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

**6. PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

 *… Matthew Chapters 11 and 12*

IN THESE two chapters we have the story of happenings in the ministry of Jesus during the period when the twelve were away from Him their first mission. The eleventh chapter opens, "And it came to pass when Jesus had made an end of commanding His disciples, He departed thence to teach and preach in their cities"; that is, in the cities of the twelve apostles. While they were sent on a wider mission and over a wider area, He went to the cities from which these twelve come.

Taking the section from chapter twelve to the middle of chapter slxteen, we are in that period of His ministry when He was enforcing His claims against the opposition of the rulers, which by this time was growing. In these two chapters, eleven and twelve, we have six parabolic illustrations: of the reed and the man in soft raiment; children playing in the market-places; a sheep in a pit on a Sabbath day; a tree and the fruit it grows; Jonah, a historic illustration; and, finally, that weird and wonderful illustration of an empty house, the dispossessed spirit.

Beginning first with the subject illustrated, and our Lord's use of it, take those of the reed and a man in soft raiment. Simply and naturally He was illustrating the greatness of His forerunner, John, and that by contrast. John was now imprisoned, and he had sent to Jesus that enquiry through his disciples. This showed how alert and keen he was, and yet also how strangely perplexed.

"Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?"

Jesus answered, and answered wonderfully, and when the messengers had been sent back, He used these illustrations in the presence of the crowds, two illustrations, and a direct word about the prophet.

Look at the illustrations. In that listening crowd there were undoubtedly those who would be impressed when they heard John's enquiry, and might be inclined to think of John as wavering. Some to-day say this was so, and that it was produced by his depression in the prison. I do not think so. John's enquiry meant rather that he did not understand the method of Jesus. However the crowd might be inclined to think that John, the great forerunner, whose message and mission had led up to the work of Jesus, was hesitating, was halting, was weakening, Christ, with that strange and yet wonderful nobility that characterized all His dealings, saved John from misapprehension. Said He, What did you go out to the wilderness to see? Did you think you would find in the wilderness a reed, shaken by the wind? Perhaps they were thinking at that moment that John was vacillating, was being blown about by the winds sweeping over his life. A reed is always the emblem of weakness. There in the Jordan valley it was a beautiful thing to look at, often growing twenty feet in height, but it was always slender and weak, and as the winds swept across the valley the reeds were agitated, because they were unstable. Jesus said, Is that what you went out to see? He did not if answer His own enquiry, nor add anything to it.

Again He said, Did you go out to see a man in soft raiment? Soft raiment was the emblem of enervation. Writing to the Corinthians Paul used that word which here is rendered "soft raiment," "effeminate," and that undoubtedly was its meaning. Did you go out to see a man in soft raiment? Here Jesus used two Greek words, in which the letters are exactly the same, differently arranged. A reed, *kalamos*; a man in soft raiment, *malakos*. Had they gone out to see a *kalamos*, or a *malakos*; a reed blown about with every breeze, or an enervated man, a man in soft raiment? To that second suggestion He did add a most illuminative word.

"Behold, they that wear soft raiment are in kings' houses," kings' palaces. John was in a king's prison. If he had been a man in soft raiment he would not have been in prison, he would have been in a palace. Mark the satire of it. Did you go out to see a man capable of being shaken with the wind? Did you go out to see a man in whose life there was a prostitution of virility for personal pleasure? Those familiar with John would know no reed was he, no effeminate dilettante, hanging on at the courts of kings for the gratification of their lusts. The very suggestion was enough. They went out to see a prophet, but he was far more than a prophet. So with great dignity our Lord defended John from the possibility of misunderstanding.

We gather therefore that there are two characteristics that disqualify any man for prophetic work. What are they? Weakness that yields to every passing wind that blows, or such self-indulgence as can be expressed only when they wear soft raiment.

When Jesus had defended John, He talked about the generation in the midst of which He was doing His work. In this figure of the children playing in the market-place, the subject He was illustrating was that of the unreasonableness of that age. It was a homely and beautiful figure. There He was in the cities of the twelve, while they were on their mission, preaching; and He suddenly illustrated the fact that His preaching, and the preaching of John, whom He had just defended, was preaching to an age that was characterized by its unreasonableness. I think this might also be applied to this age in which we are living.

What is the figure? Children playing at marriages and funerals. Children were playing in the streets, in the market-place, probably at setting sun, when market was over, and the day was waning, and the bairns were getting tired. Some of them wanted to play at a wedding, and the others would not. Then they changed, and they said, Let us play then at a funeral. No, they would not do that. You will not mourn to John's wailing, and you will not dance to My piping. John came with the stern, hard, ascetic and profoundly necessary message, calling men to repentance, and you say he has a demon, and you will not listen. I have come with such humanness that men say of Me, I am a gluttonous Man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. It was the age that would not mourn to John's wailing, and would not dance to Jesus' piping. Or we could turn that round, and say this, John would not dance to their piping, and Jesus would not mourn to their wailing. It was an unreasonable age. The harder, sterner, severer note was denounced as being the utterance of a man who was demon-possessed. The tender, human, and happy note of Jesus was refused because it lacked the ascetic note. John lacked the human touch, and they said he had a demon. Jesus seemed to lack the harder and the ascetic outlook on life, and they said, Do not listen Him, He is a gluttonous Man and a winebibber. Christ ended all by saying, "Wisdom is justified by her works," as in the Revised; some MSS render it, "justified by her children." The principle is the same. Wisdom knows the necessity for the real reason of mourning, and .the true inspiration of dancing, and she is justified in her methods as they are presented to men.

Again in this twelfth chapter, verses eleven and twelve, we have that simple figure of speech of a sheep fallen into a pit on the Sabbath day. What was the subject our Lord was illustrating? Many applications can be made of it, but here He was showing the dishonesty of traditionalism, the dishonesty of these men of His own time who were traditionalists. In that same chapter when passing through the corn-fields, the question was raised, and now again when He healed a man on the Sabbath, Luke shows that it was on another Sabbath, but Matthew puts the two incidents close together. It was the Sabbath, and the traditionalists' attitude towards the Sabbath was marked by their question about the disciples, and the question of what Jesus would do on the Sabbath. What He did to that cripple gave rise to the figure of speech.

We know how constantly our Lord flung Himself against the bondage of traditionalism because it overlay the law of God. What a distinction He drew. They taught for commandments of God the traditions of men, and neglected the great matters of the law. Go back to that age. They had the law of God as it had come to them through Moses, the written law in their Scriptures. To that they had added the oral law. Now the oral law consisted of interpretations of the written law by the Great Synagogue, that was called Abhoth, which means Fathers. The opinions of the Fathers constituted tradition laid upon them, and were attempts to interpret the actual law. Again, from these traditions which they called Abhoth, they had another section called Toldoth, and Toldoth meant descendants. These were rules deduced from the interpretations of the Fathers, supposedly resulting from the law itself. The result was tradition heaped upon tradition, which had bound upon the people intolerable burdens.

Take this matter of the Sabbath, in illustration. The law said that on the Sabbath there should be no manner of work. The Abhoth, or the Fathers, in this application said, Reaping and threshing are both work; therefore reaping and threshing must not take place on the Sabbath. Then going down to Toldoth, they said, Plucking the ears of corn with the hand is reaping, and rubbing them is threshing. That is why the Pharisees objected to what the disciples were doing. Their secondary interpretation of the law was that if the disciples plucked ears of corn and rubbed them, they were breaking the law, they were reaping and threshing. It is very natural, and quite possible. People even to-day are mastered by tradition in stupid matters, and in religion; something the fathers said, which was said sincerely, and the sons have come along and taken what the fathers said, and they have added something to it, and the result has been all manner of futile, stupid, ridiculous laws governing men.

These Pharisees were criticizing Jesus, and wondering what He would do on the Sabbath with the crippled man; and He said, Which of you, having a sheep fallen into a pit on the Sabbath day, would not draw it out. Many of them, if they had seen a sheep that had fallen into a pit, would not have drawn it out on the Sabbath; but if the sheep had been their own, they would! That is the whole point. Which of you, having one of your own sheep fallen into a pit, would you not pull it out on the Sabbath? How much more is a man better than a sheep! This man is God's property. The sheep is yours. You have one law which you observe for your own personal property, and another that you observe for God's property. A sheep, if it is yours, you would deliver. A man, if he is God's man afflicted, you say the Sabbath is broken if he is delivered. The final application was that He took the man and He healed him. The man because the property of God was sacred, and was restored to sanctity as Jesus healed him. Traditionalism is dishonesty.

Then in verses thirty-three to thirty-five we have the illustration He had already used in the ethical Manifesto, of the tree and fruit. The subject illustrated was the dishonesty of His enemies. Here we are in the realm of controversy. He was enforcing His claims against opposition. These men were dishonest. They were attributing good fruit to an evil source. They were going so far as to suggest He was casting out the demons by the prince of the demons. His victory over Satan was declared to be complicity with Satan. In effect Christ said to them, Be honest. Judge Me honestly, as though He had said, by the fruits.

Then He immediately applied His illustration to them, and declared that they were incapable of honesty, for that is the meaning of the explanation, "How can ye, being evil . ...?" He called them to consider this illustration of the tree and its fruit in application to Himself and His work. He appealed to these men to test Him, and find out the secret of His ability, by the things at which they were looking, the things done, by the fruit produced.

At the fortieth and forty-first verses, again, these men were asking for a sign from heaven. It is an amazing thing to read, considering all He had done in healing the man. Yet they said they would like a sign from heaven. He used the historic sign .of Jonah. What was the subject He was illustrating there? He was showing the valuelessness of a sign as a credential; but there was the ultimate value of one inevitable and overwhelming sign. Notice in this connection He declined to give them any sign except one that they had in their own literature, that they could read, and interpret only as He used it in application to Himself. There shall no sign be given but the sign of the prophet Jonah. As He addressed them He revealed the secret of their seeking a sign. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." Evil, *poneros*, harmful; and adulterous, faithless; marking their relationship to God, appearing in the figures of the Old Testament of the betrothal of God's people to Himself. Jesus told these rulers, asking Him for a sign, calling Him Teacher, while not obeying what He had to say, asking in mockery for some spectacular sign from heaven; I know the meaning of your question. You are evil, and you are adulterous. The effect of your life upon others is harmful, because you are out of harmony with God, and are infidel. There is no sign that shall be given to you except the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so shall the Son of man be three days and nights in the heart of the earth. The Scriptures never say whale, but a "great fish." Some men are so busy with the tape measure trying to find out whether man could get inside a fish, they never plumb the depths of Deity. The book of Jonah says that "God prepared a great fish." Jonah was a sign to Nineveh. There is no meaning in that sign if the story not true. It demands the historicity of the story of Jonah. How was Jonah a sign to Nineveh? The crew of the vessel had flung him overboard reluctantly. Undoubtedly they were a fine body of men. They did not want to do so, but he was insistent. To them he was dead, and gone. Then they reached the land, and the man they had flung to death appeared in Nineveh, preaching. That strange and mystic sign of a man coming back from the dead to preach to Nineveh produced a repentance in Nineveh, that spared it for a hundred years. Jesus took these men back in their history, and predicted the future concerning Himself.

Once before in the earlier days of ministry, as John records, they asked Him for a sign. The answer He gave those rulers was, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," That is exactly the same thing. The only sign of the divinity of His mission, and of the interpretation of His personality will be found through His death and His resurrection. This was a great word He uttered. Whether anyone caught the significance of it at the time we do not know; but there remains the record for us, and for all time, to show that the spectacular thing these men wanted He never granted; and indeed, so evident is it, that during His ministry, repeatedly when some miracle had been wrought, out of His compassion of heart, He charged people not to talk about it.

The last illustration is in verses forty-three to forty-five. It is important to notice that whatever the illustration was, the application was to that generation. That does not exclude an application of it to personal and individual lives. He was, however, speaking to that generation, in the midst of which He had been conducting His ministry, following upon that of John. The whole of John's ministry, and that of Jesus, had had the effect of casting out of evil spirits. It was a cleansing, purifying, exorcising ministry. That was what our Lord was illustrating. He took this story of a house which had become tenantless. The whole emphasis in His description of that house was His account of how the returning demon found it. "He findeth it empty, swept and garnished." Yes, but empty. He was speaking of His generation, an evil generation, swept and garnished by the teaching of His predecessor and His own teaching, but not possessed, empty. He was emphasizing the fact that if that or any other generation is left like that it may become the home of demons sevenfold. The illustration is that of the danger of a tenantless house.

The application was to that generation. The house was freed from evil mastery for a while, but it was empty. It lacked a new possessor. It lacked a master in place of the one exorcised and the empty house was the opportunity for the re-entry of the demon, reinforced seven-fold. We must take it, and make application of it to ourselves, or to an age. Reformation without regeneration is no use. Oh, we may sweep the house, and garnish it, and improve certain conditions by creating a new environment but unless there is a new possessor, a new Lord, a new Master, instead of the old demon, the demons will return with sevenfold force. Reformation is ultimately of no value alone. It is only preparation for worse desolation. The only possible cure for a man or an age is reformation, followed by regeneration and the incoming of the new Lord and Master. That is so with the individual.