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

**43. THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN**

*"He spoke also this parable to certain people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others. "Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed to himself like this: 'God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men, extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far away, wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

*Luke 18:9-14*

THIS is one of the best known and best loved parables of Jesus. It is interesting to observe that those parables of our blessed Lord which have taken hold more profoundly generally upon the heart of man, are found in this Gospel of Luke, the chronicler of God's second Man, and the last Adam. He, a Greek writer, portrays Him in all the perfection of His human nature. That may account for this appeal of some of his parables to the human heart.

An honest consideration of this story shows that it is indeed the word of the Lord, quick and sharp, dividing asunder. It is a very searching, as well as comforting story. Like the previous parable, it is concerned with the subject of prayer. In that we had a revelation of God in the matter of prayer, as He was contrasted in His character and in His dealings, with the unrighteous judge. In this parable we have a revelation of human nature in the attitudes, or activities of prayer, in the presence of God.

We consider first, the subject illustrated; then the figure which our Lord employed; finally deducing the teaching.

The subject illustrated is revealed in the specific statement with which the parable opens, "And He spake also this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at nought." We at once see why the parable was uttered. It was spoken to a certain personal and relative attitude. The personal attitude is revealed in the word, they "trusted in themselves that they were righteous." That phrase illuminates the whole situation of the Pharisees, and those closely associated with them. They believed in righteousness, but their idea of righteousness was on a low level. In the great Manifesto Jesus had said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven." I do not know that many of them could have said what Paul did in his marvellous auto-biographical passage in the Philippian letter. After thirty years of comradeship with Christ, he said, as he looked back at those days, that he was "a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the Church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless." Perhaps of this man whom we see in the parable, that also could be said. We do not know, but we do know his righteousness consisted in his devotion to certain laws, and interpretations of the laws; especially in those days to the traditions with which the laws had been almost submerged, as to their vital applicability. Our Lord had those people's personal attitude in mind when He spoke this parable. They were trusting in *themselves* that they were righteous.

Then the relative attitude of these men is revealed in that pregnant phrase, "And set all others at nought." The Greek word there might be rendered a little more forcefully, as in the margin, "the rest." What a way to dismiss all except oneself! They trusted in themselves, these people, whom Jesus had in mind, that they were righteous; and accounted all the rest as not counting, as mere ciphers. That attitude is seen again and again in the Gospels. Once some of these men addressed the crowd, and spoke of them as cursed, those who did not know the law. Here is an attitude of life, personally trusting in oneself, believing one is righteous, and at the same time, setting all the rest at nought.

Luke says specifically in the ninth verse that it was these attitudes our Lord had in mind. These personal and relative attitudes are seen in the light of God. Two men were in the Temple, and men were looking at them. The crowds would see them, and form their own opinion concerning them. Jesus stood quietly there, and said in effect, Look at those two men. Look at that one man, his attitude concerning himself, and towards all the rest; and see what God thinks about them both, the Pharisee and one of the despised.

Now look at the figure employed. Here we are in the presence of familiar things. Jesus drew a picture of two men in the temple. "Two men went up into the Temple to pray." They both went to the temple, and they both went to pray. At that point this story becomes searching. Isaiah had referred to the Temple, and had called it "My holy mountain," "My house of prayer"; and in the course of His ministry Jesus referred to it by practically citing Isaiah's words, "It is written, And My house shall be called a house of prayer." So two men are here, seen going to the right place, the place appointed, the house of prayer, with all that that word meant. Look at the two men, and see the similarity between them. Both of them were going to the Temple, recognizing it as the house of God, the place set apart and ordained as the place of worship, and going there to pray.

Then we begin to see the difference. What is the first thing about the Pharisee? He "prayed thus with himself." Oh yes, he began by addressing God. He used the Name at the beginning of his prayer. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." That is the emphasis. God he knew. It was the house of prayer, and he knew it as the place where men come to deal with God, and he began his prayer with a recognition of God.

Luke tells us, moreover, that he "stood and prayed." A little lower down we read, "The publican, standing afar off." They were both standing, but the descriptive words are different. The word used by Luke of the Pharisee suggests in itself a static and upright position of perfect security and self-satisfaction. The word *static* as descriptive of his attitude is warranted by the word itself, he "stood." The other man stood, for it was the habit to stand in prayer. But how differently men can stand! A man can stand with the braggadocio of an uplifted chin that tells a great story about him. He can stand with head not lifted, but bowed down, which tells an equally great story. Even in those two different words translated by the same verb in our language, we have the dawning of a great revelation.

This man prayed with himself. What does that mean? Was he alone? Hardly at that time of worship and prayer; and yet he was. He prayed, separated from these others. He knew enough of this man and his habits to know that he would withdraw, perhaps getting as near to the sacred altar as he could, and seek to be separated even in the matter of physical contact of his garments from the rabble, all the rest. He "prayed with himself." But something he did not seem to have recognized was that when he prayed with himself, he was not only separated from the others, he was separated from God; and therefore his prayer rose no higher than the beautiful roof of the Temple, perhaps not so high as that! He was in a circle. He was the centre of the circle, and its circumference, He prayed with himself.

Then he recognized the Deity, approaching Him by using the name, God. His conception of God is revealed in his prayer, "God, I thank Thee, that I am not as the rest of men." I am no extortioner. I am not unjust. I am not an adulterer. I am not "even as this publican." In that prayer can be read all the scorn there was in his heart for men. He was telling God that he had abstained from vulgar sins.

Had he finished? Oh no, he had not. "I fast twice in the week." That was a work of supererogation. The law did not require that, but he had followed the traditions most meticulously in the interpretation of the law. "I give tithes of all that I get!" All that I get, and acquire, I set aside the tenth of everything obtained in the course of my business. This man was talking to God. He began by addressing Him, and he told God that he had abstained from certain vulgar forms of sin, and that he was very careful to observe certain rites or ceremonies.

Why was he telling God these things? Evidently this was his conception of God. He would not have written down what was in his subliminal consciousness. This man thought of God as One satisfied with trivialities, abstaining from vulgar sins, and the observing of certain rites and ceremonies. We may go further and say he thought God was obligated to him, because of these things. He went up to pray, but he prayed within himself. Into the circle of his own self-centred personality he dragged God by name, and degraded Him by what he said.

Look at that other man. Jesus told the story of the publican to fling up into clear and sharp relief the picture of the Pharisee. He spoke this parable to those who trusted in their own righteousness, as this Pharisee did, despising others. He might have left it there, but no. He drew attention to another man, this publican, standing afar off, suggesting a different attitude. The Pharisee was in all probability pressing as near as he could to the altar. This man perhaps was just within the Temple, the holy place. He had crept in, and stood afar off from the place which was central to the conception of the Divine Being. He did "not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven." With downcast eyes, beating on his breast, the action of confession, then he spoke. "God" - that is the same word the other man had used; but the nominative case was not in his prayer. The other man's prayer was full of it, I … I … I … I …I!" It was the objective case here. It is "me"; "God be merciful to me a sinner." Seven words only. See what he has done. He has drawn a circle, and there are two personalities within it. Who are they? God and himself; "God," "me." That circle that looks so narrow, yet has within it that one sinning man and all the vastness of eternity, for his cry is a real one. One remembers the words of the ancient prophet, in which interpreting the fact of God, God speaks to him and says, "The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit. To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word." His conception of God is thus revealed. "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

What was his conception of God? That He was holy, One in Whose presence a sinner needs propitiation, for that is his word, Be propitious to me. His sense of God in his prayer was that God is compassionate, One to Whom a sinner could come.

Two conceptions of God. The same name, God; even as we may say God, and mean very different things; even as we may say Jesus, and have very opposing conceptions. The God of the Pharisee is One satisfied with trivialities, and has in some senses a duty to a man because he has abstained from vulgarity, and has kept up certain rites and forms and ceremonies. The other conception of God is of One Who is holy, in Whose presence a sinning man needs mercy; but One to Whom he can come, and with downcast eyes, and beating on his breast, breathe out the sighing of his soul for mercy. That is the picture, and what a picture it is.

The teaching again is self-evident and declared. When Jesus had finished His parable, He had not quite ended. He had something else to say. He had to utter a judgment, to make an appraisement, to pass a verdict. "I say unto you," Take that phrase in the records, and watch when it fell from the lips of Jesus. He used it now. It was the formula of authority. It was the voice of the watching God. Yes, God had been watching and listening to Pharisee and publican, and Jesus now told us the result. He said, "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other." That is the appraisement, that is the judgment, that is the verdict concerning this publican. It is interesting to see some expositors are a little at pains to tell us that Jesus did not mean there what we now mean by being justified. I admit the men of the time did not understand it in all its fulness; but He knew its meaning. It means exactly what it does in the New Testament. "Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through Whom also we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." Only a word, but it is the word of Jesus, with all its meaning; this man went down to his house justified. I think this man came to the Temple again the next day, but he did not come in the same way. He came the first time sin-burdened, knowing his need in the presence of the holy God of mercy. When he went away the prayer was heard; and somewhere, in his house perhaps, confidence possessed him, and I can imagine him coming up the next day, still taking the same attitude, still standing in the same way. There was no strutting or braggadocio, but the next day he lifted up his eyes to heaven. This day he could not; but when he came back he knew that he could lift them up. There was no beating upon the breast any more, but perhaps a great sober Hallelujah- justified!

What about this other man, the Pharisee? There was nothing further to be said about him. He was dismissed. The publican went down to his house justified rather than the other. That is all we know about him. Undoubtedly the Pharisee was there again the next day, but he was left "with himself."

Our Lord gathered up the whole force of the wonderful parable in His last word, "I say unto you … every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Where are we when we come into the house of God, and pray? I cannot tell you. You know!