**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 03 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**UNDERSTANDING, OR BIT AND BRIDLE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding; whose trappings must be bit and bridle to hold them in, else they will not come near unto thee.*

*Psalm 32:9*

*Be yet not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*

*Ephesians 5:17*

THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN THESE TWO TEXTS IS SELF-EVIDENT. The Hebrew Psalmist, and the Christian Apostle say the same thing. The method of the former is illustrative and pictorial; that of the latter is more direct and interpretive. Each of these men, separated from each other by centuries, saw two ways of living. The one was described by the Hebrew Psalmist in the figure of the horse and the mule, which must be held in with bit and bridle. That same way was described by the Apostle in a word that really is vibrant with sarcasm - "foolish!" This word, being literally translated, means: having no mind. That is one way of life. The Psalmist describes the method to be adopted with that state of mindlessness; the Apostle simply refers to it. The other way of life is described by Psalmist and Apostle by words which we have translated by the same word "understanding." The Hebrew word translated "understanding" means to separate mentally; or as we say, to distinguish. The Greek word translated "understanding" means to bring together or, as we say, to conclude.

The distinction between the two statements is that the first illustrates one method, while the second interprets the other method. So these texts complement each other while moving in the same realm and uttering the same injunction. The first declares what has to be done with the mindless horse or mule, or man. Such must be held in with bit and bridle. The second shows what the understanding mind takes hold of. It apprehends the will of the Lord.

In these injunctions a central idea of life is implicated, two methods of life are revealed, and in each case an appeal is made to choose the higher and the nobler. These, then, are the lines of our consideration.

We shall perhaps see the central idea of life most clearly by considering the illustration of the Hebrew Psalmist. What, then, are the functions of bit and bridle in the case of the horse and the mule? Let me say at once, and that for my own soul's comfort, that many of you may know a good deal more about horses and mules than I do. However, I am not proposing to deal with the characteristics of these animals, but rather to take the simplest things, which are perfectly patent to the ordinary person. In the case of horse and mule, the bit and the bridle mean, first, restraint, and second, realization under restraint. The restraint is preliminary, the realization is final. The restraint of bit and bridle is the indication to the will of the animal of the fact of a superior will. If the Psalmist said, and he did say, and that with inspired accuracy, that these animals have no understanding, he did not mean that they have no intelligence. Understanding is something far more than intelligence. Horses and mules have intelligence; they have emotion; they have will. These are the elements of human personality, but in a lower degree and yet very definitely, we find them in what we call the lower animals. No man knows anything about a horse who says that it has no intelligence. And that a mule has will none will deny who has attempted to manage one! The purpose of bit and bridle is to indicate to whatever there may be of intelligence in the animal that it has to do with a superior will.

Thus it becomes the method of compulsion by the superior will, that which keeps all the forces represented in the life of the animal near to the master and under control. That is what the Psalmist says: "Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding; whose trappings must be bit and bridle to hold them in else, they will not come near unto thee." The Revised Version has greatly helped us there. The text is somewhat obscure, but the Authorized rendering: "In order that they may not come near unto thee," is entirely misleading. We put bit and bridle on horse or mule in order to indicate to whatever intelligence they may have that they have to do with a superior will and in order to compel their will to yield to that superior will.

But there is a reason for such restraint; it is always in order to teach realization. In the horse and the mule there are forces of strength, of energy, of swiftness. The purpose of the bit and the bridle is that these forces may be controlled and exercised, that they may become useful, that they may realize something.

For the sake of illustration let us exercise our imaginations and put ourselves in the place of the mule - some of us have not far to travel. The first sense of bit and bridle is simply that of something curbing, hurting, checking, mastering. As to mules I do not know, but I do know that after a while a horse will come to know the very touch of your hand on the bridle. You have but to make your own peculiar movement of the bridle, and it will turn to the right or left, it will halt, trot, gallop, or canter, as you desire. By restraint you have realized its powers, and you have given to the animal itself the sense of power. By the imposition of your superior will, curbing, checking, reining, mastering, you have made its life useful.

Now, what are the implications of that very beautiful illustration from the old Hebrew who loved a horse and a mule I verily believe, or he never would have written this psalm? The first is that life is power, energy, force having values beyond its If life be energy, power, force merely, having no value beyond being, then it does not need bit and bridle, it does not need control, it does not need method or direction. In that case, let us merely live. But when religious singer of the long ago and an apostle of the Christian era charge us not to be mulish, implicated in the charge is the idea that life is power and energy and force, having values beyond being; in other words, that life is purposeful. No human life has come to its realization when it is simply lived. It comes to realization only when it is being lived for purpose.

Again, the figure implicates the truth that life lacks direction within itself for the realization of this purpose. It can exist but it cannot achieve. The horse and the mule can live in the wilderness and the prairies, but they will not achieve. Lasso them, corral them, break them in, put the bit and the bridle on them; then they will achieve. The bit and the bridle are the means necessary to achievement. Man can live without any control external to himself. He can answer all the impulses of his own being, he can let them have full sway and run riot. He can live, but he cannot achieve. Unless the forces in his being are under some kind of controlling power that will direct and energize, life is nothing more than a putting forth of effort, which is without value.

And so, finally, this figure of the bit and the bridle teaches us that life needs restraint in order to be realized, it needs impulse in order to achieve, and that such restraint and impulse come, not out of the forces of the life, but from without.

Now let us look at the two methods of life suggested. Neither of these methods is godless. The man who is entirely godless is not in view. Neither writer was thinking of such a man. The Hebrew Psalmist was singing for the people of God, and the whole point of his charge is its application to the people of God. He was appealing to those who had heard the voice of God saying to them:

I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go; I will counsel thee with Mine eye upon thee.

It was that sense of the Divine relation to the soul, and the soul's relation to the Divine, which led him immediately to say what he did. Because of that, because God is pledged to your guidance, "Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding." So also when Paul wrote this injunction in the Ephesian letter, "Be not foolish." Therefore I say again that neither of these ways is godless. They rather reveal two methods of God with men; which method He adopts always depends on the man. Whether God shall adopt with me the method of the bit or the bridle, or the higher method, depends on me. But to that we will return in conclusion.

Now, what are these methods? The first is the method of compelling pressure; the second is the method of impelling motive. In the first we see life controlled by pressure from the outside; in the second, we see life impelled by the mystic motive of understanding, which is within. The first is the method of conflict; the second is the method of communion. Be not like the horse and the mule, which have no understanding, and must be kept under control with bit and bridle. The necessity for getting near, and being under control, is admitted; but because there is no understanding, the bit and the bridle, the compelling pressure, the conflict ending in victory for the superior will, are necessary. Be not like that, said the Psalmist; have understanding. More bluntly, the Christian Apostle said, Be not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Get the deep profound inner secret of your life so related to God that you will understand by the communion of love rather than by conflict the restraint which is necessary for realization. We are offered the choice between the restraint of compelling pressure and the restraint of impelling motive, the restraint of bit and bridle and the restraint of understanding. Bit and bridle mean the fight between two wills, and ultimately the mastery of the weaker by the stronger. Bit and bridle are the symbols of intermediary methods, made necessary because the soul is not consciously near to God, because it has no understanding. Horse and mule be held in with bit and bridle, for they have no understanding. They are not near to their master in spirit, in thought, in mind. They cannot help it. They are not to be pitied. But when a man is in that state he is to be pitied, nay, he is to be blamed. In the case of a man, the bit and the bridle mean God's employment of compelling pressure to force the will to higher purpose in harmony with His own will. God's method with most of us has had to be that of the bit and the bridle, of adverse circumstances, personal affliction, chastisement; and all because we have not been near enough to God to understand Him.

The method of understanding, the method of communion, the method of impelling motive, is the method, not of conflict between two wills, but of co-operation between the will of man and that which Paul, in another of his letters, so gloriously and adequately described as the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

The method of understanding is based on the comprehension of these very facts concerning the Divine will, that it is good and acceptable and perfect. To understand the will of the Lord is to love the Lord. Understanding is infinitely more than knowing. It is the comprehension, not merely of what the Lord commands, but of why the Lord commands. Understanding does not mean that we always know immediately the reason of what the Lord commands, but we know the One Who commands so well as to be perfectly at rest, even when we cannot understand the immediate reason of the command. It is good, it is perfect, it is acceptable. If we would finally apprehend the meaning of the word "understand," we may remind ourselves of another great psalm in which the Singer declared: "Thou understandest my thought afar off." That is infinitely more than knowing it. God understands the thought, He knows the reason of it, the genesis of it, how it came to be. Understanding the will of the Lord is the response of the soul of man to God's understanding of the soul. God's understanding is ultimate and final and perfect, and there is no darkness in it. As the soul of man knows these things about God, that soul understands. What it does not know of God's immediate reason or purpose it does understand to be perfectly right, since it is His will. Is there any finer word in the language to express what friendship is than the word "understanding"? Leave all your acquaintances, and think in the narrow circle of your friends. I am not speaking disparagingly of acquaintances; they are very valuable. But no soul has many friends. Fasten your attention on one. The greatest thing you can say to that friend is, "You understand." That does not mean that your friend can explain to you the mystery of the thing you are thinking, but it does mean that your friend understands this mystic call of the soul. Understanding goes out beyond intelligence, beyond emotion, and beyond will. It is a spiritual apprehension. To understand what the will of the Lord is, is to apprehend His motive. It is not always to know what the motive is, but it is to know that the motive is mastered by His infinite and unfailing love.

Now we see why I read that passage in Isaiah 11 for lesson, which, in some senses, seems to have little connection with the line of our meditation. I read it for its remarkable suggestions concerning Jesus. The prophet of the olden time, having climbed a great height, having dived into a great deep of understanding, described God's perfect Servant, and in that passage we see Him first as Man, and then immediately as God. The merging of the human and the divine is wonderfully indicated, and in both cases we have this thought of understanding. "He shall be quick of understanding in the fear of the Lord." That is the final glorious word about the Messiah in His ideal humanity. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. The Revisers have rendered it: "His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord." The Authorized Version had, and it was a better rendering: "He shall be quick of understanding." Sir George Adam Smith translated it "He shall be keen of scent in the fear of the Lord." That is understanding! That is the story of the life of Jesus on the man-ward side, understanding. To my risen and glorified and exalted Lord I render apology for saying the thing I am going to say. There was no need for bit or bridle in the case of Jesus. No compelling circumstances crowded Him into obedience. He went through circumstances that were to His soul the burning of fire, but not to compel His obedience. He was quick of understanding in the fear of the Lord.

The very next sentence in Isaiah reveals Him on the other side, as God dealing with man. He shall not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears; but He shall judge righteous judgment. In other words, when the Messiah exercises the judgment of Deity His judgment is not based on the only things that human judgment can be based on; neither according to the seeing of the eye nor the hearing of the ear. His judgment shall be based on understanding, on perfect knowledge, and perfect sympathy. So the light of the great passage comes to help us. This is the higher way of life, understanding. He who understands, yields, not to the pressure of bit and bridle, but to the sweet constraint of the eternal love. Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding. Be not foolish, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.

Both texts make exactly the same appeal. That appeal is based on human capacity. That is the Biblical distinguishing conception of man. He is ever presented as capable of knowing, and of communing with God. Outside the Biblical revelation men have not yet reached that conclusion. They are approaching it. In the days of my youth the physical scientists were telling us that God was unknowable. Science is now beginning to admit that there may be the possibility of communication with a spirit world. That statement, however ignorant it is in some of its applications, is a step towards the ultimate truth that man is fashioned for having communion with God directly and immediately. That is the Biblical revelation. Think hurriedly of its outstanding figures. What are they? The first is that of a man in a garden. It is the story of Adam, the first man. What is the peculiar fact about him which the Bible insists on? That he could talk with God. What is the story of a man who came out from a great civilization that was entirely pagan and became the father and founder of a race that stands to this age in the world for the great monotheistic idea? It is the story of a man called Abram, who heard God speak, who was capable of communion with God. What is the story of a man who was a great lawgiver, and so great a lawgiver that his national code remains to this day the final court of high national morality? It is the story of a man, Moses, who spoke face to face with God as a man talks with his friend. What is the story of all those prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Habakkuk? They are all stories of men who heard God, who spoke to God, and in whose very bones the fire of the divine word burned.

Finally and centrally, there is the story of Jesus, and it is the story of a Man Who walked over dusty highways and over our fields, and in the midst of our temptations, enduring our toil, living by trust as we live by trust, but all the while talking with God. The Bible says to every man that he may know God and understand God. The highest function of the soul is the function of adoration. That goes far out beyond intercession, is greater than thanksgiving, is far more magnificent even than praise which is uttered. It is the function of speechless consciousness of God. For that man is made.

The Biblical idea of man is that out of that exercise of adoration there shall come human inspiration for the carpenter's shop, the commonplaces of life, the doing of the next duty that comes, the taking of the next turning. That is the deepest meaning of Christianity.

The conception of Jesus concerning man is found in the words which John records for us in His final prayer, words perpetually quoted and never exhausted by quotation: "This is age abiding life, to know Thee, the only true God."

The letters of Paul's imprisonment, those to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and the Philippians, breathe his consuming passion that Christian people should come to the full knowledge of God. Again and again we find him expressing his thankfulness for their faith, their hope, their love; and when we read this we are inclined to say: What more could be needed? These people had faith and hope and love. Yet Paul said: I am praying always earnestly for you. To what end? That you may come to the knowledge, epignosis, the full knowledge of God. And there is the Biblical conception. In man is the light of life. In his new birth that light is rekindled. First, it is daybreak; then it groweth more and more unto the perfect day; and so at last it becomes high noon in the life of the soul. If a man will walk by that light, if he will answer that light, he lives by understanding, and the bit and the bridle are not necessary.

The appeal of the text expresses a divine purpose, and the divine purpose fundamentally is that of restraining and realizing life; and the divine desire is that this shall be done by understanding. The divine love, however, says: If you will not walk in the light by understanding, then you must learn by bit and bridle.

So, finally, the appeal of the text offers a great alternative, revealing to the life two methods of God with the soul, urging the higher, that of understanding, but definitely declaring that if the higher is not answered, then God will employ the other, and that for very love.

Now are we saying we have indeed been foolish, we have been as the horse and as the mule, and so we know the bit and bridle? If so, and I speak not to you now, but with you, let us learn to yield to the bit and the bridle, and if we do, because God has created us as He has, we shall come to understanding. Is not that the more common experience of life? Am I not touching the realm of experience when I say that almost all of us pass into the realm of understanding by the way of the bit and the bridle? With the majority of us it has been bit and bridle.

The young I would urge to choose the understanding way at once. This urging comes from one who has known much of bit and bridle through his own folly, through his own lack of spiritual mindedness. Choose the way of understanding. Cultivate your fellowship with God. Make time for the secret place, for the quiet hour, for getting near to God without pressure, that you may know, that you may understand. For the doing of this the great Lord Christ, our Saviour and our King, is ever at our disposal Take advantage of His comradeship. Watch the glance of the eye, listen to the sound of the voice, observe the activity of the hand. Such contemplation brings the soul nearer to God, to more accurate understanding, and so makes less necessary the bit and the bridle.