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

**19. PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

*"But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying, but those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. He who is able to receive it, let him receive it."*

*Matthew 19:11,12*

*"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into God's Kingdom."*

*Matthew 19:24*

THE TWELFTH verse of this chapter contains a remarkable parabolic illustration. Immediately before uttering this, our Lord had said, "All men cannot receive this saying, but they to whom it is given." Then at the close of the twelfth verse He said, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." Those words of our Lord show the difficulty of the illustration, and of the subject illustrated. It does show, however, that the intention of our Master was to reach, not the general crowd, but a limited company, such as were able to receive it.

The word at the end of verse eleven, "All men cannot receive this saying, but they to whom it is given," did not refer to His own saying, but to the statement of the disciples. They had said to Him, "If the case is so with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." In the last clause, His statement linked up with what the disciples had suggested, applying to what He Himself had said, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." We see then that this parabolic illustration contained in these words of Jesus, seem to guard it, to fence it off, to show that it was not intended for everyone; and therefore had a particular and limited application.

That being admitted, we ask, what was the subject under discussion? What subject was our Lord illustrating at this point? To put it first quite bluntly, the subject was that of celibacy, of abstention from the marriage relationship. The subject under discussion was consequent upon previous happenings. The question of divorce had arisen. In order to understand our Lord's teaching, definite, and applicable to all time; it is nevertheless necessary to remind ourselves of the conditions obtaining in all the Jewish world at that time, and opinion held then on the subject of divorce.

It was one of prevalent and almost bitter controversy between two great theological schools within Judaism. Hillel, that great teacher who had passed on twenty years before our Lord began His ministry, but whose opinion was widespread and tremendous, interpreting the finding of Moses in Deuteronomy (24:1), had declared that the meaning was this: "A man may lawfully divorce his wife for any reason that might render her distasteful to him." He was interpreting the law that if a man, after marrying, found some blemish, he had the right to write the wife a bill of divorcement, and send her home. It is a long time since Hillel died, but men are trying to bring this up again to-day! On the other hand, stood the theological school of Shammai, that declared there was only one reason for divorce, and that was unchastity.

Those two schools were bitterly opposed, and when they came to Jesus with the question, it was the result of that widespread difference of opinion and dispute. The Pharisees came to Him, "tempting Him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" We see at once what lay behind the question.

Notice carefully our Lord's answer to that question. Both teachers, Hillel and Shammai, appealed to Moses as final interpreter, but differently. When they came to Jesus He said, "Have ye not read, that He which made them from the beginning, made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife." Any detailed examination of the passage is unnecessary; but they raised the question, with all the background of theological controversy. He went from Hillel and Shammai, beyond Moses, to God. He took the whole question back into the region of original Divine purpose and Divine intention. That was the first line of His answer.

Then He clearly declared that there was one reason for divorce, and only one; and that, to use the word of our translation, was "fornication." Thus He really set the seal upon Shammai's view, rather than upon Hillel's. He went on, and interpreted that. It was at that point the disciples showed they had been under the influence of Hillel in their thinking. Divorce had become simple, and cheap, and easy; and any man whose wife was distasteful to him could obtain a divorce. So they said to Jesus, If that is the standard, it were better for a man not to marry. It is rather a revelation of degradation in their thinking. They were Christ's men now, but they still had very much to learn and understand.

Then came our Lord's remarkable reply. He admitted the possible accuracy of their view. He said, "All men cannot receive this saying, but they to whom it is given." As though our Lord said, You may be right in the presence of existing conditions, and of the original Divine intention, and of this strong law of chastity that permits divorce only for the reason of fornication. If you are right, it is a hard saying, and it may be so. All men cannot receive it, but they to whom it is given. It may be possible, in view of existing conditions, that there are those who take that position. Christ was not condemning them.

Then He gave them this parabolic illustration. It is purely Eastern, and in that way we must understand it. The word eunuch meant guardian of the bedchamber. The peculiarity was that these men had to be unmarried men, and unmarriageable men. Our Lord was looking at the conditions, and said, There are those who are eunuchs from their birth. There are those who have been rendered impotent by the act of man. But beyond these two facts then in existence He saw another. There are those who have taken up this position of celibacy from the marriage relationship in the interest of the Kingdom of God. "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." Some are born incapable of marriage. Some are created incapable to marry. With them we have nothing to do. We are not living in the East. Then some for the Kingdom of heaven's sake take up the position of celibacy. Our Lord said that was not for everyone. Some men cannot receive this, but He recognized the possibility. He said, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." In other words He taught distinctly that in the interest of the Kingdom of heaven, celibacy is permitted, but It is not enjoined. There can be no command laid upon a man that he become celibate, if he is to serve the Kingdom of heaven; but if any man out of soul conviction, separates himself from the marriage relationship, so be it, let it be. There is nothing forbidding it; there is nothing to enjoin it, nothing to command it.

That little paragraph stands there, fenced off by the words of Jesus, showing that what is said is not easy to be received, and was only for those who were able to receive it. That does not mean that those able to receive it are lifted on to a higher plane than those not so able; but it does mean that those not able to receive it are not to hold in contempt anyone who devotes himself or herself to the celibate life, in the interests of the Kingdom of God. It must be a matter of personal conscience and relationship for those who are able to receive it.

Then we look down the ages, and look around. How often we have known those who have been able to receive this thing, and have rendered service to the Kingdom of God of a most remarkable kind, because they have been able to receive it. I do not know that it would be historically safe to quote the case of Paul, because in Farrar's *Life of St. Paul* he argues at length that Paul was a married man. He did say, "Have we no right to lead about a wife?" Yet taking the context we see that he said, speaking to the unmarried, "It is good for them if they abide even as I am." In all probability he used it as an illustration of the celibate life. Do not forget, if any incline to the Roman view, that the one who is claimed as the rock of the Church was not a celibate. That does not invalidate either Peter's or Paul's power. There, however, the great principle is presented to us.

There is another principle at the heart of it, applicable over a wider area. In the last analysis the attitude and action of every individual soul must be personal and individual, and in the presence of God. So the light shines over a wider field than evinced in the realm that our Lord referred to by His use of the figure.

We pass on to another quite different figure of speech found in verse twenty-four. "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God." Much more should be read and referred to. Our Lord was now illustrating the blighting influence of wealth on personality. Look at the previous verse "It is hard for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven." That was the subject under discussion at the moment. The disciples were astonished, for they said, "Who then can be saved?" The subject emphasized was the possible blighting influence of wealth on personality, not inevitably so, nor finally necessary.

The whole subject arose out of the departure of the young ruler. It was then that our Lord said, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of God." He did not say they cannot do so. Indeed, presently we shall see that they can. He did not say it was impossible, but that it was hard and difficult. The emphasis of the declaration might have been seen if it had been immediately uttered as the disciples looked at the retreating back of the young ruler; as be had turned his back upon the revelation Christ had brought to him, because he was one "that had great possessions." How hard it is for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of heaven. Our Lord's comment emphasizes in the most superlative way, and almost terrifying degree, the statement He had just made.

But there is something else to be added. Take the illustration as it stands, "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God." We may say, of course that means, it is impossible. Yes, in a certain sense, and our Lord meant to teach that. There is no need to go fully into the matter of the word camel, or eye, or needle. There have been many attempts to explain this passage by explaining it away; that our Lord did not really mean what He said, if He used the actual words. Some of the Cursives there give *Kamilos*, which means rope, instead of a camel. Hort says that was "certainly wrong," and Robertson has ratified Hort's finding. They are both right. Lord Nugent said in his *Lands Classical and Sacred* that the needle's eye referred to a gate with the smaller arch, through which no camel could pass except unladen. That is possible, most possible. However, to me it is unnatural, forced, and insufficient. I believe our Lord meant and said exactly this, If a camel cannot go through a needle's eye, neither can a rich man enter into the Kingdom of God.

A friend of mine in the States, a man, a scientist of unusual ability, once delivered one of the most remarkable addresses I have heard, fanciful, but scientifically clever, on this text. He showed it was quite possible to put a camel through a needle's eye. He took a camel, dissected it, analysed it, and reduced it to its elements, down to a liquid, and so was able to squirt it through a needle's eye. I apologize to my distant friend for the blunt way of stating this! I do not know that I am prepared to accept it. Yet there is something here that is of great importance. The saying of our Lord here meant that a rich man is rendered incapable by his own action of entering into the Kingdom of God.

The disciples then said, " Who then can be saved?" - another revelation of their mental outlook and attitude. We saw it in their question on divorce. What lurked behind it? Rich men could not enter into the Kingdom, because they evidently believed in the power of wealth to introduce men everywhere. If a rich man cannot go, no man can. We see their faulty thinking. Perhaps they were hoping some wealthy man would join the movement. "Who then can be saved? " As on another occasion they came to Jesus with astonishment, and said, All men are seeking Thee. They were always thinking on a faulty level. He had almost as much trouble with them as He has to do to train us. We are so slow, fools, and slow of heart to believe. That is the background here.

Mark the tremendous significance of what our Lord said. He replied to them, saying, "looking upon them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible." Everything depends upon the preposition employed there. "With men," *para*, by the side of, in the company of. "With God," *para*, by the side of, in the company of, in fellowship with. "With men it is impossible." With a rich man hampered by his riches, overwhelmed by them, mastered by them, depending upon them, imagining with the disciples that they constitute some right of entrance into any possession of privilege, it cannot be done, said Jesus. With men, not by men. If a man is only looking out upon the level of his fellows, if only acting with men, if his thinking is mastered by human views, and he is struggling under the mastery and co-operation with others to enter the Kingdom of God, it cannot be done, it is impossible. But with God nothing is impossible. All things are possible if that man ceases to look to himself as a human being, or to his fellows in association with him, trying to find entrance, if he cuts himself off from them, and comes into definite contact with God, if he begins by submission to God, and continues in fellowship with God. Nothing is impossible to that man.

This all began with the coming of the young ruler. Do not forget our Lord looked upon him with great affection. Mark tells us that "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." That was after he had declared he had kept all the commandments on the second Table of the Decalogue from his youth up. He had come asking what he should do to inherit eternal life, this man with great possessions. Jesus had told him, "Thou knowest the commandments," and in quick succession had flashed upon him in brief wording, the essential light of the six commandments that marked the interrelationship between man and man. Man *with man*. He had said, "All these have I kept from my youth up." Do not say he was lying. He was not. He told the truth. Looking at Jesus he said he had a clean record by the test of the law, the commandments that marked relationship with his fellow-men, "with men." But he was outside the Kingdom.

Then Christ said to him, "One thing thou lackest, go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor." That is initial, preliminary, "And come, follow Me." Who was speaking? The One Whom the young ruler had addressed as "Good Master"; and when He said that, Jesus said to him, "Why callest thou Me good? There is one good, that is God." We are shut up to an alternative. Jesus meant, either, I am not good, or He meant, I am God. We do not accept the view that He meant, I am not good. One thing lacking, that is life. One thing thou lackest, follow Me, follow the One Who stands before you in the place of God, and then all things are possible. You can enter into life, You can find your way into the Kingdom of God.

The case in question was that of a wealthy man. The final application of Jesus is to far more than the wealthy men. It is to every man whether rich or poor the truth abides. "With men," if our thinking is mastered by human opinion or action, in seeking human co-operation; if endeavour is halted within the paralysis of our own human nature, we cannot struggle our way into the Kingdom of God. But if on the other hand we are "with God," all things are possible, even the passing through the needle's eye of the camel.