in the other view he means that the love of Christ had, as it were, hedged up his path, limited his vagrant freedom, and made it obligatory and imperative upon him, restraining himself from every thing else, to devote himself utterly to the service of Jesus and of men. These meanings come substantially to the same thing. I need not trouble you with further reference to the mere form of the expression, but the more important question that I desire to raise is, What was it that gave to the love of Christ its constraining power? How did it come to lay such a masterful hand upon Paul? What was it in Christ's love to him that built up such a barrier between him and former ways of living that he did not any longer care even to look, much less to climb, over it, but walks within narrow limits which Christ had enjoined, and found them to be liberty and breadth?

The answer lies most distinctly in the words which follow my text: "Because we thus judge, that if One died for all then all died; and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him."

So, then, the element which gave this constraining power to the love which constrained was the fact of the Lover's death. There is nothing in the whole world parallel with the permanent influence which Jesus Christ exercises all through the centuries. Contrast it with the influence of all other great names in the past; how shadowy, how superficial, how merely one amongst a multitude the force on this generation of the greatest is! But here is a man dead for nearly nineteen centuries, who is still influencing thousands of people, however imperfectly, yet to an extent and in a manner wholly unparalleled and unique.

Love is like some delicate wines, which lose all their *bouquet* and aroma when they are taken a sea voyage. You can not carry it across the great ocean of time without evaporating its pungency and its power. It is but a poor, pale, shadowy thing when it reaches the feet of the dead and sceptred spirits, that still, in some fashion, do rule the nations from their urns.

Then how do you account for the fact that there is one Man who stands out in the past, solitary in His immortal power, and to whom millions of hearts have turned and do turn, owning the mystic influence that comes from His finger, and regarding a smile on His face as possible, and as more than sufficient guerdon for the miseries of life, and the agonies of death. The phenomenon is so strange that one is led to ask where lies the secret of the power. Paul tells us "The love . . . constrains," and it does so because He died.

That is to say, if we are to feel His constraining love, we must first of all believe that Jesus Christ loved us in the past, and loves us in the present. If that dear Lord knew no more of the dim generations that were to come, and had no more individualizing reference to the units that make up their crowds, than some benefactor or teacher of old may have had, who flung out his wise words or his fair deeds, as archers draw their bows, not knowing where the arrow would light, then the love which He deserves from me is even more tepid than the love which, on the supposition, He gave to me. But if I can believe, as Paul believed, that, although he had never seen Jesus Christ in the flesh, yet that he, the man of Tarsus, was in the mind and the heart of the Man of Nazareth when He died upon the Cross; and if we believe, as Paul believed, that, though that Lord had gone up on high, far above all principality and power, there were in His human-divine heart, a real knowledge of, and love to, His poor servant, struggling with beasts and sins down here, for His sake; then, and only then, as I take it, can we say reasonably the love that Christ bore, and bears to me, "constraineth me."

That is to say, if we are to love Christ, in distinction to merely admiring, reverencing, obeying His precepts and the like; if we are to love Him with any throb of that love which makes the good of earth, and the blessedness of being, we must go far deeper than such notions as I have been referring to to find the mystic charm that will evoke that love. You must believe that His love is divine, timeless, all-comprehensive, individualising, grasping each man, and so encompassing the world. Strike that article out of your creed, and the Christ that you have left is a cold image, to be coldly admired, and little more.

Further, if there is to be this warmth of love, there must be the recognition of His death, as the great sacrifice and sign of His love to us. "Rule thou over us," said the ancient people to their king, "for thou hast delivered us out of the hand of our enemies." The basis of Christ's authority, and the vital centre of all His power over men's hearts, by which He transforms lives, and lifts those which are embedded in selfishness up to the wondrous heights of self-denial, is to be found in the fact that He died on the Cross for each of us. As a matter of fact, those types of Christian teaching which have failed to hold the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ as the centre of His work, and have brought Him down to the level of a man, have failed to kindle any warmth of affection for Him. A Christ who did not love me when He was upon earth, nor loves me now that He is gone up on high, is not a Christ whom I can be called upon to love. And a Christ that did not die for me on the Cross is not a Christ who has either the right or the power to rule my life. We must accept that fulltoned teaching if we are to solve the riddle of the power which the Man of Nazareth has over all the world. Unless He were the Son of God, and therefore loving us each, as only a Divine heart can love; unless He were the Sacrifice for sin, and therefore rendering up Himself unto the death for each of us, there is nothing in Him that will absolutely sway hearts and perfectly ennoble lives. The Cross, interpreted as Paul interpreted it, is the secret of all His power, and if once Christian teachers and Christian churches fail to grasp it as Paul did, their strength is departed.

2. Secondly, what sort of life will this constraining love of Christ produce?

I turn to the context for an abundant answer. The first and most important reply which comes from them is this—a life in which self is deposed and Christ is King.

The natural life of man has self for its centre. That is the definition of sin, and it is the condition of us all, exemplified and manifested in more or less subtle forms, though, without doubt, often, when great enthusiasms come into men's minds, there is a departure from the fundamental and ruling principle. Yet nothing else but Jesus Christ can conclusively and radically eject the supreme regard of self from the heart, and throne the unselfishly Beloved in the vacant place. Otherwise Christ's grim and awful description applies—when the evil spirit is gone out, the house is empty, swept or made clean, garnished or beautified, and made comfortable and convenient with much furniture and many adornments—but, for all that, empty. And then comes the evil spirit back again. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the only way to keep the devil out is to get Christ in.

So the context implies that self-denial is only possible when the chains that hold us are melted or broken by the warmth of Christ's love, or by the sceptre which He wields. Then, and only then, shall we lose ourselves when we find Him.

There is but one power, dear brother, which is strong enough to lift our lives from the pivot on which they turn, and to set them vibrating in a new direction, and that is the recognition of the infinite and so tender love of Jesus Christ for each of us, which charms us away from our selfishness, and turns us into His servants and children. That love may constrain us, in the words of my text, shutting out much that one used to like to expatiate in; but within these limits there is perfect freedom. "I walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts." There is no life so blessed, none so sweet, serene, and heroic, none in which suffering is so light, pain so easy, duty so doable as the life that we live when, by Christ's grace, we have thrown off the dominion of self and held out willing wrists to be enfranchised by being fettered by the "bands of love." Self-denial for Christ's sake is the secret of all blessed life.

A comet—these vagrants of the skies—has liberty to roam, and what does it make of it? It plunges away out into depths of darkness and *Infernos* of ice and cold. But if it came within the attraction of some great blazing sun, and subsided into a planet, it would have lost nothing of its true liberty, and would move in music and light around the source of blessedness and life. And so you and I, as long as we make ourselves the "sinful centres of our rebel powers," so long do we subject ourselves to alterations of temperature almost too great to bear. Let us come back to the light, and move round the Christ: satellites of that Sun, and therefore illumined by His light and warmed by His life-producing heat. Self must be slain if we are to be blessed. If self is to be slain, Christ must slay it.

Again, the sort of life which Christ's love, recognized, will produce is one that will often look like madness. "Whether we be beside ourselves," says Paul, "it is to God." He was evidently quoting some of the stinging nettles of speech which had been cast at him by his antagonists. "He is mad," they said of him, as they said of his Master. A life of true yielding to Jesus Christ's love, in which He is heard to speak, and reigns alone, will often look like insanity to the men who have no share in the heavenly vision. But such enthusiasts are the salt of the earth; and the madmen of to-day are the Solomons of to-morrow. Oh! would that amongst us conventional and cold professors of Christianity, so afraid to do anything higher and nobler, more self-sacrificing and more Christlike, than the low average of conduct of the people round about us, there would come similar "fanatics" once more. They would lift all the level of this hollow Christianity in which so many of us are living. If we once had amongst us men after Christ's pattern—nay, I drop the requirement, after Paul's pattern—some of us who think ourselves very consistent and estimable Christian people on the whole would begin to feel the red coming into our cheeks, and would wonder whether all the while we had not been deceiving ourselves. The man who professes to live for Christ, and by Christ, and like Christ, and never gets anybody to laugh at him as "enthusiastic," and "impracticable," and "Quixotic," and all the rest of it, has much need to ask himself whether he is as near the Master as he conceits himself to be.

Further, this constraining love will produce lives of self-sacrifice which, in all their enthusiasm, are ruled by the highest sobriety and clearest sanity. "Whether we be sober it is for your cause." It is a matter of course that the men who do not see what we see shall think us to be absurd because we say we see the city of palm trees where they only see dancing heat pillars, and shall think that we are mad because we say that we are journeying thither, and that that is our home. But the sanity is with the enthusiasts, as it generally is. There is more sober sense in being what the world calls fanatical, if the truths upon the pages of Scripture are truths, than in being cold and composed in their presence. The sanity is, as it has a knack of being in this world, on the side of the enthusiasts, and the madness is on the side of the "prudent" people. Balaam, although he was a seer, and a stargazer, and a learned man, and a professor of magic much run after by influential people, and a king's counsellor, saw nothing but the vines stretching over the rough walls; and the poor, despised animal that he bestrode saw the angel. The enthusiasts, who see visions and dream dreams about God and Christ and heaven and hell, and the duties that are consequent, these are the sober-minded men; and the others, who see only the shadows dancing upon the walls of their prison-house, and never look beyond to the realities that surround them, are beside themselves. There were many wise and learned rabbis in Jerusalem, and many intimate and affectionate friends in Tarsus, who, when the news came that young Saul, Gamaliel's promising pupil, had gone over to the enemy, and flung up the splendid prospects opening before him, said to themselves, "What a fool the young man is!" They kept their belief, and he kept his. All the lives are over now. Which of them was the wise life?

Young men and women who have yours to shape, lay this to heart, that wisdom points to enthusiastic devotion to Jesus Christ. Then—and I was going to say, and only then, but that might be an exaggeration—is life worth living.

3. Lastly, here is a question for you. What is your attitude to that constraining love?

The outward manner of the Apostle's life is not for us, but the principles which underlay the outward manner is as absolutely, and as imperatively, and as all comprehensively applicable in our case as it was in his. Paul got no more from Jesus Christ than you and I may get. Jesus Christ did nothing more for Paul than He has done for you. There was absolutely no reason for Paul's devotion which does not continue in full force for yours and mine.

Christian men and women, do you believe in that dying and living love for you? Have you laid it upon your hearts till it moulds your life? Do you repay it with devotion in any measure adequate to what you have received?

And for some of us who make no profession, and have no reality of Christian feeling, the question is, "Do ye thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?" Jesus Christ has given Himself for thee, my friend; has loved, and does love, thee; died for thee. He stretches out that grasping hand, with a nail-hole in it, to lay hold upon you, and you slip from His clasp, and oppose to His love a negligent and unaffected heart. Is there any madness in this mad world like that? Is there any sin like the sin of the ingratitude to Jesus of some in this place this evening? Where shall wisdom, and peace, and blessedness, and nobleness be found, except we say, "The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*"?

Wherewithal Shall a Young Man Cleanse his Way?

The following salutary counsel to young men was uttered recently by Dr. Marcus Dods. We quote from the *British Weekly*:

Until we fight against sin as the allies and subjects of Christ, as well as for our own sake, we seem to fight, not in Christ's strength, but in our own. And if we think of our sin as mainly our affair, if we hate it mainly for the shame it brings upon us, then when we are tempted by it, and when our own view of it is changed, the advantage and pleasure of it being now clear, and the shame of it remote and dimly seen, there is absolutely nothing to restrain us from it. But if we habitually live with Christ and consider His will in all things, and that our sin brings grief to Him, when we are tempted, though our own view of sin is altered, we are conscious that His view of it remains the same, and in sympathy with His judgment we also condemn it.

I suppose every one of you is conscious of some sin, of something that lowers you in your own eyes, and that sometimes makes you fear it is stronger than you are, and may carry you into a future of the darkest and saddest kind. There is, may I not say, something in the character or life of each of you which must be removed ere you can be all you ought to be. If so, what business most urgently calls you, or when accomplished will give you a truer satisfaction and set your feet free for future attainment and enjoyment, than to clear away this recognized and growing evil? Could you have any truer joy this day than to be able to say that the thing which most troubled and threatened you has been removed? Why should you not have this happiness, say, in a year hence? Deal seriously with these serious things—look forward to what awaits you in life. Be perfectly sure that through sin lies no path to happiness, that every step you take on that road must be retraced with the shaming conviction that you have been a fool. Each part of life has its own duties and its own opportunities, and at no future period can you come back into the past and make up for bygone omissions. The future periods have their own tasks, and are so filled with what is proper to them that what has been left undone in a former period cannot now be attended to. You are permanently crippled for life in that omitted particular.

—"One thing that convinces me that the New Testament is a divine book is that its rules cannot be carried out except by spiritual men."

The Worker's Inspiration.

The faithful servants of God need not be distressed with doubts respecting the success of their endeavors; for they may know that their "labor is not in vain in the Lord," whether it is apparently successful or not. The sure promise is, that sowers shall be reapers, ultimately, if not immediately. An inspired apostle says, "Let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not." Those for whose encouragement these words were spoken, need not shrink from any service on account of seeming unsuccessfulness, so long as they can be "workers together with God." God does not fail as a worker, and no one will fail while working with and for Him. The expectation of invaluable results from devoted service for the Supreme Master, is fully warranted; but those results, while certain, may not be according to human calculations, in regard to either the time or the way of their manifestation.

While desired achievements may be delayed, or developed in a different manner from that in which they were looked for, those striving for them in the name of the Lord, are not to be discouraged, so as to lose their confidence as to the success of what they may do to advance the cause of God. There is positive certainty as to actual success, upon which they may confidently rely; but their assurance in this respect is not to be abused by giving place to any careless presumption, which assumes that ends will be accomplished regardless of means. True faith is as far removed from presumption as from despair. Let it not be forgotten that genuine confidence is not presumption. Fitly as well as epigrammatically has it been said:

"If you trust before you try,
You'll repent before you die."

Well did Matthew Henry say: "We do not trust God, but tempt Him, when our expectations slacken our exertions." While there are unfailing assurances given that there will be moral and spiritual harvests to fill enlarged and multiplied garners, yet these promises are not unconditional, but they presuppose the work of sowing, in order that there may be reaping. It is a saying to be accepted, that "every Christian should have strong and abiding confidence in God that what ought to be done can be done, and *help with all his might to do it.*" Promised blessings are anything but grounds for remissness in duty, calling as they do to action the most vigorous and untiring.

Very appropriately does Owen Feltham, an English writer who died about 1678, say: "Do thy part with industry, and leave the event with God. I have seen matters fall out so unexpectedly that they have taught me, in all affairs, neither to despair nor presume; not to despair, for God can help me; not to presume, for God can cross me. I will never despair, because I have a God; I will never presume, because I am but a man." In such a frame of mind no failure in the service of God need be dreaded; no work need to appear formidably arduous, or hopelessly unavailing; no withholding of effort will be tolerated. With right views in relation to these matters, there will be constant endeavor to comply with the requirement: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." Not unfitly does Thomas Carlyle say: "The latest gospel in this world is, to know thy work and do it. Know thyself: long enough has that poor self of thine tormented thee; thou wilt never get to 'know' it, I believe! Think it not thy business, this knowing thyself; thou art an unknowable individual; know what thou canst work at and work at it like a Hercules! That will be thy better plan." The appeal of C. F. Orne is ever timely:

"Ho all who labor, all who strive!
Ye wield a lofty power;
Do with your might, do with your strength,
Fill every golden hour!
The glorious privilege to do
Is man's most noble dower.
O, to your birthright and yourselves,
To your own souls be true!
A weary, wretched life is theirs
Who have no work to do."

To comply with these stirring calls may involve the experience of weariness, and those who are not weary of the work may be weary in it. This weariness will crave relief, such as trusting in God alone can afford. Confidence in God is a support to the weary and fainting toiler, which survives every other reliance of the oppressed and aching heart. No toil however severe need dishearten the Christian believer who holds "the shield of faith." Truthful as well as beautiful, are the words of Herbert Newbury:

"One sweetest word of holy meaning
Cometh to me o'er and o'er,
And the echoes of its music
Linger ever—evermore.
Trust—no other word we utter
Can so sweet and precious be,
Tuning all life's jarring discords
Into heavenly harmony."

The Secret.

I once knew a young collegian who, they told me, was making a deeper impression on his fellow-students and professors than any other student who had been in the institution for years. I heard of him everywhere. In all the clubs and meetings and delegations that were talked of before me this man's name was appearing, and I marvelled much at his enormous capacity for work. At last one of the professors speaking of him in the most glowing terms, threw in, in the middle of his eulogy, a sentence upon which I put my finger at once as the clue to the secret by which he accomplished the many things—too many, very probably—which he undertook. "Tom knows," said the professor, "the value of five minutes about as well as anybody I ever saw."

There is a sermon in a very few words. Do you know the value of fine minutes? If you do not, seek it out among the other tables of weights and measures, and study hard till you know exactly how much it equals, and you will have laid the foundation for much learning.

Begin with minutes. When you get to the end of a sentence in your French translation, do not stop to sketch a sheet of faces before you go on to the next. When you mean to indulge in an afternoon's pleasuring, do not idle about the house saying little nothings to each member of the family in turn until half of the time is gone. When you would lend a hand to prop up the right, to pull down the wrong, do not wait until the golden moment wanes and the adversary has gotten that often fatal advantage—a good start.

Frank, Harry, Tom, and Ned.

"Mamma, I get muddled over the Bible as often as I study. The deeper I go the worse it gets,—I mean, the more puzzled I get."

The speaker was Harry Marston, a bright youth of fourteen, who never passed over anything without understanding. Mamma paused from her sewing as Harry went on with characteristic dash:

"Matthew and Mark do seem to contradict each other, and I am not quite certain that Luke and John are in perfect accord. Set things in order for me, will you not, mother dearest?" and Harry's flushed but earnest face gazed eagerly into Mrs. Marston's.

"Certainly, my son, to the best of my ability—at another time. Your mind is tired from overwork. Ned is calling to you now, and I saw Frank and Tom Rosser entering the gate a moment ago."

Harry was off like a flash of lightning. In a few moment he returned with Ned and the visitors at his heels.

"Mamma, please may we go to Folly Dam bridge, and fish all the morning? We'—

"Please!" "Please!" "Please!" broke in three voices.

"On one condition only," answered Mrs. Marston, "and this condition has four strings to it. Four boys must be at home to a three o'clock dinner, after which each one must write me a description of the morning's frolic from the time of setting out until the return."

The boys' faces clouded a little, as though they did not enjoy the condition, until Mrs. Marston added.

"I do not want a dull 'composition,' but a natural, happy recital of what I hope will be a very happy time."

Off they went, joyous because innocent, glad because free. Three o'clock found the quartette at home, and a little later they were doing justice to the finny demonstration that the morning's work had not been in vain.

After dinner, Mrs. Marston brought our four pencil tablets, and, after enjoining perfect silence the work began. In due time the four youthful scribes made creditable returns.

Frank Rosser was a born painter, so naturally he drew a vivid picture of scenic surroundings. Harry dashed along, describing accurately, but in rapid succession, the morning's doings. Tom was careful and precise, telling many little things omitted by the others. Ned was meditative, and while he related facts he drew moral lessons as he passed along.

"All together," said Mrs. Marston, approvingly, "they make a charming, and, I doubt not, perfect narration. The facts are the same, but how different is each sketch! You, Harry, say that, as you were crossing the bridge, Tom fell down, while Tom avers that he and Ned fell across the bridge. Which is correct? One must be wrong!"

"Oh no, mamma! Both are right. We were crossing, and the boys fell on the last plank. I didn't see Ned fall."

"And," pursued Mrs. Marston, "Frank says you were all standing at Farmer Grey's gate, while Ned distinctly affirms that you were sitting under a tree in his yard. How about this grave error? One must be entirely wrong."

"Not a bit of it, mother mine!" replied Harry. "Both are very facts. The tree is exactly at the gate."

"That being so," continued Mrs. Marston, "then I will draw a helpful lesson for you from to-day's pleasure. I think the supposed discrepancies in the gospel narratives may be disposed of in much the same way to oftimes weary puzzlers."

The appearance of Bridget called Mrs. Marston's attention to domestic matters, and the boys went to batting balls. That night, as the brothers clung to mamma for the good-night kisses, Harry asked:

"Little mother, didn't you make us write those pen sketches in order to illustrate the real harmony of the gospels?"

"Yes, my son. Don't you think it was a good way?"

"A very, very good way; and I know I shall never forget it."

"Nor I," put in Ned. "Tom and Frank said it made things seem new to them, and they are going to tell it at home to-night."

"I hope they will," said Harry; "for old Mr. Rosser is always harping on the contradictions of the Bible."

"Well," said mamma, "if our simple illustration, pleasingly learned, will be the means of helping one soul from darkness nearer the light, then truly the day's frolic will not have been in vain. Good night, my sons, and remember always that light comes to earnest seekers. God Himself is the source and essence of true harmony. There can be no discord in His words or dealings. We often miss a note because our lives are not attuned to His.

"Oh! let my life-harp be
Sweetly attuned to Thee,
Then shall I find true rest
In making others blest."

—*S. F. Surelle, in S. S. Times.*

—"The *abandon* with which we devote ourselves to God's interests will rest very much on the steadfastness of our faith in His providing care. On this point there is a living witness who, above all others of modern time, has a right to speak. His witness, given a few years ago, was substantially as follows: 'During the last fifty years, I have asked and received in answer to prayers more than £1,000,000. I have besides received tens of thousands of answers to prayer for spiritual blessings, and thousands of conversions to God. Moreover, in my work I have required hundreds of workers. Now it is not our work to make workers—that is the work of the Holy Spirit. He must provide them. I have asked for them and they have been sent when I needed them.' This wonderful testimony of George Muller reminds us that nothing pays so well as unfaltering obedience to the commands of Christ. Through all these fifty years and more he has been entirely devoted to God's kingdom. As thoroughly has he trusted his Master to care both for him and for his work, and now he tells us the results."

"And we know at length that if only
We give Him His royal seat,
The earthly music will take its place
And tremble around His feet,
Sweeter than ever, because to our hearts
The Master is still more sweet."

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