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

**34. THE WATCHFUL SERVANTS**

*"Peter said to him, "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everybody?" The Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his lord will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the right times? Blessed is that servant whom his lord will find doing so when he comes. Truly I tell you, that he will set him over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, 'My lord delays his coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken, then the lord of that servant will come in a day when he isn't expecting him, and in an hour that he doesn't know, and will cut him in two, and place his portion with the unfaithful. That servant, who knew his lord's will, and didn't prepare, nor do what he wanted, will be beaten with many stripes, but he who didn't know, and did things worthy of stripes, will be beaten with few stripes. To whomever much is given, of him will much be required; and to whom much was entrusted, of him more will be asked."*

*Luke 12:41-48*

THERE are senses in which this paragraph is not an easy one with which to deal. While not exactly obscure, we need to give careful attention to certain details, in order not to miss its chief value.

The parable in its fulness is peculiar to Luke. Other parables have moved in the same realm. In the twenth-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of Matthew we considered three, one communal, having to do with inter-relationships within His Kingdom; one personal, dealing with the supply of oil for lamps; and one imperial, concerning the talents entrusted to His own. When considering the first of these in Matthew, we postponed a full consideration, because the teaching here in Luke is fuller than that given in Matthew. Matthew recorded briefly this parable as our Lord uttered it in the Olivet prophecy. Luke gives it as our Lord had uttered it in an earlier part of His ministry.

This parable has a value all its own. What was our Lord intending to illustrate? Notice how the record begins. "And Peter said, Lord, speakest Thou this parable unto us, or even unto all?" What parable? Certainly not the one we are now considering, because He had not then uttered it. Immediately preceding that question is a parable Jesus had been uttering, and the question of Peter concerned the application of that previous parable, which dealt with the subject of fidelity to an absent Lord. Matthew Henry once said, "Thank God for Peter. He was always asking questions." His questions always brought forth wonderful answers. This was a perfectly fair question, "Speakest Thou this parable unto us, or even unto all? " It is one that faces us as we consider the parable. This present study is the answer to the question about fidelity to an absent Lord. The "us" referred to the twelve chosen apostles, representatives of those who should be the successors in the long history. Is the teaching of that parable restricted to such, or does it apply to all? Whether the "all" means all men, or all disciples, we cannot say. Peter was definitely seeking to know if our Lord's teaching was intended to lay responsibility on the apostles, and those who should be called after them to certain definite spiritual authority within the Church of God, or whether it applied to all the Church. That is the background of the parable.

Notice how our Lord answered it. He did so by asking a question which, in a sense, He did not answer at all. Peter said, Who is that teaching for? Is it for us, or all? Jesus said, "Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall set over his household?" The question is open. Does what He is now going to say apply to a special company, called to specific service, or does it apply to all? Our Lord left it quite open. In effect He said, What I have said applies to every steward in the household who is faithful and true, whether in a special sense called to ministry, or not. I think in the last analysis the supreme value of the parable is for such, but it applies to others as well.

The picture our Lord here drew was of a household, which we must interpret by the East. There the household is a very different thing to what it is here. The household was composed of a lord, a master, the supreme one over all those who constituted the household, a despot not in any bad sense, but in a good sense, signifying complete and unquestioned and unqualified authority. Then in the household there was the office of stewardship, those under the lord who were the representatives of the lord. They were stewards of the property of their lord. A steward not only had charge of these things, he was responsible for their administration in the household. In the Eastern countries, too, the position of steward was often held by slaves, bond-servants. In this story the word used for servant is *doulos*, bond-slave. Those who were representatives of the ruler, the lord, were in complete surrender and subservience. That was the household.

Now in that household the responsibility that rested upon those who were stewards, being bond-servants, was that of watching over the life of all in the household, and of feeding all in that household. In the teaching of Jesus, taking the figure, we see that it was applicable to all in a household. Every bond-slave was in some measure the steward of the property of his lord, and every bond-slave was responsible to the rest in the household for the administration of the will of his lord, and the feeding of each other. Yet there were those in such households who were in special positions of government and authority over the affairs. That is the picture.

What were the possibilities lying within that fact of stewardship in the household? Simply, fidelity on the one hand and failure on the other; those faithful and those unfaithful. Reasons for infidelity on the part of stewards within the household are suggested. The lord is absent, he is not there. There may be those who postpone his return, or declare, "He delayeth his coming"; and are therefore careless in their watching for him; the result being that they do wrong to each other. They "begin to beat the men-servants and the maid-servants," ill-treat them, and give themselves to carousing. That is infidelity. The Lord's teaching is that presently when the lord comes himself, he will deal with these stewards. He will deal with those who have been faithful, and set them in authority over all other things; associating himself completely with them in dominion. With those unfaithful, they will receive condemnation. He "shall cut him asunder." The Old Version had it, "cut him in sunder." The Revised Version has changed it. The judgment will be discriminative. Those who knew and wilfully disobeyed their lord's will will be beaten with many stripes; and those who disobeyed, and yet did not know the lord's will, yet were guilty, and did things worthy of punishment, will be beaten with few stripes.

If the story is taken in all its simplicity, we see what this teaching really is. There is a sense in which this parable is applicable to all in the household. That is a great phrase, "the household of God," which is the living Church. Every member of the Church is responsible for the other. The one sentiment which is for evermore denied at the door of the Church is the sentiment that is never recommended by the lips that first used it, "Am I my brother's keeper?" We should remember that. Yet there is the attitude, the peril, the possibility of an attitude in those words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" That is not true in the Christian Church. If it is true, then there are stewards who are failing. We are all responsible for each other in the great household of God.

Yet it is true according to New Testament teaching, that God has called by the Holy Spirit, and set apart certain within the Church who are in specific sense in oversight. That is the meaning of the word *bishop*. Bishop and presbyter are synonymous terms in the New Testament. They meant those who have oversight. That is what the writer of the epistle said, "Remember them that had the rule over you." Who were they? Those "which spake unto you the word of God." These orders of Christian ministry emerge clearly in the New Testament. We have mixed them terribly, and yet their essential values remain, those who are called upon "to watch in behalf of the souls" of "the household of God." Whereas the application of this parable of Jesus is unquestionably to all, I cannot study it without being convinced that its special application is to those whom we to-day call ministers. We are mistaken if we think ministers are servants of men. We are servants of the Lord, and "your servants for His sake," in His interests. There are great words in the New Testament - bishop, teacher, pastor; and they all mark the fact of a position of responsibility in the Church of God concerning that Church.

The great underlying thought here is that of a revelation of an atmosphere in all this teaching of Jesus, that of fellowship in the household in the absence of our Lord, the fellowship of the Christian Church. The Lord used that distributive method in order to show that it applied to all those who take the position of bond-service, or stewardship; whether specially or generally, but specially to those who are called. In the book of the Acts we have that wonderful story in the twentieth chapter of Paul calling together the elders of the Church at Ephesus, and talking to them. Take a few sentences that fell from his lips. "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops," that is, overseers, "to feed the Church of God, which He purchased with His own blood." So Paul said to the elders at Ephesus, and it reveals the very thought of responsibility.

In Peter's letter we find the same great truth (1 Peter 5:1), "The elders among you" - presbyters - "I exhort, who am a fellow-elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, who am also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed." How did he charge them? "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according unto God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." Mark this, "Neither lording it over the charge allotted to you." It is interesting to note that the word "Charge " is the word *cleros*, from which we derive our word clergy. This is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. The clergy, therefore, according to the New Testament, are not the special ministers of the Church, but the rank and file of the members. The Church members here are in the clergy, and the minister is not! The clergy means the laity. It has to do with the inheritance, and the elders are not to lord it over the clergy, but to make themselves "ensamples to the flock." And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye "shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away."

Those two references show how the teaching of Jesus has special and first-hand application. To every brother in the ministry, and Sunday School teacher, and those preparing for this sacred work, it is borne in upon us as we study these words of Jesus, that we feed the flock of God.

It may be said, Surely the picture cannot be a true one, that within the household were those beating their men-servants and maid-servants, and eating and drinking, and becoming drunken. It is rather startling. But consider the history of the Christian Church. Again and again within the Church, on the part of those supposed to be stewards and fellow-watchers, this very thing has literally taken place; the beating, and beating to death, in the supposed interest of Christ Himself. One of the things that gives me cause for hope and rejoicing to-day is that there is far less of it than there was when I was young. I can remember the extreme bitterness manifested to those who were of the household of God by others, and how men mauled each other. They are still doing it. There is an awful possibility of being in this fellowship, and so failing that our treatment of our fellow-men is utterly antagonistic to the spirit and genius of Christianity. Study the history of the Church to see to what I am referring.

What then are our duties? Paul said, Watch, and also, Feed the flock of God. Peter emphasized it. There is to be mutual ministry within the Christian Church, that of helpfulness, a mutual ministry on behalf of the other *douloi*. In the Church it is specially true. It is philosophically true of the whole race, but in the Church it is specially true, "No man liveth unto himself." It is also written, every man lives for his Lord, but this applies to his fellow-member too. When the function is fulfilled, then we find the blessedness; and when it fails, there must be discipline and punishment.

"Lord, to whom sayest Thou this? Unto us or to all?" To both, to all, to any who become members of the household, bond-slaves of the Lord, and stewards, serving each other in the things of the Kingdom of God.