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

**30. THE TWO DEBTORS**

*"A certain lender had two debtors. The one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they couldn't pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most?" Simon answered, "He, I suppose, to whom he forgave the most." He said to him, "You have judged correctly."*

*Luke 7:41-43*

LUKE is rich in parables and parabolic illustrations peculiar to his narrative. There are no fewer than eighteen.

In order to understand the subject our Lord intended to illustrate when He used this parable of the two debtors we must have its setting. The story is well known. In it we see three persons: Simon, who invited Jesus into his house to dinner; the woman who, as Simon would have said, invaded the sanctity of his house; and Jesus.

We give attention first to Simon, and notice what he was thinking in his heart. We understand the cause of his thinking, and find that in the parable the Lord was revealing the reason for what Simon saw that perplexed him. There was no cordiality in the invitation which he extended, because when he received Jesus, he neglected all the common courtesies of an Eastern home. He brought no water for His feet, no oil for His head, he gave Him no kiss of salutation; all which were things of common courtesy in an Eastern home. He simply asked Him to come in, and Jesus went in, and sat down to meat.

Then Simon saw a very strange happening. Luke with fine delicacy employs the phrase "a woman … a sinner." The word is the synonym for a harlot. Simon saw a prostitute, to use the blunt word, suddenly cross his threshold. There is no need to emphasize the fact that she had never been there before. No man like Simon, cold and dispassionate, moral, upright, and conceited, need be afraid that kind of woman is coming near him! Simon saw her come in and go round the board, and stooping behind Jesus shed tears over His feet, then with loosened tresses of her hair wiping them, smothering them with kisses, and pouring on them precious ointment. Simon saw this, and it perplexed him.

Now what did Simon see? He saw this woman manifesting and giving evidences of great devotion and of affection towards Jesus, and he associated what he saw with what he knew of the woman. He knew who she was, knew what her story was; and when he saw a woman of that character come into his house, and give evidences of tremendous affection for Jesus, and devotion to Him, he measured the action by what he knew of the woman.

Jesus accepted those evidences of affection and devotion. He allowed her to do what she did. He did not forbid her. Simon said if He were a prophet He would have known who and what manner of woman she was. That was Simon's outlook. Jesus accepted it. Simon associated what he saw with what he knew of the woman. Jesus accepted the devotion and affection because He associated these things with what *He* knew of the woman. The whole story shows what Simon knew, and what Jesus knew. Our Lord presently asked Simon if he really knew the woman. Notice the two little sentences. Simon said, "If He were a prophet He would have perceived who, and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him." Presently Jesus said to him, "Simon, seest *thou* this woman?" Then He proceeded to show the woman to Simon, and He did so by comparing her with him, and He showed - to put the matter bluntly - that by comparison with her, Simon with all his boasted morality, was as coarse as sackcloth, and she was fine as fine-spun silk. That is the background.

What was Jesus showing by the use of this parable? He was showing that this woman was a cleansed woman, a forgiven woman. He did not pronounce forgiveness then, but as something already accomplished. The tense of the verb is, "hath been forgiven." He was showing Simon this one thing, for I believe He was trying to reach the soul of Simon. This leads us to the parable, which teaches that moral cleansing is the inspiration of devotion, and of beauty. That summarizes everything at the beginning as to the circumstances under which the parable was spoken, and the subject which the parable was intended to illustrate.

Take the parable, remembering the narrative. Jesus said, "A certain lender," and the word is a money-lender. They existed then, and still exist. "A certain money-lender had two debtors; the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. When they had not wherewith to pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most? Simon answered and said, He, I suppose " - and the word there suggests a rather supercilious attitude - "He, I suppose, to whom he forgave the most." The Master said, "Thou hast rightly judged."

Look then at this figure our Lord employed. It is strictly a commercial one, money, debtors, and creditors; and in each case the inevitable conclusion is that the debts had been incurred through need. This money-lender had advanced to one fifty pence, and to the other, five hundred. The proportion of fifty to five hundred is the important thing. To translate into the English equivalent is not easy. There were debts, and the degree of obligation is marked by the difference in the amount, between fifty and five hundred. It is a commercial picture, quite usual, happening often enough in that country, still happening too. The advance had come from the same source, and it had gone to two people in the same condition of need, and they were both still in the same condition that they had nothing with which to pay. They were both bankrupt; they owed the debt, but they could not pay it.

Then our Lord introduced into His parable something extraordinary, almost unusual. What is it? That the money-lender forgave them both. Do not miss that, because there flashes a light of the Divine, there beams the glory of the grace of God. Keep to the figure for a moment, the cancellation of obligation in both cases, the fifty wiped out, the five hundred wiped out! It was a purely gratuitous act on the part of the creditor, on the ground only of the bankruptcy of the debtors. I think Simon must have been astonished when he heard the story at that point. The creditor cancels the debts of the debtors, which was something quite unusual; and from that fact He asked this question, Which of them is likely to love him the most? He did not use the prerogative which was his, and take the usual course of events, which follows a personal indebtedness to a creditor. He cancelled the debts.

What had Simon to say to that? What he would say is so obvious. I think with a touch of superciliousness he said, "I suppose, he to whom he forgave the most." Quickly and sharply came the word of Jesus, "Thou hast rightly judged." The greater the obligation the greater the sense of gratitude when the obligation is cancelled. We see much of infinite beauty gleaming in this wonderful parable. I see in the parable itself, in the mind of our Lord, a tender satire for Simon. I think He was accepting Simon's valuation of his own degree of guilt at fifty, and that of the woman at five hundred. He took figures that revealed the working of Simon's mind. Simon was a Pharisee, and therefore an orthodox Jew. Simon would have admitted he was a sinner, but would thank God that he was not such a sinner as that woman. How wonderfully things persist. Our Lord said He would take him at his valuation. You are the fifty pence sinner, and the woman the five hundred pence. Ten times she owes as thou dost. On his valuation He took him; but as a matter of fact, there are no such degrees in sin. Sin is rebellion against, and unlikeness of God, whether the form be that of the hypocrite as Simon was, or the form of a fallen woman, such as the one who came into his house. The essence of sin was rebellion against the law and will of God, and contradiction of the heart of God. That is sin, and there is no such thing as degrees of guilt. Or even if we should admit degrees, then considering this whole story, Simon's sin was greater than the woman's, for do not forget this, that the sins of the spirit are always more heinous than the sins of the flesh. The sins of the spirit, pride, self-satisfaction, are more deadly to human life than the sins of the flesh ever were, or can be. So the parable Jesus used.

What does the parable teach us by implication? I begin at the heart of it. First of all, the bankruptcy of all men when they stand in the presence of God. We are all His debtors, but we have nothing to pay, not one of us. In the words of our hymnology, often sung,

"Nothing in my hands I bring."

Why not? We have nothing to bring. We have nothing with which we can pay the debt we owe to God, consequent upon a violated law, and sin in our lives, whether of the spirit or the flesh, matters nothing. This parable, sharp-cut as a cameo as we ponder it, brings us face to face with the fact that the sentence on every one of us morally is that we have nothing to pay, nothing sufficient to meet our obligations.

Then if that is the great central truth, by implication there is another amazing thing. There is forgiveness for all. He forgave them both. Behind that there is so much that cannot be said, but must be remembered. I do not know who this money-lender was, but even the parable of Jesus fails, as all parables do, to utter the ultimate truth. He forgave them both. Mel Trotter has said an arresting thing. "We are all redeemed, but we are not all saved," an important distinction. When Jesus died, He did not die for me alone, but for the world, and the Cross provided redemption for the world, that which makes it possible for God to forgive, "He forgave them both." This money-lender lost not much more than 550 pence, more than £55 in our currency all told; but in order to provide humanity's need in its deep necessity, in its bankruptcy, God gave His only begotten Son. That is not in the parable, but it is implicated. "He forgave them both," forgiveness for me, for you, and that by an act of God; very costly to Him, which was all of grace. We have no claim upon God righteously. Our only claim upon Him is that of His heart, His love, and His grace; and neither the heart, nor the love and grace of God can ever act at the expense of holiness. That is where the Cross came in. It was the means by which He made possible the forgiveness of God, granted to both of them, the fifty and the five hundred sinner, what- ever the degree of guilt might have been.

Then we glance at the direct teaching. He teaches that moral cleansing is the inspiration of devotion, that love is not a mere passing human emotion. It is a great devotion, and it springs out of moral cleansing. No man knows what it is to love Jesus who is not conscious of His cleansing power from sin. It is interesting that all through this story the word for love is the highest, *agapao*, love intelligent, informed, devoted. She loved much; and her love sprang from the fact that her sins, which were many, had been forgiven. A cleansed heart becomes a loving heart. Moral cleansing sets free from a sense of bondage. It restores spiritual perception, and is of such a nature that such a woman will violate her own inclination or prejudice. Nothing else would have persuaded her to go into that man's house, but she went in. Luke is careful to tell us that when she knew He was in the house, that brought her in. She trampled on all her prejudices when she went in, because she was spiritually cleansed, she was set free from the bondage of fear. What cared she for the opinion of Simon? She knew the relationship between her Lord and herself.

Then I look at her again, and learn from the whole story, in the light of the that such devotion, resulting from moral cleansing, is the secret of restored beauty. That is what our Lord tried to show Simon, that the actions of the woman were characterized by beauty. Her tears, her kisses, her nard, were beautiful things; and they were brought by a woman whom Simon looked upon as soiled and spoiled, smirched, and cast out and reprobate. So she was, until Jesus met her. But then at once all the graces of womanhood blossomed into beauty and into fine expression. That woman was nobly born, because she was born again; and the only men and women of noble birth are those born from above, morally cleansed, freed from all the bondage of tradition and fear, and blossoming with grace and beauty. All this was seen in a desire to serve her Lord, and the tears and kisses and nard were the sacramental symbols of the devotion of a woman whom Jesus had forgiven in the name of God, and delivered. His last word to her was this, "Go in peace." So we have rendered it, but it is really, "Go into peace." There was a future before her. Probably she never did get back into communion with Simon and his crowd. Very likely she would be looked down upon by some of the moralists who knew nothing of the grace of God. What did it matter? The Bible never names a woman of this kind. In great beauty, names are withheld; but the personality is seen. Two debtors, both forgiven, but the one who was conscious of the value of the gift manifested it in her devotion; and so went in peace.