**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**1. THE PARABOLIC METHOD**

*"Again he began to teach by the seaside. A great multitude was gathered to him, so that he entered into a boat in the sea, and sat down. All the multitude were on the land by the sea. He taught them many things in parables, and told them in his teaching"*

*Mark 4:1,2*

*"When he was alone, those who were around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. He said to them, "To you is given the mystery of God's Kingdom, but to those who are outside, all things are done in parables, that 'seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest perhaps they should turn again, and their sins should be forgiven them.' "*

*Mark 4:10-12*

*"He said to them, "Is the lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Isn't it put on a stand? For there is nothing hidden, except that it should be made known; neither was anything made secret, but that it should come to light. If any man has ears to hear, let him hear." He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you, and more will be given to you who hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he who doesn't have, even that which he has will be taken away from him."*

*Mark 4:21-25*

*"With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. Without a parable he didn't speak to them; but privately to his own disciples he explained everything."*

*Mark 4:33,34*

A CONSIDERATION of the metaphorical or parabolic method of our Lord is necessary as a preliminary study, for there has been some misinterpretation of our Lord's reason for His use of such method. There are two self-evident facts: first, that our Lord did use the parabolic method; and secondly, that at a certain stage in His ministry He employed it in a new way.

The fourth chapter of Mark's Gospel opens with the statement that on that day Jesus went out of the house, and went into a boat, and He spoke "many things in parables." The thirty-third and thirty-fourth verses declare, "With many such parables spake He the word unto them … and without a parable spake He not unto them." This unto them means that He used parables constantly in what He said to the multitudes. In the course of these thirty-four verses there are two sections dealing with the reason of His parabolic method. The first is found in verses ten to twelve. There He answered a question, and told the disciples the reason of His method. The second section is in verses twenty-one to twenty-five, again an explanation of His method.

In the first paragraph we have not a full explanation from our Lord, and that section demands the second paragraph. In the first explanatory paragraph we are faced with a difficulty, which we will state and consider, and make certain deductions therefrom.

At this hour in the ministry of Jesus He specially adopted the parabolic method for addressing the crowds. He had used parabolic illustrations before this time, notably to the woman of Samaria, when He spoke of the water of life; to the disciples, when He told them fields were white to harvest; in Nazareth, when He spoke of the physician and his healing work; to the disciples again, of fishers of men; and in His Manifesto, of salt and light and building. But the Sower was the first full parable, uttered at this time.

Tracing the course of our Lord's ministry we shall find that there had come a moment when definite and positive hostility had hardened in a peculiar manner. In the home at Capernaum He had been challenged, because He had claimed to forgive sins. In the house of Levi He had been challenged because He permitted His disciples to omit fasting, and because He consorted with sinners. In the cornfields He had been criticized for allowing His disciples to pluck the ears of corn on the Sabbath. In a synagogue on a later Sabbath, He was challenged, and they counselled to destroy Him. Again, in the house in Capernaum He was charged with being in complicity with the devil. All this had its definite effect upon the minds of the people. In the third chapter we find it said, "He looked round about on them with anger, being grieved at the hardening of their heart." That was the mental condition of the hour, of the rulers, which affected the crowds. This hardening of heart meant callousness, blindness, determination not to listen, nor to obey; or if to listen, then only critically, and destructively.

At that time Jesus adopted this parabolic method when speaking to the multitudes. When their hardness of heart made Him angry, then in a very definite and enlarged form He began to use parables; His anger being the result of His grace, in the presence of their attitude.

The difficulty here is found in the tenth to twelfth verses. Much has been said about it, and there have been differing interpretations. The apparent meaning of the passage is that Jesus adopted the method of the parable to prevent these people understanding; and to be forgiven. That is the first impression made upon the mind as the verses are read. There have been two methods of dealing with that difficulty. The first is that this is a truth which must be accepted though not understood. Some Bible teachers and expositors take the view that our Lord deliberately adopted the parabolic method here that the people should not see, or understand, or be forgiven. The second method of dealing with this passage is that the statement is not true, that He never said it, and therefore the passage is untrustworthy. That second method is impossible of belief by those who hold that the record is true.

But is the difficulty due to what the passage really says, or to long-continued interpretation, or misinterpretation of it? Was the reason of the parabolic method that men should be prevented from understanding, and so be excluded from the mercy of God? That would surely be blasphemy, and would contradict the whole purpose of God in Christ, and of Christ in the world. Consequently we must look at this a little more particularly.

There is one important fact to bear in mind, that the narrative of Mark is condensed; and that of Luke is even more so at this point. Matthew's account is much fuller. In the thirteenth chapter of that Gospel, after the parable of the sower, "The disciples came, and said unto Him, Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?" And He answered, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." Carefully notice the change. "Seeing they see not," not that they may not see. "Hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." They are seeing, but they do not see. They are hearing, but they do not understand. Therefore He spoke to them in parables.

Our Lord then quoted Isaiah, and Matthew writes, "And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall no wise perceive." Why?

For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing and their eyes have they closed; lest haply …" Matthew and Mark both use the word " lest," but the word needs a context larger than Mark quoted, The "lest" is the "lest" of their attitude, their hardness, of their persistence in unbelief. He was grieved with their hardness of heart, and that was the reason why He adopted the parabolic method. They had hardened their hearts until they had become gross; until they with seeing eyes were nevertheless blind. That was their attitude. They had done this lest they should be drawn back to God, and halted, and be forgiven. They were not aware of that ultimate, but that was their condition.

Carry the thought a little further. According to Matthew, the disciples had enquired the reason for speaking in parables. The Lord's answer was that it was given to them to know the mysteries. He told His disciples that the difference in method was due to a difference in relationship. To those of His disciples who were obedient, who submitted to Him, the mysteries could be made known. To those without, those not yielded, and not obedient, those refusing and hardening the heart, the parabolic was the necessary method.

Go on to verses twenty-one to twenty-five in this fourth chapter of Mark. He used the lamp as His illustration. This lamp is not put under the bushel, which would extinguish it. It is put on a stand. The parables therefore constituted a lamp, a lamp shining. It was not in order to hide things, but that the hidden things might be brought to light. These people could not, because of the attitude they had assumed, receive the mysteries, the profound things of the Kingdom of God. His disciples could receive those mysteries; but to those without, the parable was a lamp. There is nothing hidden except that it may be manifested. There is nothing secret but that it may be revealed. He gave them parabolic pictures, so that they might enquire. The purpose of the story, the picture, was to lure them to think, in order that they might find their way into the higher mystery.

Therefore it is important that the passage in Mark should be interpreted by the fuller passage in Matthew. Take that matchless triptych of stories constituting one great parable, recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, the lost sheep, the lost silver, and the lost son. That was spoken to men who were blundering, and protesting against Him. There is nothing in that story of the mysteries of the Kingdom; but it is there. Can we suppose Jesus told those men that story of lost things sought, and found, in order to prevent their coming to God, and finding mercy? If they had heard that story, enquired concerning it, sought its deep significance, they would have found themselves in the presence of all the height and depth and length and breadth of the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

In other words, the parable is ever the open door to the mystery. If men will consider the picture, and enquire, He will always answer. The parables therefore do but illustrate the whole fact of His approach to the human heart.

There is a remarkable statement in the Proverbs.

"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing;

But the glory of kings is to search out a matter."

That is true in Nature. God conceals behind that which is sacramental that which is supreme, so that men may take the thing that is manifest, and so following and enquiring, may find the deep secret. It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, but it is the glory of kings to search out a matter. The writer did not mean merely kings on the earthly level, but the kingly nature, which is always seeking for the secret thing.

The same philosophy is in the great word of Moses, uttered long ago, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever." The secret things are there that we may discover them. Nature is a great parable. Think of the earth, and of research, the things man has been finding out. They were all there from the beginning, but were hidden.

With reverence let it be said that the Lord Himself and the whole fact of the Incarnation is a parable. "No man hath seen God at any time, but the only begotten Son Which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him." The secret hidden, mysterious, of the Being of Godhead. No man has seen that; but as the old philosopher talking to Job, said,

"Canst thou by searching find out God?

Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?"

That is perfectly true, but God has revealed Himself, and supremely, in His Son. The Son therefore becomes the picture, the parable, which being known and investigated, God Himself is found.

Our Lord did not intend then in the use of the parable to prevent men seeing, but to help them to see. He did not want to prevent them hearing, but to quicken their power of hearing. He did not keep men away from the forgiveness and the mercy of God, but He lured them towards it. As we come to these wonderful illustrations, and the more definite parables, we shall see He is not hiding, but veiling

"The light that were else too bright,

For the feebleness of a sinner's sight."

If the truth can be suggested by the story, in the presence of that story men may presently find the depth and wonder of the mystery.