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

**17. PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

*… Matthew Chapter 16*

THE SIXTEENTH chapter contains no parable, but five suggestive parabolic illustrations, of weather forecasting, of the leaven in a new setting; and closely together, three parabolic illustrations of a great theme, rock, gates, and keys.

Look first at weather forecasting. We think we live in an advanced age, because we have weather forecasts. Evidently they had them in the time of our Lord, "When it is evening ye say, It will be fair weather, for the heaven is red; and in the morning, It will be foul weather to-day for the heaven is red and lowring." Jesus knew about weather forecasting, and He employed it.

Note the subject which He intended to illustrate and illumine when He made use of that particular figure of speech. The Pharisees and Sadducees had come to Him requesting a sign from heaven. On other occasions they had asked a sign, but at this time they were particular. They wanted a sign from heaven.

In our familiarity with these words, we may not understand the significance of their conjunction in that statement. The two great parties in the Jewish State at that time were divided philosophically, theologically, politically, and socially. They had no dealings with each other and were constantly in conflict. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came," a coalition formed for the one purpose of trying Jesus. They came "tempting Him," that is, trying Him, testing Him. These men had nothing in common. They were all the time at daggers drawn. The Pharisees were the ritualists in religion, and the Sadducees were the rationalists. The Pharisees believed that Rome had no right to have any authority over them. The Sadducees submitted to the Roman authority, and insisted upon it. Yet they came now in a united effort to put Jesus in such a position that would reveal the truth of their contention that He was an impostor. That was their purpose. They asked for a sign from heaven, and the very request as it was preferred, showed that they intended not to deny the things He had done, but to cast aspersion upon them.

In the twelfth chapter Matthew has recorded the fact that the Pharisees did not deny our Lord had cast out demons; but they affirmed He had done so because He was in league with Satan himself. Now they came to ask for a sign from heaven. Signs were everywhere, casting out demons, healing disease. Signs had been multiplied. He went about, doing good. As Peter said on the day of Pentecost, He was a Man approved of God by powers and wonders and signs which God did through Him. Signs were everywhere. Yes, but these men said it was possible to account for all the wonderful things He had done on a low level. They had said the casting out of demons was the result of complicity with the devil himself. Now they came to Him and asked for a sign from heaven, expressing their disbelief that anything He had done had behind it heavenly authority, or heavenly power. There is little doubt they were asking for some spectacular manifestation. Some sudden illumination of the night by supernatural light would have done nothing to convince them; so they suggested some appearance in the heavens, in the midst of the brightness of the day, that would bring conviction; something supernatural from heaven that could have come from nowhere else.

Now note our Lord's reply to them. "When it is evening, ye say …" We read next, "*It will be* ..." That little phrase is not in the Greek, neither here nor in the next verse. The italics mean that the words have been supplied by translators to give sense. Read it bluntly, without the words. "When it is evening, ye say, Fair weather … in the morning, Foul weather to-day." That was something with which they were all familiar. Christ was quoting from their common- place speech. They had said it often undoubtedly. It must be remembered the illustration is peculiarly Palestinian. It was the aspect of the sky in Palestine; but it is equally true in England to-day. Many will remember the old saying, "A red morning is a shepherd's warning; a red night is a shepherd's delight." Travelling over the vast expanses of ocean, we always notice whether the morning or evening was red. This was a commonplace figure of speech Jesus used.

Then He applied it. He said to these men that they were intelligent on a certain level, and within certain limitations. They knew how to discern that red morning and that red night. They were significant. As they watched the face of the sky they were clever in surface observation, but they could not discern the signs of the times.

Notice this carefully. He flung them back upon their own request. They had asked for a sign. The signs were all about them. They had observed phenomena, and had come to correct conclusions about the weather. They did not fail in accurate weather forecasting, but they could not see the meaning of the things in the midst of which they were living, "the signs of the times."

Then He told them why this was so. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of Jonah. And He left them, and departed." Why were they blind? Why could they not understand? Why could they not discern the real meaning of the things in the midst of which they were living? They were evil, an adulterous generation. Those were terrible words. They were evil, *poneros*, harmful in their influence, because evil in their hearts. The moral nature was warped, because of the evil of their spiritual nature, which was atrophied.

He then fell back upon that appalling figure of the Old Testament, with which these men would be familiar if they had their own Scriptures, "an adulterous generation." How constantly the great writers of the past had referred to these people under the figure of a marriage relationship. Said Jehovah, "I have betrothed thee unto Me." Again and again the prophets charged them with adultery, infidelity in their relationship to God as their Husband, Master, and Friend. Jesus swept the whole of that generation into that description, "evil and adulterous." That was the reason for their blindness. They were evil because they were adulterous. They had been unfaithful to their covenant with God, and the result of that was that they were harmful, evil in their hearts, and hurtful in their influence. Therefore they were blind.

Seeing all these signs, they could not discern them. There would be one sign, full and final, the sign of Jonah. On another occasion He put that more fully when He said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." The ultimate full and final sign of authority would be that of His death and resurrection, and no other sign would be given than that. He turned His back upon them, He left them. They had ability to observe natural phenomena, and to make correct deductions in forecasting the weather; but utter inability to understand the commonplace things of His power and majesty, which had been apparent to them in the course of His ministry. This was because of their infidelity in heart, resulting in an evil nature, and so in spiritual blindness.

No application is needed save perhaps to declare that this always abides. Take the world to-day with its great advancement which cannot be denied. All this weather forecasting is marvellous, whether a depression is here, or there, and the way it is likely to move. We can discern in England the signs of the weather. But can we discern the signs of the times? Have we caught the significance of the things Jesus, not did, but is doing? If so, remember there is one great sign that brooks no denial. It can be evaded by supposed intellectuality, but it remains the central fact of all history, the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Pass now to the second illustration in this chapter, contained in verses five and twelve, that of the leaven. We have studied that figure before in one of the parables. Take it here as Jesus used it. The subject that He was illustrating here was that of false teaching, and what it meant in human life as to its influence. The Pharisees and Sadducees, in a coalition, were attempting to entrap Him. Now the evil of the teaching of the Pharisees was their attitude towards tradition. That made sin purely external. Here was the reason of our Lord's constant conflict with them. The spiritual and moral conceptions of these Pharisees and Sadducees were radically opposed to Jesus. The teaching of the Sadducees created the right to, and the opportunity for, indulgence in every form of material living. All their policies were based upon that materialistic and naturalistic conception of life. The Pharisees who professed to believe in angel, Spirit, and resurrection, had so covered over these essential truths of life and religion with their traditions, which they suggested were interpreting these things, were really throttling them, smothering them, killing them as to vital power. Our Lord now dealt with this teaching of the Pharisees, and in that connection used this figure of leaven.

What does leaven mean? Let us take a definition from a scientific text-book. It is "a chemical decomposition of an organic compound." Of course when we get away from our Bible we get simplicity of language! An "organic compound," that is life, the organism; but leaven is the "decomposition" of that compound organism. In other words, leaven is that which destroys, it is fermentation. It is something which always breaks up, and ultimately destroys. It is quiet and insidious, but terrible in its working, and yet persistent. As Paul said, "A little leaven leaventh the whole lump." In his Corinthian letter he referred to those Judaizing teachers who were seeking to superimpose the Pharisaic philosophy upon Christians under the title of Judaism, that is Pharisaism, and he called that leaven.

Our Lord warned His disciples against the danger of their teaching. It is arresting, however, to notice that when He said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," even His disciples did not understand Him, and they were materialized by the influence of their age. They thought He was talking about the fact that they had forgotten to take bread on the ship, which called forth from Jesus a word of tender rebuke, "How is it that ye do not perceive that I spake not to you concerning bread?" These men who came and asked for a sign were blind. Are you blind too? Can you not understand? Then He told them what He meant, and then they understood that He spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees.

The value of that illustration to them, and to us for all time is that it lays emphasis upon the danger of false teaching, even though that false teaching be given in the name of religion. The Pharisees claimed to be religious teachers. The Sadducees claimed to be religious teachers, even though their philosophies and theologies were fundamentally opposed. But they were claiming to teach religion. They put upon the teaching of religion a false conception and outlook, and understanding, a leaven which brought about the decomposition of the organic compound. False teaching is a leaven that forever destroys. There can be nothing more important than that teaching in the name of religion, in the name of Christianity, nay, in the name of Christ, should be according to His outlook, His power, and His will; anything else works fermentation, decomposition, and ruin.

So, having rebuked the seekers after a sign, and revealed the reason of their failure, that they were blind because evil, and evil because unfaithful to God, He warned His disciples against their teaching, using the figure of leaven.

We come to the last illustrations in this chapter, the figures used - rock, gates, and keys. The passage is well known. Simon Peter had just made his confession, expressing, as I believe, not only the conviction of his own heart, but of the whole group about Him, "Thou art the Christ," the Messiah, that is, His office. As to nature, "Thou art the Son of the living God." Jesus responded to that confession by uttering a beatitude upon the man, "Blessed art thou, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven. And I also say unto thee …" Do not miss the "also." It is significant. Why did Jesus say "also"? Thou hast made thy great confession concerning Me. Now I have some confession to make to thee, some secret to reveal which I have never told you before. He began with Peter personally, "Thou are Peter," thou art *petros*, a piece of stone; "and upon this rock "- *petra,* essential rock; - "I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven." Rock, gates, keys, three illustrations flaming with light, shining in the great declaration.

"This rock." What subject was He illustrating? The fact of His Church, "I will build My ecclesia," different from everything that had gone before, even in the economy of God. The Hebrew nation had been God's ecclesia, His called out and separated people, for the fulfilment of function, but it had failed. Its Pharisaic and Sadducean rulers had been in unbelief to ask for a sign from heaven a short time before. They had utterly failed.

Then has God failed? I hope He will forgive me for suggesting the question. God never fails. Everything may look as though God is being beaten out of His world. He is not. He never fails. If that old economy, which God created, has broken down and failed, then "I will build My Church." It is the great authoritative word of Jesus, declaring that He would establish an institute for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose, and the accomplishment of the Divine end. He used first of all the figure of rock, that He would build upon rock.

Remember that He was talking to Hebrews, to a group of men belonging to that ancient nation which He would presently excommunicate. They would understand the figure He used. Rock. How was that figure of speech used in the literature of the Hebrew people? Turn back to the Old Testament, and look at the occasions where the figure of rock is used in a figurative sense, and there are over forty such. "Rock " is only used figuratively in the Old Testament of God. Upon one occasion, in Deuteronomy, in the Swan Song, Moses used the word as of false gods, putting them into contrast with the true, "Their rock is not as our Rock." Through Moses and the prophets, rock is always used, reserved, not by the intention of the writers, but by the intention of the Holy Ghost, as a figure of God Himself, essential Deity.

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." "On this Rock," of essential Deity, "I will build My Church." The Roman Church still believes and teaches that the rock was Peter. Our Protestant Churches are saying the rock was Peter's confession. A poor foundation that. In a few days he was swearing he had never seen Him. The Rock is God, and Christ says, "I will build My Church"; I will build back into relationship with the living God human souls, and so create My ecclesia.

What about the figure of the gates? He had swiftly changed the figure of speech, from building to battle. The gates of Hades shall not prevail. What are gates for? To guard the city against the enemy. The gates of Hades shall not prevail. How often that has been interpreted as though our Lord said, My ecclesia is built on a rock so strongly that Hell cannot overcome it. Oh no; He will build on rock, and that proves its invulnerability. But now He said, Hell shall not be able to withstand the attack of the Church. It is not a picture of the Church invincible against attack. It is a picture of the Church invincible in attack, so that the very gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. With the eye of a great Commander, the Lord saw the whole Church, and the last enemy, death; and the Church victorious, as she ever has been. No, they are not defeated, our loved ones, defeated in death. They are victorious in the hour of death, over all the power of Hades. The gates of Hades shall not overcome them.

Again another change of figure, from those of building and battle, "I will give unto thee the keys of the to that of moral influence. Kingdom o; heaven." Again we can interpret that figure of speech only according to the times. It was perfectly familiar. That great order of scribes for a long time had looked upon keys as the insignia of their office, as the interpreters of the moral law. So He made use of the figure to show that the Church was not only to be built on rock, and therefore invulnerable; not only to be the attacking force against which the force of Hell should not prevail; but that she should be in the world to enforce the laws, in the sense of moral standards; to bind, to declare that which is obligatory; to lose, to declare that what is voluntary. So in these figures used by our Lord, rock, gates, and keys, eternal truths are revealed concerning the Church which He is building.