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

**24. PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

*… Matthew Chapter 23*

IT IS important to have a general sense of the whole movement of this chapter, for against that background we find illustrations our Lord used in the course of His discourse. We are at once reminded of the inevitable solemnity of the occasion. This chapter records the final hours of Jesus in the Temple. After this discourse He left it, to go back no more. His word had excommunicated the Hebrew people, not from salvation, or the possibility of it, but from the office they had held by Divine appointment, of being the instrument through which the Kingdom of God was to be proclaimed and revealed among men. He had uttered His final, Kingly, Divine word of excommunication when He said to the nation through the rulers, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

This twenty-third chapter is a continuous discourse, and we observe it falls into three distinct parts. The first part was addressed to the multitudes and His disciples. Notice the opening words of the chapter. He was still there in Temple precincts. The crowds were all round about Him. Nearest to Him were His own disciples, and in the first twelve verses He addressed Himself to the disciples and to the crowds. As we read, it is easy to see the part intended for the multitudes, and the particular part intended for His own disciples.

Beginning at the thirteenth verse, still in the same situation, the disciples and the multitudes still there, and the rulers with whom He had dealt in the earlier chapter; He began to address Himself directly to those rulers, and those in authority. That section beginning at verse thirteen ends at verse thirty-six.

The third section was addressed, out of His heart, to the city of Jerusalem, as He saw it. There it was, represented by the rulers. There were multitudes of Jerusalem folk gathered in the Temple, and unquestionably others. There was the city of Jerusalem itself, built round about that Temple, and He addressed Himself to the city as the mother of the nation. That is in verses thirty-seven to thirty-nine.

In all the record of the words of Jesus we have nothing quite so full of terror as His discourse that day to the rulers. It is noticeable that He pronounced upon these rulers, scribes, and Pharisees an eight- fold Woe. It is significant when He began His public ministry, and enunciated His great ethic in the Sermon on the Mount, He began with an eightfold Beatitude. Now to the rulers specifically, definitely, those who had been hostile to Him from the beginning, and whose hostility had grown upon them, He pronounced an eightfold Woe. Take the eight Beatitudes and Woes, and they stand over against each other; and we can see how they answered each other in the most wonderful way.

In the course of that discourse He employed certain illustrations. In the first two movements He made use of six parabolic illustrations and then when addressing Jerusalem, unveiling His heart, He made use of one. All these illustrations were in the realm of denunciation, all uttered on the same day, in the same place, in the same discourse; and then a parabolic illustration unveiling His heart.

Whereas the illustrations themselves are brief as to words, they are graphic beyond degree, and as a clear and sharp lightning flash they lit up the things He was saying, whether of denunciation, or of the unveiling of His heart.

Take the words briefly. "They bind heavy burdens" (v. 4). The picture is common, but it is very graphic. "Blind guides" (v. 16). Again an illustration, but the picture is absurd, though graphic. "The gnat" and "the camel" (v. 24). The picture is grotesque, and therefore graphic. "The cup," "the platter" (v. 26). The picture is disgusting and therefore graphic." "Whited sepulchers" (v. 27). The picture is appalling, and very graphic. "Serpents", "brood of vipers" (v. 33). The picture is terrible, and so graphic. Then "a hen" and "her chickens" (v. 37). The picture is simple, and therefore graphic. That brief reference to each descriptive phrase, each parabolic light marvellously illuminated what He was saying.

Take that first word. "They bind heavy burdens." The picture, common at the time was that of an overladen beast of burden, of a horse, or an ass, upon which burdens were placed all too heavy for it to carry. In this country a draft-horse should never be expected to pull more than its own weight, I was once standing by a friend of mine, a member of my church, a great contractor, as he was superintending some of his work. He saw a draft-horse laden, coming up; and I saw him look at it. I wondered at the fierceness in his eyes. He stopped it, and said to the cartman, "What load is on that cart? He said, "Two tons, sir." He replied, "Keep that load down to a ton; no horse can pull more than its own weight." The figure here is that of a beast of burden, with a weight put upon it that it has no right to be carrying; and, indeed, in the last analysis, cannot carry. It will sink beneath it. Jesus said to those rulers, that was what they were doing, overloading these beasts of burden, abusing authority by putting upon men burdens they could not possibly carry.

It is wonderful what our Lord said in that connection. He said, These men, scribes and Pharisees, sit in Moses' seat. The word " seat there stands for authority. It is the word *cathedra*. To-day we say men speak *ex cathedra*, that is, out of the seat of authority. Jesus said these men sat in Moses' seat. He really said they had seated themselves in Moses' seat. That is the force of the Greek word. The whole order of scribes had arisen, not improperly; indeed, Jesus set His imprimatur upon it as being permissible. But it was not a Divine appointment originally. They set themselves in Moses' seat, that is they were there to interpret the law as given to men through Moses. "Therefore," put emphasis upon the "therefore", "all things whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe." But they had said so many things that men could not do; they had bound burdens on men that they could not bear. They had added to the law multiplied traditions, crushing the soul, and making men turn from the law, and from God.

Did the Master mean if they sat in Moses' seat the people were to do anything the rulers told them? No; when they spoke according to the law, then they were to be obedient. But He said to the rulers that their whole method of tradition, superimposed upon the law of God, men could not carry. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Why? They were putting these burdens upon men, but were not carrying them, and they would not help. He did not mean they would not help men to carry them, but they would not carry them themselves.

In that connection He went on to show the disciples what they were to do. In the thirteenth chapter He had appointed His disciples the new scribes, the moral interpreters. "Every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the Kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." They were scribes. His disciples were His new scribes. He was denouncing these scribes who had bound burdens upon men, who had become taskmasters, cruel even in their enunciation of law. Notice now what He said to His disciples. Do not be called Rabbi. Do not be called Father. Do not be called Master. All these words indicated their mission, and reveal the value of their teaching. They were servants. So He was sending forth His own disciples, He was sending them out on that great mission; and it was that of service, not to bind heavy burdens upon men, but to serve men for the lifting of burdens and bringing of release.

Then in the sixteenth verse He said, "Woe unto you, ye blind guides." Again in verse twenty-four, "Ye blind guides." There is another parabolic illustration, absurd and therefore graphic. One blind man is trying to lead blind men. The guide who should know the way, and be familiar with it, and lead others along it, is himself blind. He does not see the way at all.

Our Lord was illustrating the fact that these men had given interpretations of the law, and of the ritual, which inverted order, proving that they themselves did not see. They were making the gold more valuable than the Temple. They were making the gift more valuable than the altar, forgetting it was the Temple that sanctified the gold, the altar that made sacred the gift. "Blind guides!" They could not see themselves. Their spiritual vision of relative values had faded, and yet there they were, teaching the people, and because they did not see, their teaching was utterly false.

In close connection He went on. "Blind guides, which strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel." What a grotesque idea it is. The picture is one of a man with a goblet. He is about to drink, and there is a gnat, and he is particular to get it out; and there is a camel, and he swallows it. It is intended to be grotesque, and to show exactly what these men were doing. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hvpocrites!" It is a picture of most glaring inconsistency. Observe in passing our Lord did not say it was wrong to tithe mint and anise and cummin. As a matter of fact He said they ought to do so. But the trouble was, while they did that, and got the gnat out of their drinking goblet, they were neglecting essential values, and swallowing the camel. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"

We come next to the cup and platter. The picture is graphically disgusting. Certainly nothing could be more loathsome than a dirty cup inside, when the outside was clean. But our Lord used the figure intelligently. It *was* disgusting. They were very careful that the out-side was clean, but it did not matter what the inside was like. The commonplace reaction of every man and woman is that it is disgusting; yet that is exactly what these men were doing. They were eager about the maintenance of an external appearance, which was a lie, because within they were full of every form of corruption and evil. I am not staying to apply these things. I am leaving the Holy Spirit to do that. These are all perils for us all the time.

Then the figure of a "whited sepulchre," a peculiarly Eastern figure, a burying place, in which only corpses are placed, and are covered over, and whited. The picture is appalling and graphic. In that Eastern country it meant anyone buried, and people walking across the place where corruption was going forward, were in danger. It is not by external whiteness and cleanness that we are in danger of deadly infection. The rulers, scribes, and Pharisees were whited sepulchres. They were practising a deceit which had in it a terrible menace to others. They were concerned with an external appearance which veiled an inward corruption. Men and women incessantly crossing their pathway, attracted, at least not repelled by all the white appearance, nevertheless were inhaling the deadly germs of their own wrong and corruption. "Whited sepulchres!"

Once more, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! … serpents, ye offspring of vipers," the spawn of vipers. The picture is terrible. Serpents, the offspring, the brood, the spawn of the viper; the keen eye, the poisonous bite. Jesus said, That is where you hypocrites belong, to that realm of dire peril to men. He gave the reasons. So in all these we hear Him in that last discourse within Temple precincts, uttering these terrible Woes, and by illustration showing their reason, and revealing the truth about these men.

Come to the final illustration. "As a hen doth gather her brood beneath her wings," simple, and yet graphic. It is one of the most beautiful pictures of motherhood that can possibly be imagined. It is not necessary to dwell upon it. We have evidences of it in all our villages, hamlets, and farmsteads. We have seen the mother hen, when the sharp cry of a hawk is heard, suddenly gather all the little ones under her outspread wings. There is no need to enlarge upon it. It is such a wonderful picture. Jesus said as He addressed Jerusalem, the great centre and mother of the national life, which was under the influence of the hypocrites, the scribes and Pharisees, which had scattered her children, and driven them out into all the places of deadly peril, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," what that hen does for those chickens I fain would have done for you. "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings." The whole illustration thrills and pulsates with the Motherhood of God. I did not say Fatherhood. That is a great truth, but the other truth is as vitally revealed in the Bible. "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you." Those are God's words. Jesus took that great figure of Motherhood, in its simplest ritual manifestation, the picture of the hen and the brood, and He said, That is what I want, that is what I came for, that is what I fain would have done,

"Woe," uttered eight times over. It was necessary because of human choices and misrepresentations; but that was not what His heart desired. He would have gathered them as a hen gathers her brood beneath her wings.

So among the last sentences in that Temple, even after the pronouncement of His Woes upon the rulers who had misled the people, He unveiled His heart. Yet that was the prelude to His ultimate sentence. "Your house is left unto you desolate." He had often been in that House. If we treat the word as local, as certainly it was, while referring to far more, to the whole dynasty and economy, He had often been in that House. He was going out of it, and as He went He said, "Your house is left unto you desolate." In the course of the ministry He had called that Temple, "My Father's House." He had called it "My House." Now He called it "your house," and it is desolate.

Yet while that was the sentence, it was the penultimate sentence, and the very last word is this, "For I say unto you, ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord." Thus through the appalling gloom of desolation there shone a light that spoke of a day of restoration when they would say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord."

The main thing is His description of those rulers. The key word, "hypocrites," was uttered six times over, perhaps seven. As we see Him thus denouncing hypocrisy, we observe all through His passion for righteousness, and we find in the unveiling of His heart His compassion for the worst. His passion for righteousness never destroys His compassion; but His compassion never destroys His passion for righteousness.