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

**35. THE BARREN FIG-TREE**

*"He spoke this parable. "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. He said to the vine dresser, 'Behold, these three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and found none. Cut it down. Why does it waste the soil?' He answered, 'Lord, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit, fine; but if not, after that, you can cut it down.'"*

*Luke 13:6-9*

THE PARABLE of the barren fig-tree is again peculiar to the Gospel according to Luke, and is one that has become familiar. Again care is needed to discover the subject which our Lord intended to illustrate. The figures of the fig-tree and the vineyard were prominent nationally at that time. One might be familiar with the song of the vineyard in the fifth chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah, without realizing that this parable as to method is closely connected with it. There is no doubt that in the mind of our Lord thoughts of Isaiah's song are to be found, and that His parable in certain ways was an adaptation of that song of Isaiah.

This parable might be applied to the nation of Israel, and to God's dealing with that people. While not denying that there may be such an application, unquestionably there is that implication; if that be all, we do not really understand at what our Lord was aiming. So we must give attention to the context of His parable.

In doing so we see at once the application was individual rather than national. The larger application is of course involved, but the national entity has to be measured by individuals, and its strength measured by the individual unit. As it is true that every chain is as strong as its weakest link, and no stronger; and every fortress is as strong as its least guarded gate, and no stronger; so the nation is as strong as the individual. If it is weak individually, the weakness of the national life is created. So there is the closest relationship between the national and individual application.

However, we are concerned to know why our Lord, at this point, used this parable; and also to mark the relationship of all that lies round about it. To find the answer we go back to the previous twelfth chapter. It is one continuous narrative, the two chapters being linked. Luke is careful to show, at the beginning of chapter thirteen, that what Jesus was about to say happened at the same time. In verse fifty-four, in chapter twelve, we find Jesus speaking to the multitudes. To summarize there, He was rebuking the people because they were unable to discern the times in which they lived. He recognized their mental ability. He said they were weather-wise, but were entirely ignorant as to spiritual things. "Ye hypocrites, ye know how to interpret the face of the earth and the heaven; but how is it that ye know not how to interpret this time?" He was charging them with spiritual incapacity and misunderstanding of life.

Then "at that very season," so begins chapter thirteen, there were people who came to tell Him something that Pilate had done. He had mingled the blood of some Galileans with the sacrifices they had offered. The Galileans were a hot-headed crowd, and were often in some political difficulty, and it is quite evident there had been some trouble. At the time perhaps some religious festival was going forward. They were offering sacrifices, and Pilate had sent down a punitive expedition, and had slain them, mingling their blood with their sacrifices. They came and told Jesus the news. When? Immediately "at that very season," when He had rebuked them for ignorance and inability to discern the times.

Why did they tell Him that at that time? Note His reply. He said, "Think ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans because they have suffered these things?" Was that what they were thinking? Was that how they were looking upon life? Was that their interpretation of things? Were they thinking that those Galileans were sinners above all because they suffered these things? Were they imagining that a swift judgment was evidence of profound sin? "I tell you, Nay." They were wrong. They misunderstood life; "but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish." Did that mean that Pilate would slay them too? They were looking upon the slaying of those people as though they perished. That is not the deepest meaning of perishing. They were slain by Pilate, but they could perish without being slain by Pilate, and they would, unless they repented of their sins.

Then transferring His thought from Galilee to Judaea, He continued, "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, and killed them, think ye that they were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." That is the context of the parable.

He had rebuked the multitudes for their spiritual insensibility to the time in which they were living; and they, desiring to show Him that they were not such fools as He imagined, said, We do understand things. We know that because Pilate killed these Galileans this catastrophic judgment falling upon men proved that they were sinners above all. Our Lord gave them a parable to correct their false thinking about life; and revealed once and for all, the truth about human life, whether individually or nationally. Keeping here to the individual application, He gave parabolic illustration of the truth concerning human life, as against the foolish superstition in their minds of which they had given evidence, as they reported this story about Pilate and the Galileans.

Even to-day there is a tendency to say some catastrophe is the judgment of God upon people, because of their extreme wickedness. We have no right to say such a thing. People said that the earthquake in San Francisco, and the fire that followed, was the judgment of God on that city. Nothing of the kind. God does not deal with men like that now. That is not His method. Here in this parable we see the truth concerning all life, and though we may never be slain by Pilate's soldiers, or be crushed by the falling of houses in an earthquake, we may perish unless we repent.

Look at the parable. What a marvellously clear and succinct revelation it is. It is a simple and human story. What is the picture presented? First we see a proprietor, and his rights are revealed. "A certain man had a fig-tree." It was his, planted in his vineyard. It derived all its resources from his soil, his property. There are three rights of the proprietor, taking the picture simply.

There is first the absolute right of the proprietor to his own property. It was his soil. It was his vineyard. It was his fig-tree. It belonged to him.

Secondly we see, growing out of the absolute right, the moral right of expectation. Why did he give that fig-tree room in his vineyard? Because he expected figs, fruit. If a man plants a fig-tree in his garden, he expects figs. We can change the figure. If a man plants an apple-tree in his garden, what does he do it for? Apples. The moral expectation is perfectly justifiable.

But in this parable there is another right, a punitive right of the proprietor to destroy that which fails. That is what the proprietor said to the vinedresser, the one in charge of his vineyard. For three years I have sought fruit on this fig-tree, and found none. My right of expectation has been trifled with, and thwarted, in spite of my patience for three years. Cut it down. Who will gainsay his right to do it? His right was created not merely because it brought forth no fruit, but because it cumbered the ground. That means two things. Another tree, occupying that same space and soil, will bear fruit, and because it is robbing the soil of its riches, and bringing forth no fruit, it is ruining the soil. Those are the proprietor's rights as we look at the picture. There is no need to make any application.

Now in the parable there is interference, gracious, beneficent, but just, made by an intercessor. What does he ask? An opportunity to provoke that failing tree to such action as shall produce the fruit. "Let it alone this year also till I shall dig about it," disturb it; "and dung it," fertilize it. That is the plea of the intercessor. Is that all? No, "If it bear fruit thenceforth, well." That is what thou hast been expecting. If I can make it produce fruit, that is everything; and if not, then there is no quarrel between the vinedresser and the proprietor. "If not, thou shalt cut it down."

As we look at the fig-tree, what is the revelation? Everything depends upon the fulfilment of the proprietor's moral right to fruit. If a tree bears fruit, it will still keep its place; and functioning according to the intention of the proprietor, he will be satisfied. If it fails, in spite of the intercessor's plea, and his ministry, there is only one thing to do. A fruitless tree must not be allowed to cumber the ground.

Here the truth concerning life is revealed, whether it be individual or national matters nothing. The first fact is, the rights of God. Are people tired of hearing that? I thank God that it is being said with new emphasis again to-day. A man has no rights apart from the rights of God. The only right man has is to be damned! That is not the only thing. We have no right to expect anything, except for the mercy and grace of God. God's rights are the absolute rights of proprietorship. We are His by creation. We have no power of personality that is not created by God. Any essential power of personality is the result of Divine creation, and we are in His vineyard. This world is His. We have lived in it so many years, We have breathed His air. We have known His sunlight. We have benefited by His laws. Here we are, living in His world, His creation, His property, and deriving all the resources of personality from that which is His.

Has He any moral right of expectation? What does He expect? When looking at the fig-tree I used the word of the parable and said we could change it to suit this Western clime in which we live. What did that man want from that tree? Figs. What is God looking for in man? What is He looking for in me? A man. What is He looking for in you? A man, a woman, a youth, a child. When He said, "Let Us make man," He is looking for the realizing of the meaning of our own life, according to His own creation. Suffer me an illustration, often used. When a boy in Sunday School, we used to sing,

"I want to be an angel,

And with the angels stand.

A crown upon my forehead,

And a harp within my hand."

Surely there was never anything more stupid taught to children than that! I am not an angel, thank God. God never intended us to be angels, and He never intends us to be. He does not want angels when He makes men. He wants men. Someone may say I am lowering the standard. No, I am not. What is a man? We have only one answer. Jesus is the revelation. That is what God wants when He comes into His garden seeking fruit, from you, from me; likeness to Jesus. There is another of childhood's hymns I have not given up singing even now,

"I want to be like Jesus,

Meek, lowly, loving, kind."

That is what God wants. A man looks for figs from his fig-tree. God looks for humanity from His humanity, and He has that moral right of expectation.

If we fail, who will deny His right to destroy, to cut down. That right is inherent in the meaning of humanity. A man who is not realizing that Divine ideal is cumbering the ground. It may be, my dear Sir, somebody living where you are living would exert an influence of fruitfulness, and would benefit humanity; and you are taking up space, you are cumbering the ground. You are taking God's resources, and prostituting them to base uses. Because you are not fulfilling the meaning of your own life, has He not the right to say, "Cut it down"?

Then of course the great Lord Who uttered the parable is revealed to us as the intercessor. Mark carefully this one supreme fact. The ground of the plea of the intercessor is not pity. We do not understand it if we talk merely of pity. It is not a case of the woodman sparing that oak because of the beauty of its foliage. If there are no figs, if there are no apples, if there is no humanity, Christ is not interfering, or asking God to let us off, or making excuse for failure. No, He has received the right to dig about it and dung it, to disturb and fertilize the life, to come into contact with the barren fig-tree and make it fruitful.

Then, if in spite of all He does for us, there still is no fruit, then He joins with the proprietor in the verdict of doom, "Thou shalt cut it down."

What is the test then of life? Fruitfulness, according to the Divine intention. No, God is not swooping down upon people and proving they were dreadful sinners, by some calamity. He is expecting fruit. Oh! wonderful imagery and matchless grace, He is introducing Himself as the vinedresser. He is waiting and able to take the deadest tree and make it live again, a fruitless human life, and make it blossom with beauty, and bear fruit.

"But if we still His call refuse,

And all His wondrous love abuse;

Soon must He sadly from us turn,

Our bitter prayer for pardon spurn.

Too late, too late, will be the cry,

When Jesus of Nazareth has passed by."

It behooves us to turn from all the false thinking of man about life, and its conditioning; and to find out God's thought and its revealed purpose now and for ever, from this parable of the barren fig-tree.