**VOLUME 3; CHAPTER 12 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE PROBLEMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE: CAN A JUST GOD FORGIVE SINS? by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

IT WILL BE ADMITTED AT ONCE THAT THE POSSIBILITY OF the forgiveness of sins has been believed in and proclaimed by the Christian Church for nineteen centuries.

False deductions have been made from the central doctrine, and false presentations of that doctrine in the process of the centuries. By false, I mean untrue to the earliest teaching of Christ and His apostles as that teaching is recorded for us in the Scriptures of the New Testament.

Perhaps the most glaring of the false deductions was that which was known as the Antinomian heresy, which was that because God has in His grace provided perfect redemption it does not at all matter how a man lives. Perhaps the supreme illustration of what I mean by false presentations was to be found in that most remarkable movement which preceded the reformation, and had its head centre of exposition in Tetzel, who preached that by certain payment on their part men might receive indulgence to sin, These false deductions, and false presentations, as well as the simple proclamation of the New Testament declaration, do prove that the idea of the forgiveness of sins has obtained in the Christian Church from the beginning until now.

This belief is based on belief in the government of God, the conviction of righteousness, and the consciousness of sin.

The idea of forgiveness of sins cannot be present to the mind of the man who does not believe in the existence and government of God. Therefore, all we said last Saturday night must be taken for granted as we take up this second problem of the religious life. God is, and God governs. If you deny these things then you deny sin, and this inquiry as to whether God can forgive sins is absurd. Unless we find common ground in this premise we certainly shall not find a common resting place in the conclusions that I shall draw. To admit the government of God is to be convinced of His righteousness, and that conviction is ever followed by the consciousness of sins. Do you quarrel with me at that point? Do you question the accuracy of what I am now taking for granted? If for a moment you grant the idea of righteousness, measure yourself by that idea, and tell me if you have realized the ideal. I do not care, for the moment, whether your father was a sinner, or whether Adam fell. I care very much about these things on other occasions and in other directions, but not now. See God, and righteousness, and immediately, if you are honest, you will say I have failed. I think there is no man here who knows what righteousness is, who has had the first faint idea of the ideal of perfection and of beauty, but who is compelled to say, While I see it, and believe in it, and admire it, I have not realized it. That is the consciousness of sin. It may bring no terror to the heart, but it is there. It is only as these things are recognized that we make such an inquiry as the inquiry of our subject tonight. Taking these things for granted, I inquire, Can a just God forgive sins?

Seeing that the forgiveness of sins is a Christian doctrine, it is necessary that we inquire what the doctrine really is that the Church teaches. I think you will agree with me that this is a fair proposition. Suppose I had no Bible and no Christian body of truth, and no Church which for nineteen centuries had been proclaiming the possibility of the forgiveness of sins, and someone should suggest a question such as this, I should have to approach it from a different standpoint altogether, and answer it in a different way. Even then I should say to my questioner, What do you mean? There are two or three words in your simple question that I want you to define. What do you mean by "just," by "forgiveness," by "sins"? Exactly as I would ask these questions if this inquiry came to me without the light of the Christian revelation, seeing that the idea conveyed by the inquiry is a Christian idea, I must still ask these questions. What is the Christian meaning of the terms "just," and "forgiveness," and "sins"? Let us then proceed along three lines. We will define our terms. We will state our problem. We will attempt to formulate the answer of the New Testament.

First of all, for the definition of terms, The terms are very wide, having racial applications. We will, however, endeavour to confine ourselves to the individual applications. Understand from this moment I am attempting to deal with these questions as though I were the only man involved in the inquiry, as though I made the question pertinent to myself, and entirely and absolutely personal, as though I said, Can a just God forgive my sins? In dealing with the inquiry in that way we will first define our terms. I am going to attempt a rapid definition of words used and ideas conveyed in that question.

First, the words, just, forgiveness, sins. What does the word just mean? If you take the word that lies behind it, and examine it, and attempt to discover, as you always will do if you are a careful reader, its root significance, I am not at all sure that you will not at first be somewhat surprised. The word out of which this comes is a word which means seeing. Let me suggest another word, observing. You say at once that these two words mean the same thing, and yet the second of them is constantly made use of in a slightly different sense from that in which the first is always used. Seeing suggests a view. Observing also suggests a view, but it often means more. For instance, you say to a boy, Here is a rule of conduct, observe it; by which you mean to say, You are not only to see, but to act in harmony with the thing you see. So if the root idea of the word translated just be seeing, its use means acting in harmony with the thing seen. Just means activity in conformity with things as they really are. Can a God who acts in conformity with things as they really are forgive sins?

Let us be as simple and childlike with our next word, forgive, What does forgive mean? To let go is the simple meaning. It suggests the idea of unlocking a prison house so that the prisoner is set free. The sense in which the word is used always means to treat sins as though not committed, to let them go, blot them out, pardon them, forgive them. Let me repeat my inquiry in the light of these definitions. Can a God Who acts in conformity with things as they really are treat sins as though they had not been committed?

For the third time let us follow this line of definition. From the Christian, Biblical standpoint it is almost more difficult to define words translated sin or sins in our Bible. I am content to take the word that is most often translated sin, which suggests the simplest fact in the mind of the writers. It is a word which means "missing the mark." It is the word used of a man standing with his rifle and shooting at a bull's eye and missing it. It is a word which indicates the failure of the man who sets himself to realize, and never realizes. He misses the mark. To fail, whether wilfully or unwittingly, is, in the broadest sense of the word, sin, Let me make my inquiry again. Can a God Who acts in conformity with things as they really are treat missings of the mark as though the mark had not been missed? That is the problem of this inquiry.

Once again, take the two ideas suggested here for definition. First, the idea of the justness of God. What is justness? We have already said it is seeing things and observing them in the sense of being true to them. Let us now put it this way. Justness in God is undeviating conformity to truth, in Himself, and in His dealings with all others. Take the phrase forgiveness of sins and the idea suggested by it. What is meant by the forgiveness of sins? The treating of failure as non-existent, and the treating of the one who fails as though not having failed. That is forgiveness in the Bible sense. If you try to understand what forgiveness means by what you do with your children you will never understand it at all. If you begin to argue that just as you say to your child, I forgive you, so God does with the sinner, you do not begin to know what the Bible teaches about the forgiveness of sins. That is not the forgiveness of the Bible. You cannot make the sin of your child as though it had not been, and that is what the word really means. Someone is saying, You are making the problem more difficult than it seemed. I hope I am. In order to persuade ourselves that God can forgive, we are losing the amazement that ought to fill the heart in the presence of the meaning of the Cross and His infinite grace in forgiveness. The thing that first overwhelms me is the problem. Then the thing that overwhelms me more is the solution of the problem which the Bible teaches and for which the Christian Church really stands.

Having spent so much time with the definition of terms, let me now try to state the problem. Here are certain self-evident things that I submit to you and pray you to follow me, and not to be afraid. As to God. To treat sin committed as not committed is to act out of conformity with truth. That is unjust. As to the universal order. To treat sin committed as not committed is to establish and confirm sin. That is unjust. As to the sinner. To treat sin committed as not committed is to establish and confirm sin as a power in the life, and that is unjust. Now, the problem can be stated by only first making a fundamental affirmation. A just God can forgive sins only by basing His judicial action upon absolute truth. If the forgiveness of sins means the violation of truth, then God can never forgive sins. Can God so deal with sin as to enable Him to forgive it on the basis of absolute truth?

You say to me, Of course God can forgive sins, because He loves. I say, Yes, but then in God's name remember what love is. Love is not a sentimental softness that overlooks the poison in the blood. Love is not an anaemic weakness that weeps over cancer and refuses to cut it out. There is nothing we are suffering from today more than this weakened conception of the meaning of love. We begin to understand love only when we understand that at its heart, at its centre, are purity, and eternal righteousness. Let me say the thing as I feel it. If you could persuade me that forgiveness, which simply says, Oh, never mind, say no more about it, pass it over, could satisfy God, then I say it could not satisfy me. It does not get to the depth of my own being. It does not touch the heartache and anguish of my conscience. Before I can know forgiveness as experience in which I dare rejoice, there must be, somehow or other, blotting out, cancelling, making not to be. I tell you honestly that it does not seem to me that there can be a solution, until I open my Bible and begin to read it.

Now I want - and as God is my witness I feel the almost appalling difficulty of it - I want to state the Christian answer to this, great inquiry. I do not propose to state the answer in the terms of my own ideas of how God might do this thing. I will tell you why. It is honest for me to say only what I have already said, that there appears to be no solution. What, then, does Christianity affirm? The Bible teaches the forgiveness of sins. The Church has taught the forgiveness of sins. We are still - in proportion as we are true to the doctrine of the Catholic Church for nineteen centuries, and to the doctrine of the Word of God - proclaiming the possibility of the forgiveness of sins. Upon what grounds?

First of all, let me attempt in a very few sentences to state the process by which God can forgive sins so far as that is stated in the New Testament; then let me speak of the provision He has made for sinning men who turn to Him, and, finally, of the great proclamation which is entrusted to us in the presence of sin.

What is the process? We must begin where the New Testament begins. First of all, there is presented to our view a Person, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ; or, to give Him the full and dignified title with which the apostolic writings abound, and which culminates all other suggestiveness, the Lord Jesus Christ. What is this Person according to New Testament teaching? God incarnate. I know perfectly well that you may say that is not granted. I am not dealing with the question as to whether this Person is God incarnate or not, apart from my Bible. That is an inquiry which every man may make, but that is not the one with which I am now dealing. All I now say is, and I say it quite carefully, if that Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, is not God incarnate, then some part of the New Testament is untrue, It is quite impossible, absolutely impossible, and those of you who differ most widely from my own position will agree with me here, to retain your New Testament and deny that, You may deny it, and deny it honestly, but if you do, then there are certain parts of the New Testament which you say are not true. I respect your conviction, though I do not share it. I want you to see this. I stand asking what the Church has taught for nineteen centuries upon the basis of Biblical revelation, and my first answer is, that, first, a Person is presented to me, God incarnate. I see Him living. I see Him dying. I see Him rising.

Then, in the second place, will you remember that this New Testament teaches that this Person is a manifestation. In His life there is manifestation of righteousness. In His death there is manifestation of substitution. In His resurrection there is manifestation of victory won in and through and out of death.

Now, a manifestation is never all. A manifestation means that all cannot be seen, and therefore it must have a medium through which men may come to see it, though they cannot see it all. The moment you speak of this Person as a manifestation, using, if you will, the actual phrase of your New Testament, "God manifest in flesh," you recognize the spiritual and essential fact behind the manifestation, which is more than the manifestation, which is superior to the manifestation, of which the manifestation is but the unveiling, the revelation.

Therefore, finally, this whole fact revealed in Jesus is inexplicable. I cannot know all the life, even though I see its lines and lights, and movements, I cannot know all the death though I see its suffering and brutality and tragedy, I cannot know all the resurrection, though I see its triumph and hear its song. Behind the manifestation is a great spiritual and essential fact, yet not a contradiction to the manifestation. That is to say, I am to interpret the spiritual, essential, eternal facts in the terms of the manifestation. When I look at the life of Jesus I see righteousness incarnate, and in that manifestation I learn, as nowhere else, the holiness and righteousness of God. In the same way, when I look at that death interpreted by all the declarations of the New Testament, I see death for others, death in which He bore our sins in His own body on the tree, in which He was the Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world. In that death I see manifestation of something in God, infinite, mysterious, overwhelming, appalling, which cannot be shown in any other way than by such a death as that. In the terms of that human death I come to understand something that lies back in Deity which I cannot fully understand, but which apart from this death I never could have dreamed of.

Looked at on human levels, what was this death of Jesus? Suffering undeserved. Suffering on behalf of others out of pure love and compassion. At the back of it, what is there? The suffering of God out of pure love on behalf of those who do deserve such suffering. You say that does not explain it, and I admit I have never yet had it explained. It lies beyond me, surging upon my spirit in billows of unfathomable love that almost break my heart, yet eluding the grasp of my mind. I come back to the terminology of human manifestation, "By His stripes we are healed, The chastisement of our peace was upon Him." That old prophetic word was carried out to the letter in the human life of Jesus. But this was manifestation in order that human eyes might see the infinite and unexplored reaches of the pain of the being of God. So I see through Christ the activity of righteousness, of expiation, and, finally, of victory, In His life God's righteousness revealed. In His dying, God's expiation by suffering of man's guilt unveiled. In His rising, God's victory over all the forces of darkness made manifest.

What is the result of this according to the New Testament teaching? Think for a moment of the provision. The New Testament declares that there is now forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Christ, that by the shedding of His blood remission has been made. Blood is the symbol of what? I veil my face, and take my shoes from off my feet. God knows, I do not. So much as blood says, I know. Blood shed is not life lived, but life laid down. Blood shed is not merely the strength of a great ideal. It is the bruising and battering of that ideal. It is agony, and pain, and defeat. That is the symbol. God help us to tread reverently when we go beyond it. The issue of sin realized in God, gathered into His heart, to His own suffering, to His own pain, to His own wounding. That is the ultimate significance of the old word in the Hebrew economy, "In all their afflictions He was afflicted," The New Testament never teaches that a man named Jesus tried by dying to persuade God to love.

The New Testament never teaches that God was impassive, and never felt pain, while some person other than Himself endured it, in order to appease Him. There is no such teaching from Matthew to Revelation, from Genesis to Revelation. The New Testament does teach - and quarrel with all I say, but hear this - "God was in Christ." Every word He spoke was a word of God, and every work He wrought was a work of God, every tear He shed was a tear of God. The very blood He poured out was in that sense symbolical of the very blood of God. So that we are in the presence, not of a unit out of the vast multitude of humanity, pure in himself, trying to deal with God so as to make God love men. We are in the presence of God, in the One in Whom dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally, that men might see a suggestion of it, and come to an understanding of it. In Him I see how God has taken hold of guilt, and made it not to be, curing the pain in His own pain, ending the issues in His own agony, taking all the responsibility and the mysterious harvest into His own nature and bearing it. Thus a God of absolute truth, without violation of truth, makes sin not to be, and thus forgives the sinner. Whether these things are so or not, these are the things the New Testament teaches. These are the things for which the Christian Church has stood, and must stand, if she would remain. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is a doctrine that a just God can and does forgive, not by putting the issue upon someone outside Himself, but by gathering up into His own heart and life and being the weight of sin, by suffering in Himself.

Consequently, the proclamation of the Christian evangel is that God can be just and the Justifier - mark well the condition - "of him that believeth in Jesus." What does that mean? To believe in Jesus is to return to the government of God at the point of His grace. Never miss out government when you think of grace; never miss out grace when you think of government, for in Christ the two have met. In the universe, measureless to us but measured in God, in the pain and passion of God my sin has been cancelled, made not to be, but put away. Now God says, By the Man Whom I have ordained, through Whom the eternal things are manifest, in Him put your trust. That is a command. Master, "what must we do, that we may work the works of God?" said the cynical men of His day to Jesus. "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He hath sent." That was aII His answer. It is the first word of the new law. Believe. A man says, I will not believe. Very well, then there is nothing for you but the harvest of your own wrongdoing, the hell to which sin sends you. Remember, if you will proceed along the path of your own disobedience all that it involves here and forever of darkness and death is the issue of refusing to believe. I am talking in London. I am talking to men and women who know the evangel. You cannot begin there for the dark nations of the earth until you have preached the evangel. I am talking to men who know it. God comes in Christ, through Christ, revealing His righteousness, His expiatory suffering, His victorious life over and through death.

Grace there is my every debt to pay,

Grace to wash my every sin away.

That Grace is government, and God says, Now get back into My government and yield yourself to Me by obeying Me at the point of trusting Me. I come at the point of His grace and I find not merely the value of the Cross, but the virtue of the resurrection, and ultimately the victory of a realized ideal. If a man will not, then to refuse is to remain unforgiven. God is a God ready to pardon. I love that word of the ancient prophet, because ready does not mean merely willing, but fully equipped, to pardon.

So I come to Him in Christ, I come to Him with my sin - or put it in the plural my sins, I bring them all to Him - and I say, He cannot be just and forgive them unless He can find a basis for His judicial action in absolute truth, He cannot treat the sin as never committed unless He can put it away as to its virus, and as to its issue. That is what He has done, and because He has done it, He can pardon sin.

My final word is this. The experience of men for nineteen hundred years witnesses to the truth of the Christian proclamation. I know my sins are forgiven. If I say that all alone you must at least believe me to be honest in my conviction. When I multiply my testimony by the company in this house tonight who can say the same; and when that company is multiplied through this city and land, by the numbers who are singing the song of assured forgiveness, and when that testimony is multiplied for nineteen centuries, in which men have confessed their certainty of the forgiveness of sins; you have a weight of evidence that is overwhelming. You dare not charge all the men who have made this claim with hypocrisy or with lunacy. Through nineteen centuries men have sung this song, and the testimony and burden of it has been, "I know my sins are all forgiven. Glory to the blessed Lamb."

Hear me again. The evidence of life rising to higher levels of righteousness witnesses to the truth of the experience. The man who really knows his sins forgiven is the man who rises and begins the life of conquest over sin. If a man say his sins are forgiven, and goes on deliberately sinning, he is a liar. The language is vigorous, but it is Johannine, that of the apostle of love. The man who tells me he knows his sins are forgiven, and continues in sin, is lying. That is not the normal experience of the Christian Church. If you deny me this affirmation, I ask you, Where have you been living? And on what have you been looking? You may quarrel with the Salvation Army; you may not like their flag and their big drum and their Hallelujah; but their one message is the forgiveness of sins, and the perpetual result of their preaching through all the years of their existence has been that sinning men have been saved from the power of sin. The demonstration, I repeat, of the truth of the experience affirmed is in the remade lives of men and women who go out to sin no more. I do not mean that forgiveness brings immediate victory. I do say that forgiveness creates the passion not to sin, and inspires the endeavour to be obedient, and presently realizes absolute victory.

So if we are sinners and know it, there are two things concerning which we need to be most careful. First of all, to remember that God sets up the Cross of His Son as the trysting-place to which we are to come, and the place at which we are to turn our back on wilful sin. Then we are to remember that by that Cross uplifted, or by that for which it stands - all the infinite mystery that lies behind it - it is possible, to use the apostolic language, for God to be just and the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. So when all has been said, we sing the old song, and know the answer is ours as we sing:

Rock of ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee!

Let the water and the blood

From Thy wounded side which flowed,

Be of sin the double cure;

Save me from its guilt and power.