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

**18. A PARABLE AND PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

 *… Matthew Chapters 17 and 18*

IN THESE two chapters we have two parabolic illustrations and one set parable; first the illustration of the grain of mustard seed, and then the parabolic illustration of the quest for the lost sheep. At the end of the eighteenth chapter we have the parable of the two debtors.

It is important that we should remind ourselves of the subject which our Lord was intending to illustrate when He used either parabolic illustration or more set parable, in order not only to understand the parable or illustration, but to put the true limits upon them. It is possible to take a parable of our Lord away from the setting and context, and misinterpret its intention.

We ask then, when our Lord took this parabolic illustration of the grain of mustard seed, what was He intending to illustrate? The teaching arose on account of the disciples' failure on an outstanding and memorable occasion. Jesus had taken three of them away from the group. Nine had been left behind, and to them there had come a man bringing his boy, his only begotten son, demon possessed. The twelve when they had been sent out had all been given authority and power to cast out demons, and they had done this very thing. Here, however, was an occasion when they could not do it. When our Lord came down from the mountain and faced the father, he had said to Him bluntly, "I brought him to Thy disciples, and they could not cure him." They could do nothing.

When the Lord had cast the demon out, and given the boy back to his father, the disciples came and asked Him the secret of their failure. It would be a great thing if the Christian Church to-day, in its activity, paused long enough to ask Him the reason for its comparative failure. These disciples did so, and immediately He gave them first a direct answer, and then used this illustration to illuminate His own answer. His answer to them was quite simple. "Because of your little faith." Here I like the Authorized rendering better than the Revised, because this does not apply to quantity here, but to quality, "Because of your unbelief," then He illuminated His answer, "For verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you."

Our Lord was illustrating the meaning of His declaration that unbelief was the reason of their failure. He took a seed, a grain of mustard. The word there is simple, primary. The word seed always implies that which contains the life principle. If your faith is of the nature of that seed, then things follow. Our Lord had used the same figure in an earlier parable in the thirteenth chapter. He was telling the disciples here that their failure was due to the quality of their faith, their unbelief.

In the Revised rendering here, "because of your little faith," the word little does not refer to quantity. When the disciples said on another occasion, "Lord, increase our faith," it was not an increase in quantity, but a change of quality they sought. And the faith that removes mountains is like a seed which has in it the element of life, which means growth, dynamic. In Nature the ultimate result of the life principle in a seed comes through death. A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. So it bears much fruit; and if it die, the life principle begins to appear, through death.

When then is the secret of our failure? Our faith is of a failing, faltering quality. It lacks the principle of life. Applied to the whole situation, we see where they failed. This incident followed upon Caesarea Philippi, and Peter's confession, and his fear of the Cross. But yesterday our Lord was talking about life, the life of the Church, and its coming glories. They had naturally been exalted and filled with joy. But when He told them of that final and ultimate victory, that He must die, their faith failed. It was not of that living nature that could grasp His teaching. They could not interpret it, and consequently they were paralysed in the presence of the demon. They had failed at Caesarea in confidence, in faith. Their faith lacked the principle of life. They failed now in the presence of their own work which He had commissioned them to do, and which they had done until this hour.

Follow out the application. The quality of faith is life, faith as a grain of mustard seed. This does not mean that if we have a big enough faith we can go out and say to a mountain, Move, and go into the sea. A living faith never seeks to do anything without having first ascertained that it is the will of God. If we go to a mountain, because we want to see an upheaval, and see the mountain go into the sea, we can talk about our faith as long as we like, and sing about it, but the mountain will stand fast. But if, peradventure, the thing should be that the actual material mountain in the will of God needed to be removed, and we knew it, then nothing is impossible. Living faith fastening upon the will of God, submissive to His will, and seeking nothing out of harmony therewith, becomes part of the Divine dynamic, and no mountains can stand against it. That was the subject illustrated, and that was the mighty illustration.

We come next to the subject of the lost sheep, and the quest for it. What was our Lord illustrating? He used this parabolic illustration of a man who lost a sheep and sought it. He used it again later, when He linked it with the lost drachma and the lost son, as recorded by Luke. Here it stands alone. What was He illustrating? The subject illustrated was finally that of offences, which might be committed against little ones. Here He was limited in His teaching, but not in the essential appearance.

This all grew out of a question that the disciples had asked concerning greatness. Jesus had taken a child, and set him in the midst as the type of greatness in His Kingdom; and when He used this illustration of the lost sheep, He showed the value of that child. The illustration is a familiar one, and needs no elaboration. A shepherd had lost a sheep, and went out after it, and found it.

This is applied to the child. It occurs in that chapter of rare beauty, which is pre-eminently the chapter of the child. The illustration came out of their passion for greatness. Jesus made their enquiry the reason for things He said about the child, in their bearing upon the disciples, and their quest for greatness.

He told them first of all that the child was the type of character in His Kingdom. Except they were turned back again from their manhood with its prejudices and pride, and became plastic and simple and emptied of all pride as a child, they could not enter into His Kingdom.

The teaching is amazing and wonderful. The little child is the gate-keeper, and we cannot pass into His Kingdom, save as we come by the way of the child. He was showing them this, and in words that are terrible He charged them not to cause that child to stumble. He declared that we had no right to despise a little child, and summarized everything by saying it was not the will of our Father that one of these little ones should perish. Notice what a revelation He gave in the context, of the value of the child by the eternal standards. Angels, the Son, and the Father, are committed to them. Their angels always behold the face of the Father. They have constant access to God on their behalf. The Son Who is the good Shepherd, is seeking them; and the Father doth not will that one of them should perish.

It is a wonderful illustration that of the Shepherd, and the Shepherd heart, and the compassion of the Shepherd, that goes out from the field where the ninety and nine are safely gathered, into the desert and the wilderness, and brings back the child. To make that application of it which is scriptural is to cut across anaemic theology to-day which tells us that the children do not need saving. Such theology forgets the truth declared in the Bible, and illustrated in all human experience that we go astray from the womb, that we were born in sin, and shapen in iniquity. The Shepherd is seeking every one.

"Then on each He setteth

His own secret sign."

It is the picture of the love of God, operating through His Son as Shepherd, caring for the little ones. Some expositors try to explain this by saying the little ones means believers. Not at all. The child was in the midst, and His eyes and heart were upon it; and He saw how His disciples were likely to be hindered in work for the children by self-seeking and pride and desire for place. He kept the child in front of Him, and told His disciples what to think of it, under this figure of the Shepherd.

We pass next to that which we describe as a parable in itself, that of the two debtors. What was the subject He was illustrating by this story? Forgiveness, not God's forgiveness, although that is the background by suggestion, but forgiveness among themselves. This came out of Peter's enquiry, although the enquiry was due to something which our Lord had been saying. There came a moment when Peter was overwhelmed with a wave of generosity. "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?" How many times have we forgiven that man who had wronged us? We think even to-day we have risen to the ultimate height of generous action when we have forgiven a man three times. We have heard this said, "I forgave you once, twice, but the third time pays for all!" Peter doubled up, plus one, on our generosity when he said seven times. Oh blessed Peter, warm-hearted blundering Peter. But Jesus laughed at him with a fine satire, tender and cleansing, as the flashing of the summer lightning. Seven times? Supposing you try 490! "I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, until seventy times seven." We shall have to live a long time before we have any chance of forgiving a man 490 times, seventy times seven.

This wonderful parable consists of a contrast of attitude and activity towards debt. One owed his master, his lord, through his own fraudulent activity. This is a purely Eastern scene. He owed his lord ten thousand talents. That does not mean very much to us here, until we become mathematical. If it were ten thousand talents of gold, it is beyond computation. If it was a reference to a currency of silver, the thousand talents of silver was worth two million sterling. If he owed his lord ten million sterling then here is a picture almost unbelievable, and yet thoroughly Eastern. The lord ordered him to be sold, his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made, as far as he could. The man fell down before him, casting himself upon the mercy of his lord; and his lord forgave him all the debt, cancelled it, wiped it out.

Then that man so forgiven, went out and found a man who owed him something. That can be computed in pounds. The amount was £5. He had owed two million; the man owed him £5. He said, "Pay that thou owest." The man said, Give me time; and he would not, but took him by the throat, and cast him into prison. There was such an inherent sense of rightness in his fellow servants that they reported the case to their lord. His lord summoned him back, and the end of it all was that he was wroth with him. The compassion that had been shown to him had been violated by the activity of the man to whom he had showed that compassion; and he delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due. We may say, that was very hard. Wait a minute. "So shall also My heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts."

How many times shall I forgive my brother? Seven times? Seventy times seven, 490! Do not forget that. Your brother owes you not more than £5, and you owe all of two million, which you can never pay. But God in His compassion forgives you everything; and if you go out to exact the last farthing from your brother, then God has no forgiveness for you. His wrath will fall upon you. His compassions are violated by your inability to be compassionate, and will bring down His wrath upon you.

Notice how the compassion of God shines behind the whole of this. Forgiveness, not because of any worth in the man making his appeal, not because of any worth in the sinner to forgiveness, but intended to produce in the heart of that man a spirit like the Spirit of God. In that light therefore we see the baseness of the failure of the servant. Forgiveness? Who is it that we have in our mind? Have we forgiven? How many times?