

# The Cross the Proof

by Alexander Maclaren

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*The speaker argues that the love of God needs to be proved, and that Christ's death is the demonstration of that love.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 53:5, Mark 10:45, John 3:16, John 14:9, Romans 5:8, Romans 8:39, Ephesians 2:4-5, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 John 3:1, 1 John 4:19

**Topics:** "The Cross of Christ", "God's Love"

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## Description

Alexander Maclaren emphasizes that God's love is proven through the death of Christ, which serves as the ultimate evidence of His love for humanity. He argues that the belief in a loving God is not self-evident and requires substantial proof, which is found in the sacrificial act of Jesus on the cross. Maclaren highlights that this act is not only a demonstration of divine love but also a necessary response to human sinfulness, bridging the gap between God's righteousness and love. He urges listeners to recognize the significance of Christ's death as a personal and eternal testament to God's unwavering love. Ultimately, Maclaren calls for a heartfelt response to this love, encouraging believers to love God in return.

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## Transcript

GOD COMMENDETH HIS LOVE. That is true and beautiful, but that is not all that the apostle means. We "commend" persons and things when we speak of them with praise and confidence. If that were the meaning of my text, it would represent the death of Christ as setting forth, in a manner to win our hearts, the greatness, the excellence, the transcendency, of God's love. But there is more than that in the words. The expression here employed strictly means "to set two things side by side," and it has two meanings in the New Testament, both derived from that original signification. It sometimes means to set two persons side by side, in the way of introducing and recommending the one to the other. It sometimes means to set two things side by side, in the way of confirming or proving the one by the other. It is used in the latter sense here. God not merely "commends," but "proves," His love by Christ's death. It is the one evidence which makes that often-doubted fact certain. Through it alone is it possible to hold the conviction that, in spite of all that seems to contradict the belief, God is Love. And so I wish to take the words in this sermon.

### The Need for Proof That God Does Love

To hear some men speak, you would suppose that one of the simplest, clearest, and most indisputable of all convictions was the love of God. People are found in plenty who reject the distinctive teaching of Christianity because they say that the sterner aspects of the evangelical faith seem to them to limit, or to

contradict, the great fundamental truth of all religion, as they take it, that God is Love. My friends, such people are kicking away the ladder by which they climbed. I venture to say that instead of the love of God being a plain, self-evident axiom, there needs very B evidence to give it a secure lodging-place amongst our settled beliefs.

Do the world's religions bear out the contention that it is so easy and natural for a man to believe in a loving God? I think not. Comparative mythology has taught a great many lessons, and amongst others this, that, apart from the direct or indirect influences of Christianity, there is no creed to be found in which the belief in a God of love and in the love of God is unfalteringly proclaimed, to say nothing of being set as the very climax of the whole revelation. If this were the place, one could pass in review men's thoughts about God and ask you to look at all that assemblage of beings before whom mankind has bowed down. What would you find? Gods cruel, gods careless, gods capricious, gods lustful, gods mighty, gods mysterious, gods pitying-with a contempt mingled with the pity-their sorrows and follies of mankind. But in all the pantheons there is not a loving god.

Before Jesus Christ there was no such thought, or if it were there at all, it was there as a faint hope, a germ overlaid by other conceptions. Independent of Jesus Christ's influence, there is no such thought now.

Where you find the death of Christ as the proof rejected and the conviction retained, as is often the case, you have only a sign that "the river of the water of life" has percolated to the roots of many a tree that grows far from its banks. It is Christ who has brought the fire of this conviction, in the broken reed of His dying flesh, and lodged it in the heart of humanity. So I say the love of God, as is proved by men's thoughts about Him, surely needs to be established on a basis of unmistakable evidence.

I add that all other evidences are insufficient. Do you appeal, in the fashion of Paley and the natural theologians, to the evidence of God in creation? Ah! you have invoked a very ambiguous oracle that seems to speak with two voices. I say nothing about the modification that argument has necessarily assumed if the theory of evolution is accepted. I do not think it is destroyed, but it is profoundly modified. For if God put into matter the promise and the potency of all these variations, He must lie back of the process, and be conceived of as forecasting, if not guiding, the evolution ' which ends in development. So the argument has only changed in its form and is unaffected in its substance.

But, putting aside all that, you speak of the goodness of God around us. What about storms, earthquakes, disasters, contrivances of producing pain, the law of destruction by which the creatures live by the slaying of one another-what about all these things? "Nature, red in tooth and claw with rapine, shrieks against the creed," that God is Love. And if we have nothing but the evidence of nature, it seems to me that there are two voices speaking there: One says, "There is a good God;" the other says, "Either His power is limited, or His goodness is partial."

The same ambiguous issue comes from the evidence of human life. Al! brethren, we have only to look into our own lives and to look round upon the awful sights that fill the world to make the robustest faith in the goodness and love of God stagger, unless it can stay itself against the upright stem of the cross of Christ. Sentimentalists may talk, but the grim fact of human suffering, of wretched, hopeless lives, rises up to say that there is no evidence broad and deep and solid enough, outside of Christianity, to make it absolutely certain that God is Love.

There is another thing that makes necessary some irrefutable proof far firmer and better than any of these that I have been referring to. That is, that conscience rises up and protests, when it is awake, against such a notion, apart from the cross. Everybody who honestly takes stock of himself and conceives of God in any measure aright, must feel that sin has come in to disturb all the relations between God and man. And when once a man comes to say, "I feel that I am a sinful man, and that God is a righteous God; how can I expect that His love will distill in blessings upon my head?" there is only one answer-"Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

So, for all these reasons I venture to lay it down as a principle, in spite of modern teaching of another sort, that the love of God is not a self-evident axiom, but needs to be proved.

### The Death That Does Prove the Love

How do we know, in our own happy experiences, that love toward us exists in another heart? Surely, by act. Words are well (and words are acts, of a sort); but we want something more. Paul thinks that- mightier than all demonstrations of a verbal kind, in order to establish the fact of love in the Divine heart to men-there must be some conspicuous and unmistakable act that is the outcome of that love. So mark that, when he wants to enforce this great truth-the shining climax of all the gospel revelation of the love of God, he does not go back to Christ's gentle words, nor to His teaching of God as the Father. Paul does not point to anything that Christ says, but he points to one thing that He did, and he says, "There! that cross is the demonstration."

And, since it has a special bearing on my subject, I wish to emphasize that distinction and to beseech you to believe that you have not got within sight of the secret of Jesus, nor come near tapping the sources of His power if you confine yourselves to His words and His teaching, or even to the lower acts of His gentle life. You must go to the cross. It would have been much that Paul would have spoken with certitude and with sweetness else unparalleled of the love of God. But words, however eloquent, however true, are not enough for the soul to rest its weight upon. We must have deeds, and these are all summed in "Christ died for us."

Now, there are but two things that I wish to say about this great proof of the love of God in act.

First, Christ's death proves God's love, because Christ is Divine. How else do you account for that extraordinary shifting of the persons in my text? "God proves His love because Christ died?" How so? God proved His love because Socrates died? God proved His love because some self-sacrificing doctor went into a hospital and died in curing others? God proved His love because some man sprang into the sea and rescued a drowning woman, at the cost of his own life? Would such talk hold? Then I wish to know how it comes that Paul ventures to say that God proved His love because Jesus Christ died.

Unless we believe that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son of the Father, whom the Father sent, and who willingly came for us men and for our redemption; unless we believe that, as He Himself said, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9); unless we believe that His death was the act, the consequence, and the revelation of the love of God, who dwelt in Him as in none other of the sons of men, I, for one, venture to think that Paul is talking nonsense in my text, and that his argument is not worth a straw. You must come to the full-toned belief which, as I think, permeates and binds together every page of the New Testament--God so loved the world, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for sins; that Son who in the beginning was with God, and was God; and then a flood of light is poured on the words of my text, and we can adoringly bow the head and say, "Amen! God hath, to my understanding, and to my

heart, proved and commended His love, in that Christ died for us!"

The second thought about this death that proves the love is, that it does so because it is a death for us. That "for us" implies two things: one, the voluntary act of God in Christ in giving Himself up to the death, the other the beneficial effect of that death. It was on our behalf. Therefore, it was the spontaneous outgush of an infinite love. It was for us in that it brought an infinite benefit. And so it was a token and a manifestation of the love of God such as nothing else could be.

Now, I wish to ask a question very earnestly: In what conceivable way can Christ's death be a real benefit to me? How can it do me any good? A sweet, a tender, an unexampled, beautiful story of innocence and meekness and martyrdom which will shine in the memory of the world, and on the pages of history, as long as the world shall last. It is all that; but what good does it do me? Where does the benefit to me individually come in? There is only one answer, and I urge you to ask yourselves if, in plain, sober, common sense, the death of Jesus Christ means anything at all to anybody, more than other martyrdoms and beautiful deaths, except upon one supposition, that He died for us, because He died instead of us. The two things are not necessarily identical, but, as I believe, and venture to press upon you, in this case they are identical. I do not know where you will find any justification for the rapturous language of the whole New Testament about the death of Christ and its benefits flowing to the whole world, unless you take the Master's own words, "The Son of Man came to minister, and to give His life a ransom instead of many" (Mark 10:45).

Ah, dear friends, there we touch the bedrock. That is the truth that flashes up the cross into luster before which the sun's light is but darkness. He who bore it died for the whole world and was the eternal Son of the Father. If we believe that, then we can understand how Paul here blends together the heart of God and the heart of Christ, and sets high above nature and her ambiguous oracles, high above providence and its many perplexities, and in face of all the shrinkings and fears of a reasonably alarmed conscience, the one truth, "God hath proved His love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Is that your faith, your notion of Christ's death and of its relation to the love of God?

#### The Love Which Is Proved by the Death

There is much bearing upon that in my text, which I can barely spare time to draw out. But let us think for a moment of the fact which is thus the demonstration of the love of God and try to realize what it is that, that cross says to us as we gaze upon the silent Sufferer meekly hanging there. I know that my words must fall far beneath the theme, but I can only hope that you will listen to them charitably and try to better them for yourselves in your own thoughts.

I look, then, to the dying Christ, and I see there the revelation, because the consequence of a love that is not called forth by any lovableness on the part of its objects. The apostle emphasizes the thought, if we render his words fully, because he says, "God proves His own love." It is a love which, like all that belongs to that timeless, self-determining Being, has its reason and its roots in Himself alone. We love because we discern the object to be lovable. God loves by what I may venture to call the very necessity of His nature. Like some artesian well that needs no pumps nor machinery to draw up the sparkling waters to flesh in the sunlight, there gushes up from the depths of His own heart the love that pours over every creature He has made. He loves because He is God.

In like manner, another word of my text bears upon this matter, for he says, "Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Oh! brethren, it is only the gospel of a dying Christ that can calm the reasonable

consciousness of discord and antagonism that springs in a man's heart when he lets his conscience speak. It is because He died for us that we are sure now that the black mountain-wall of our sin, which, to our own apprehension, rises separating between us and our God is, if I may so say, surged over by the rising flood of His love. The cross of Christ teaches me that, and so it is the gospel for men that know themselves to be sinners. Is there anything else that teaches it? I know not where it is, if there be.

That dying Christ, hanging there in the silence and the darkness of eclipse, speaks to me too, of a Divine love which, though not turned away by man's sin, is rigidly righteous.

I referred, at the beginning of my remarks, to the current, easy-going religion that says, "Oh! we do not want any of your evangelical contrivances for forgiveness. God is Love. That is enough for us." I venture to say that the thing which that form of thought calls love is not love at all, but pure weakness. Such in a king or in a father would be immoral. It is not otherwise in God. My brother! Unless you can find some means whereby the infinite love of God can get at and soothe the sinner's heart without periling God's righteousness, you have done nothing to the purpose. Such a one-eyed, lop-sided gospel will never work, has not worked, and it never will. But, when I think of my Christ bearing the sins of the world, I say to myself, "Herein is love. By His stripes we are healed," and in Him love and righteousness are both crowned and wondrously brought into harmonious oneness. Is there anything else that will do that? If there be, I, for one, know not what it is.

Again, when I look on the dying Christ I see a divine love, which is bounded by no limits of time or place. Look at that majestic and significant, commendeth, not commended or proved, as if it were a past fact, sliding away rapidly into the oblivion that wraps all past events as the world gets older, and its memory gets more burdened. It is "commendeth" today, as it commended eighteen hundred years ago.

Remember to whom Paul was speaking-people that had never seen Jesus Christ-many of whom had not been in the world when He left it. Yet He says "that cross stands there for you of this second generation as the present proof of eternal love."

And, my friends, it stands for us men and women in Manchester as truly as for the men and women of Galilee or of Rome. There is no limit of time at all, either to the power of the proof or to the love that it establishes. But today, as long ago of old, and as it will be in the remotest future, the cross of Christ towers up like some great mountain beacon, when all beneath is lost to sight, as the one eternal demonstration of an everlasting love.

And now, dear brethren, proves is a cold word. It is addressed to the head. Commends is a warmer word. It is addressed to the heart. It is not enough to establish the fact that God loves. Arguments may be wrought in frost as well as in fire; and if I have erred in any measure in that regard this evening, I ask pardon of Him and of you. But it is your hearts I want to get at -- through your heads. I do not care to make you orthodox believers in a doctrine. That is all very well, but it is a very small part of our work. I want your hearts to be touched, and that Christ shall be not only the answer to your doubts, but the sovereign of your affections. Do you look on the death of Christ as a death for your sin? In the strength of the revelation that it makes the love of God, do you front the perplexities, the miseries of the world, and the raveled skeins of providence with calm, happy faces? And oh!-most important of all-do you meet that love with an answering love?

There are two passages of Scripture which contain the whole secret of a noble, blessed, human life. And here they are: "God so love the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in

Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). If that is your thought about God, you know enough about Him for time and eternity. "We love Him, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). If you can say that about yourself, all is well.

Dear friend, do you believe the one? Do you affirm the other?

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