**VOLUME 4; CHAPTER 26 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE RIGHTS OF GOD by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*He spake this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. And he said unto the vinedresser, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this tree, and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground? And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down.*

*Luke 13:6-9*

THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN THE SONG OF ISAIAH AND THE parable of Jesus is self-evident. In the song of Isaiah concerning the vineyard, the outstanding values may thus be stated; the Lord's vineyard, the Lord's plant, the Lord's expectation of fruit, the Lord's disappointment, and the Lord's judgment upon the vineyard. In the parable of Jesus the outstanding values may be stated in almost identical words; the Lord's vineyard, the Lord's fig-tree, the Lord's expectation, the Lord's disappointment. But there is a value in the parable which is absent from Isaiah's song, that of the intercession of the vinedresser. Judgment in the case of Isaiah was immediate because of failure. Judgment in the parable of Jesus is postponed because of the intercession of the vinedresser. It is, however, as certain in the one case as the other, if there yet be fruitlessness.

It is perfectly patent that the first application both of the parable of Jesus and the song of Isaiah was to the Hebrew nation. The principles have, however, a wider application.

The parable of Jesus was spoken in order to correct a false sense of safety. The earlier paragraph of this thirteenth chapter records that "there were some present at the very season which told Him of the Galilaeans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." He reminded them also of others upon whom the tower of Siloam had fallen. The people to whom He spoke imagined that the judgment on the Galilaeans, and that on the men of Siloam were evidences of exceeding sinfulness. Jesus said, "I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish." He then uttered the words of this parable.

The peculiar value of the parable, therefore, is that in it we find the true standards for the measurement of human lives. Men are still imagining that there are degrees of sin, that the Galilaeans are sinners above all, that men overtaken by some catastrophe must therefore have been the most guilty. Christ declares that we cannot so measure sin. "Except ye" - the men whom Pilate has not arrested, the men upon whom no tower has fallen - "except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish."

Life ended by the brutality of Pilate may not have perished. Perishing is not the ending of material life by the accident of a falling tower. Perishing is something profounder, more terrible. You may live out all your days, according to human thinking, and die in quietness and peace, and yet perish. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

In face of so startling a statement, Jesus uttered the parable, and we will consider it carefully because it is one in which Jesus gives us the true standards for the measurement of human lives. Is not this what we supremely need? Is not this what we are supremely afraid of? Is there anything that we shrink more from than being measured by Divine standards? Are we not all in the habit of measuring ourselves by comparing ourselves as among ourselves? And when we do so we usually compare ourselves with those whom we know to be inferior to ourselves, and so we are uplifted in pride of heart, in satisfaction, in contentment.

The matter of supreme moment is not what neighbour or friend, or foe may think of us, but what God thinks of us. How can we find out? In the simplicity of this parable, Jesus has given us the standard of measurement, and the balances for weighing. Let us remit ourselves to Him for measurement and for weighing.

In order to do this, we must begin where we always must begin if we would understand or enter into the things of the Kingdom of heaven. We must listen to this parable as though we were children. This parable is indeed a picture of ordinary, everyday life; a picture of things with which we are all familiar. It is Eastern in colouring. The vineyard and the fig tree are peculiarly of the East; but you do no violence to the intention if you change the word vineyard to garden, and if you change the word fig tree to apple tree.

Three simple matters are suggested by the parable -

The rights of the proprietor.

The interference of the intercessor.

The position of the property.

The first right of the proprietor is the absolute right of possession. The plant was in his vineyard. It was his plant. He had the absolute right of ownership.

The second right grows out of the first. It was the moral right of expectation. He came seeking for fruit, and he had a perfect right to seek for fruit. What is a fig tree for? Ask a little child, and with magnificent abruptness, and with no waste of words the child will tell you, figs.

As I read on, I discover another right. He found no fruit; and he came years one, two, and three, and still found none. Then he said, "Cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?" He had a right so to say. His right to destroy was based first upon the failure of the tree to produce fruit; it was enhanced by his patience; but it was supreme because it cumbered the ground, that is, it took up space, soil, and strength which at the disposal of another tree would have produced fruit. That is the first phase of the picture.

Before proceeding to the others, let us inquire into the spiritual suggestions of this. They bring us face to face with the rights of God. This is a phrase which I sometimes think we are a little in danger of forgetting today, especially when we are dealing with human life. I hear a great deal about the rights of man. I do not hear very much in the common speech of today about the rights of God. I am not speaking about man's right in regard to his fellow man, but about man's rights in regard to God; what a man has a right to expect from God. Some men have even been daring enough to write what they would do if they were God. The impertinent suggestion smacks of blasphemy; as though it were possible for a finite mind to come to final understanding of what the infinite Mind ought to do; as though it were possible for a being bounded by horizons that are not many miles away, or at most bounded by one small planet which is but as dust in the balances to the immensity of the universe, as though it were possible for such a being to imagine the things that he would do if he were God. Yet, that attitude of mind is being admired and worshipped today.

Let us attend to this teaching of our Lord in which in the simplest parable possible He has reminded humanity of the rights of God in regard to human life. To my own heart it is full of comfort, whilst full of fire.

The first truth is that of God's absolute right in all human lives. The sovereignty of God is based upon the fact that every man is the creation of God, and so the offspring of God. I am a thought of God. I am God-created; physically, mentally, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, volitionally; analyze as you will, but over all your analysis write the inclusive declaration, man in the image and likeness of God, made by God. I am the property of God. I like to begin there when I am preaching to men about eternal things. I like to look into the face of every man and say, "Thou art not the property of the devil; thou art not the result of the forces of dust. Thou art the property of God." There are senses in which man is the bond-slave of the devil; the bond-slave of sin; the servant of lust, passion; but in the deepest fact, the essential fact of his being, every man belongs to God. The absolute right of proprietorship is enhanced by the fact that all our lives are lived in God's world. It is said that this is a sad and wicked world. That is not true. It is a glad and beautiful world. When Bishop Heber sang his missionary hymn he sang a great truth,

Though every prospect pleases,

And only man is vile.

If there be a touch of evil upon the world, it is the touch of the human hand that has lost its cunning, because it has sold itself to the forces and resources of evil. This is God's world; His sunshine, His rain. Evil has never made a blade of grass; it has destroyed many. The devil never made anything; he has destroyed much. Evil is destructive, not constructive. It makes nothing, it only breaks. I am in God's world, a world that He has encompassed with a sky of blue, over which He scatters the clouds in a profusion of glory, gladdened by the setting or the rising sun, until I am appalled by the magnificence around me. It is God's world. All the forces of my life are forces which He has given me. I am in this world, of the world in measure, but not wholly and finally. God owns me in His world. His is the right of absolute proprietorship; a more wonderful right than any figure of speech can show forth. The man who owned the vineyard and planted the fig tree therein, did not make the fig tree; but God Who owns the world made it, and every man in it. His right of proprietorship is based upon His creation. What a revolution there will be when we can bring men back to this first, fundamental truth about human life; the right of God as proprietor.

The rights of God are also those of moral expectation. Have you ever noticed how constantly Jesus made the men to whom He spoke juries to decide upon their own actions and activities, and pass verdict upon themselves. I think He meant to do that when He uttered this parable. Do you differ from any of the things He said when He spoke these words? Have you not a right to expect apples from an apple tree in your garden? No one will quarrel with that. Then apply the truth you admit in the higher realm. If man is God's creation; if all the forces of his being have come to him from God; if man is living his life in God's world in the midst of resources which God has provided; God has a right to expect fruit.

What fruit? What has God a right to expect from a man? Here again, be true to the simplicities of the parable and you will touch the sublimities. Ask a boy what a man has a right to expect from a fig tree, and he will say, figs. What have you a right to expect from an apple tree? Apples. Do not be afraid of the simplicity of our illustrations. What does God expect from a man? Manhood. That is all. What does God expect from a boy? Boyhood. From a girl? Girlhood, What does God expect from a woman? Womanhood. I shall thank God if the statement startles you into the frame of mind for consideration. God does not expect that you will ever be an angel; but he does expect that you should be a man, "Oh," but you say, "surely if you preach the gospel you will tell us that God expects us to worship, to pray, to give, to be religious." I decline to make use of those minor and partial terms of description, I will make use of that which includes them all. God requires from a man manhood, God is not seeking angels in London; and that not merely because He is not likely to find them there, but because to the heart of God, men and women are more than angels. When Father Taylor, the sailor preacher, lay dying, his daughter said, "You will soon see the angels." He replied, "Folks are better than angels." He spoke out of a great comradeship with God.

As God comes into His garden seeking for fruit, and examines the plant of my life, can He find the fruit He wants? That is the question. Can He find manhood? We can only answer that question by asking another, "What is manhood?" There is only one answer to that inquiry. The meaning of humanity has once been perfectly revealed in the Man of Nazareth. That is Manhood. We test our lives, as I have already said, by comparison with others; we stand in the public place of assembly still and say: "I thank Thee that I am not as other men, or even as this poor publican," We sing our way through life upon the basis of a satisfaction in the fact that there are many worse than ourselves. The measurements are false. What is a man? Behold the Man. I am to find out what I am by comparison with the life of Jesus; and when I use the word Jesus in this respect I am speaking of His humanity for the moment, the actual, positive, warm humanity with which we are familiar in the gospel stories. Behold the Man, and measure thy life by His. He was the revelation of God; and of man also. Has it ever occurred to you that we do not know the real meaning of our own lives until we have looked at Jesus? We are conscious of the contradictions of our own personality. We state the fact in differing ways. We say there is in us the angel and the beast, forever fighting. We speak of strange aspirations after high and noble things, and of grovelings amid low things. Oh yes, express it how you will, in the language of the new formula or philosophy the old truth abides, we were born in sin and shapen in iniquity. We are engaged in a battle as between the forces of good and of evil. We are broken human beings from the start. I look at the Man of Nazareth and see man after God's own heart, the archetypal Man, a perfect revelation to me of the true meaning of my own nature. I cannot find the key to my own life in any other man. I have lost it entirely as within my own personality. Song and sigh, aspiration and groveling! What is man? I am unable to answer until I have looked at the Man of Nazareth. How can I tell the story of His Manhood? We are familiar with Him. I will only do it in briefest words. He was a Man homed in the will of God, absolutely at the service of His brother men. That is the Man of Nazareth. Hear the law from His own lips: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind ... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." These things He did; but have I done them? As the measurement of that life is placed upon my life; as my life is put into the balances and weighed in the balances of the sanctuary against that life, the life that answered the impulse of the love to God and love to men, that in singing and by suffering served to help others; oh God, how I have failed!

Profane swearer! No, thou hast never been that, neither have I. Brought up in Christian homes you and I were graciously, tenderly sheltered from blatant, vulgar sins; pre-eminently satisfied with ourselves may we be, if we measure ourselves as among ourselves; but if Jesus is the standard then the Proprietor comes into the vineyard expecting fruit, and finds nothing but leaves. My life is a failure when measured by that standard.

Therefore, let it be stated carefully - not with anything of the tone of triumph in the fact, but with solemn consideration of it - because man has failed, God's right is established to destroy him; and not merely because man has failed, but also because God has had long patience with man.

Nothing but leaves! The Spirit grieves,

O'er years of wasted life.

No drunkenness, adultery, profanity; but no fruit that gladdens and satisfies the heart of God. No worship in the way of love to Him. No service in the way of helpfulness to my fellow men. And all this in spite of long patience. Every man who so lives cumbers the ground in that economy of God. It may be that you are not a cumberer of the ground in the economy of the British nation; but in the economy of God the man who is bearing no fruit cumbers the ground. Has it ever occurred to you that another man occupying your place in the office might exert an influence for the healing of humanity's wounds, and the bringing in of the Kingdom of God, which you are not exerting? I remember in earlier years walking through the streets of New York with my friend Albert Swift. He pointed out a great orphan institution in which hundreds of bairns were being cared for. I said, "What a sad thing it is to think of all those children without father or mother." I was startled by his reply; he said, "I don't know; I am not sure it is as sad as you think." I asked his meaning, and this was his answer; "In scores of instances those children only had their chance of life when father and mother were dead." It is appallingly true, and it is more true than we think. It is not merely true of the slum children in the gutter. It is true of the children in the suburbs. You feed your children, clothe them, educate them; but what chance have they of spiritual manhood with your example? Has it occurred to you, young man, that if another man sat at your desk in the office, the next man would have a better chance of purity than while you sit there? In the sanctuary, we see things from the standpoint of the sanctuary. We hear that searching word of Jesus, "He that is not with Me is against Me, and He that gathereth not with Me scattereth." There are only two moral, spiritual forces at work in the world, gathering and scattering; centripetal, and centrifugal forces. That is equally true in the spiritual world. The force of your life is gathering or scattering, hastening the Kingdom of God, or hindering it. The man who fails to be a man after the pattern of God's economy is cumbering the ground, wasting God's earth and sunshine, and all of God's resources. That is the solemnity of the parable. I am not standing in judgment upon this congregation. God knows I am before the judgment bar with you. It is by the words of Christ that we are to be judged, and we stand together before those words tonight. He comes to us with the revelation of the rights of God, the absolute right of proprietorship, the moral right of expectation; and after He has measured us, and found us receiving God's resources, dwelling in His world, planted in His vineyard, but bringing Him no fruit, He has a right to cut down because of failure, because of His patience, because we cumber the ground.

Thank God there is yet another thing in this parable. It is the story of the intercessor. We will go back for two or three moments to the picture itself. What is this picture of the intercessor? Mark this simplest of things about it. What is the purpose in the heart of the vinedresser? If you say that his purpose is that of mercy upon the fig tree, it is not so! There is no word that speaks of mercy upon the fig tree. Is that astonishing? Look at it carefully. What is the underlying purpose of the vinedresser? Exactly the same as that of the proprietor, fruit. "Lord, let it alone this year also." What for? "Till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not thou shalt cut it down." There is no quarrel between the vinedresser and the proprietor. Let it reverently be affirmed, there is no quarrel between God and Christ about man. Jesus Christ did not come into the world to persuade God to have mercy upon the man who is going to be failure through eternity. Christ came into the world to produce in man the fruit for which God is seeking. There is no difference in the ultimate intention of God and Christ. I am constrained to say, out of profound and ever-growing conviction, that the evangelism which suggests to man that Christ has done something which is merely to provide a way of escape from penalty, is false evangelism. He does that, but how? By freeing men from the disastrous failure, by remaking them that they may be what God wants them to be. Jesus Christ the Lord is not leading into the dwellings of light and glory a vast multitude of failures, of incompetent men and women. If you want to know the kind of people He will introduce to His heaven at last, hear it in the words of inspiration, He will "set you before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy." If there is any man who names the name of Christ, sings the songs of the sanctuary, professes to be a member of the Church of Christ, and his life is still barren, he is not a Christian. Unless the love of God is shed abroad in the heart, unless that love is expressed in service to our fellow men we are not Christians. We may be Christianized pagans, with a creed upon our lips, wearing the livery of the sanctuary, but we are not Christians. Jesus Christ did not come to ask God to let off the man who refuses to bear fruit. He came, to use the figure of the garden, to dig about the tree, and dung it. He came to provoke it to fruit-bearing by introducing to it new life, and fruitful resources. He came to touch the tree with a new life which shall make it respond with fruit.

And if not, if after all His digging, and all His introduction of new forces, the tree is still barren, then He says, "Thou shalt cut it down." He is one with God in purpose. He is one with God in ultimate verdict and sentence. He is one with God in the desire for fruit, and in that operation whereby He seeks to perfect men to fruit-bearing.

The spiritual values are perfectly patent. What is it that Christ offers to do for me? Why is the judgment postponed upon my guilty soul? In order that he may bring new forces to me; a barren, fruitless, failing man! That I may become fruitful, abounding in fruit to the glory of God. That is the basis of appeal. He does not ask God to be pitiful, to excuse the fruitless tree. He asks God to let Him deal with the tree, to make it fruitful. No man is ever going to be admitted into the high and holy presence of the dwellings of the saints in the light of God, on the basis of pity but upon the basis of perfection. Let us make no mistake about the purpose of Christ. The last matter may be dismissed in two or three sentences. What is the purpose of the tree in the vineyard? One word covers the whole story. Fruit! If at last there shall be fruit, then the tree will abide, it has fulfilled the purpose of its being. If at last there be fruit, then the demand of the proprietor has been met, and he will be satisfied. If at last there shall be fruit, the vinedresser will be repaid for all his patience and toil.

What is the first and final matter about my life, and thy life, my brother man? Fruitfulness according to pattern. That I become what God would have me be. That I become a man God-centered, God-governed; a man expressing my love for God in my love for my fellow-men, and my service to them. If that be produced, then my safety, my salvation is assured. If that shall be produced, God's requirement will be met, and He will be satisfied.

If that result be produced in me, then the Christ of the cross will see in me of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. In a very few moments the Sabbath evening service will be over. We shall be taking our way back to our homes, and if these transitory lives of ours be spared and tomorrow's sun dawn, we shall be away to the city, following our profession, in the midst of the daily avocation; but now we pause as in the very garden of God, and He is seeking fruit. What does He find? That is a question not to be answered by one man to another. I am asking no confession. It is a question to be answered by the preacher in the pulpit as in the presence of his God; by every man in the house as in that same great presence.

May all others be reverently patient while I say this final word. There are those who are saying, "If these be the standards, then we come short of the glory of God; if these be the balances, then weighed in the balances we are found wanting. Then what shall we do?" This is the hour of the Vinedresser, and He seeks at this moment to communicate to all who know their failure, the values of His own death and life; whereby failing men and women can be made fruitful; whereby those who fail because they are in the grip of the destructive forces of habit and of passion and of sin, can be made masters over all of them in the power of His indwelling life.

The most appalling and overwhelming thought of the hour is this, that in the magnificence of the dignity of human will you can, I can, refuse the ministry of the Christ, and choose the barrenness and the failure until the hour of doom and the day of judgment. But in that same magnificent dignity of human will, I can yield my life to Him, all bruised and battered, fruitless; and He will place at my disposal forces whereby it shall be remade, so that not only shall the fig tree in the vineyard flourish and blossom and bear fruit; but the very desert shall blossom as the rose.

In the presence of that Christ, and in the power of that Spirit, by those standards and measurements, found wanting, shall we not begin again by handing our lives over to Christ that He may produce in us the fruit that will glorify God?