**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 12 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE FIRST MESSAGE OF JESUS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*

*Matthew 4:17*

THAT IS THE WAY IN WHICH JESUS ALWAYS BEGINS. HIS first message to men is always, Repent! He does not end there. He has much more to say to men than this; and even after He had said much more to His disciples, He finally confronted them, and said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He shall guide you into all the truth." But there is nothing Jesus can ever say until this first thing is said, and until this first thing is done. He began to preach, and said, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

It is not only true that this is always the first message of Jesus to men. It is equally true that it is perpetually the first note of the Divine message to men. Through all the messages of history, utterances of prophets, visions of seers, and songs of psalmists, the almost monotonous burden of the Divine call is, Repent, repent. The herald, the forerunner of Jesus, came preaching, and saying, "Repent ye; for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Jesus Himself began to preach, and to say, "Repent ye; for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Presently He gathered round Him twelve men, and sent them out on their mission, and they went and preached that men should repent. Presently the new era dawned, the new order came, and Pentecost flooded the world with new light and new life, and in the first message delivered in the power of the indwelling Spirit, Peter said, "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins," When Paul stood in the heart of Gentile culture in Athens, he said, "The times of ignorance, therefore, God overlooked; but now He commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent." It is the perpetual keynote of the Divine message to men.

If I seek illustrations outside the Book of Revelation, and come down through the ages, I find that every subsequent visitation of power has had the necessity for repentance as its keynote. The Reformation under Martin Luther was a reformation based on the great and glorious doctrine of justification by faith. But the Reformation, based on the doctrine of justification by faith, was a revolt against the pernicious teaching that by indulgence men might continue in sin. The great revival under 'Wesley and Whitefield had this as the very keynote. The whole missionary movement of the last hundred years to the far-distant places of the earth has had this as its message to all men, Repent. That also was the keynote of the visitation that came to this country a generation ago under the preaching of Dwight Lyman Moody. Whereas the tone of his preaching was that of a great winsomeness, a definite call to repent sounded in every message. Wherever God has come to men in restoration, renewal, and regeneration, the first word has always been Repent. That is the keynote of all true ministry. It is the message that we called on to deliver to all those who are outside the covenant of promise, outside the Church, and apart from Jesus Christ. There the chief emphasis must be laid, because on the repentant and regenerated individual we may build society, cleanse municipal affairs, and create the national outlook. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand," is the message to the individual. It is the message to society both in the proper use of that great word and its popular and improper use. It is the message to the nation in its home and foreign policy. It is always the first message of Christ, the one in which He arrests men on the threshold, coming to the individual, the society, the nation, always with the same monotonous burden, Repent, Repent, Repent.

It is well, then, to consider this initial note in the form in which it is stated here at the commencement of our Lord's own public ministry; and, therefore, I shall ask you to think with me, first, of the great need declared, "Repent ye"; second, of the direction indicated, "the Kingdom of Heaven"; and, finally, of the possibility affirmed, "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

The need is declared in the words, "Repent ye." Our very familiarity with this message, because it is the message of Christ, is in danger of making us mistake its point and misunderstand its meaning. We have been affected in our thinking on this word by the teaching of differing schools of theology, in each of which I believe there is some note of truth. Let us attempt to dismiss from our mind all the messages uttered concerning repentance by inspired writers before Jesus; let us turn from every attempt to explain the message of Christ in the terms of accepted theologies, and let us endeavor to listen to what Jesus said, praying that God will help us to understand this initial message. Not that they of the past were false, or that the messages were unimportant, but because this word of Christ is absolutely all-inclusive; moreover, because His message is not the property of one age, but is for all time, and this message is complete.

Let us, therefore, first of all attempt to look at the Speaker, and consider the occasion on which He uttered these, words.

Those familiar with the Gospel of Matthew will remember that it falls naturally into three great parts, and this is one of the great dividing points. In the first part you have the story of the preparation of Jesus for His work; and here it says, "From that time," when the preparation was complete, "He began to preach." Now it was here, at the parting of the ways, between His private and His public life, that our Lord uttered this first note. Jesus of Nazareth, the One who most perfectly fulfilled the human ideal, after a life of thirty years of observation, began to preach, and He said: "Repent." He had observed individual life in a small township, where individual life is always best seen and best known. We cannot study individual life carefully if we live in London. Men are hidden there by each other, and we never get to know the real force of individual life in a great city. But there in little Nazareth up on the hillside, far enough removed from the great centers and the great movements to be isolated from them, and yet near enough to know them, this pure Man lived and listened and watched, and came to know men by careful observation; and in preaching to the men and women He knew individually He said to them, "Repent." That is the connection. It was the first note of His preaching, born of His consciousness of the need of the people, first as the outcome of this personal and individual observation of them. Yet living there in Nazareth, remember, He had lived close to the place where the great forces of worldly ideals and methods passed and repassed. Professor Ramsay in his little book on the boyhood of Jesus, a fascinating and interesting book, reveals how the great world powers passed along the road at the foot of the hill - the Hebrew priest, the Roman soldier, the Greek merchant and traveler. Jesus had watched, and perceived, and measured. And now He came to preach to Hebrew, the religionist; to Roman, the man of power and government; to Greek, the man of culture and merchandise; and He had one word for each of them, the word "Repent."

But this is to say very little. It was not merely the message of the Man of Nazareth, due to His observation of individual life in Nazareth, and of the great currents of the world thought and action. This was the Son of God, and this was the message of the infinite and mysterious One, who was familiar with all human history and all human life; this was the message of One who presently would say, "Before Abraham was, I am." This was the message of One who did not need to ask what was in man, "for He Himself knew what was in man." This was the message not merely of the Man of Nazareth, who had lived and observed, but it was the message of the ordained Messenger, who was none other than the Son of God, clothed in human garb, that He might utter in the words of human speech the fundamental truths of Deity. Standing at the parting of the ways, and beginning to utter the great message for which men had been waiting, the infinite music, for which the world had been sighing, the great prophetic message toward which every prophetic message had moved, He said, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Having thus noticed the occasion and the Speaker, let us consider the need. I want to speak about the simplest meaning of the word "repent," for as we know what this word really means, we shall understand the message of our Lord.

In the New Testament there are two Greek words translated "repent," They have quite different meanings. One of these words means to sorrow for or regret a deed. The other word means very simply and very literally to change the mind.

Around these two words a great conflict was waged between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic theologians. The Reformers maintained that the second word, which means a change of mind, was used of the change which is necessary to salvation; while the former word, which indicates sorrow after an event, was in some cases indicative of a change of mind, and in other cases it was not so. Such was the contention, in brief, of the Reformers. On the other hand, the Roman theologians maintained that the words were used interchangeably, that the elements of each were present in both, and they taught that the prevailing value was that of sorrow. The whole battle was waged around two Latin words, poenitentia, which means the sense of sorrow, and recipiscentia, which means the recovery of the senses. The Reformers maintained that the essential repentance demanded by Christ and His Apostles, as well as by prophets, was a change of the senses, or a change of mind. The Roman theologians, on the other hand, maintained that the prime element indicated by the word "repent" was sorrow, and from that Roman theology we have gained our word "repent" and the associated idea that sorrow is the prime element in repentance.

I have the profoundest conviction that the Reformers were right, and that the Roman theologians were wrong. A careful examination of the New Testament use of these two words will show that the essential quality that Christ called for was not sorrow, but a change of mind. Now do not understand me to say that the change of mind will not be followed by sorrow. My experience is that the sorrow grows with the Christian life, and is not part of its initiation. I do not say there is no sorrow; I am sure there is. What I do say is that a man may be sorry, and at last be damned. We may be sorry for sin with the meanness of motive, which means that we are afraid of punishment, and no fear of punishment ever had in it the evangelical value of repentance. The repentance that Christ preached, and His Apostles preached, the repentance which is demanded of every man is always indicated by the use of the word that means a change of mind.

When Christ used that word, and when, as I have no doubt in the hearing of the men who listened to Him, it had exactly that meaning of change of mind, He had passed beyond the outer circumference of things into the inner center of a man's life. He began by declaring to men that their thought was wrong, that their conception of life was wrong. Now we say to a man, alas, too often, Change your conduct. Jesus never begins by telling a man to change his conduct. That is to begin in the externalities of human life. He comes to a man, and says, Change your mind, and by that word He means that men hold wrong views at the very center of their being. The word "repent" passes into the fundamental realm, the thought of a man's life. We are not accustomed to think about this deepest fact, and even in preaching we are too often more occupied with conduct than with creed. I use the word "creed" very carefully; I am not referring to the creed prepared for us to recite, I am referring to the creed of our life, to the deepest conception of it, to the underlying and overmastering thing that we absolutely believe.

We all believe something, and it is the something which a man believes that makes his conduct and finally makes his character. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he," and when Jesus came and began His preaching, instead of starting a society to correct the conduct of men, He faced men, and He said: Change your mind, repent, get right at the center of things.

But the word that demands a change in the thought or mind, or conception, does not tarry there. For the moment a man has really changed his mind or his belief his conduct will be changed. Let me take a concrete, very simple, and familiar illustration. A man declares, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." I do not know whether he believes that; I may have heard him say it, but I do not know whether it is true. How shall I find out? I shall be able to find out on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. A man's creed is not to be measured by the occasion when he recites it, but by the life that follows its recitation. When Jesus takes hold of a man, and says, Change your mind, He changes the conduct of the man, and then the character. That is the order of procedure. If a man's conception of life is wrong his conduct will be wrong, and, finally, his character. Jesus does not begin by changing conduct, for He cannot do it from the outside of things; but passing behind the character, and beneath the conduct, He says, Change your mind, get right in the deepest and profoundest fact of your life.

This call of Christ is revolutionary. It calls for upheaval, change, and the alteration of all things. It is radical, passing through the external to the internal. But it is also regenerative, declaring the only way in which it is possible for man to live a new life. This is always the call of Jesus: Repent. For human life, social life, national life, Jesus Christ is the most revolutionary teacher the world has ever had. Looking into the face of the priest, He said Repent; you have a conception of life which is false, change it. He looked into the faces of the pleasure-seekers, and said: Repent, change your mind. Jesus Christ confronts you. You are interested in Him, and speculative about Him; perchance you are even daring to patronize Him. There is no blasphemy greater than the patronage of Jesus Christ. He says: Repent; your conduct and character are wrong. They are wrong because your thought is wrong; your conception is wrong, change it. That is revolutionary. It is radical.

Let us pass to the second point. Jesus in this great word did not merely say, Repent. To leave the word at that point would be to reveal all I have attempted to say as to its revolutionary and radical nature, and to leave unsaid the thing of chief importance. He indicated a direction. "Repent … the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Repentance there may be, and yet the life be hopelessly wrong, for repentance means a change of mind; and a man may change his mind, and his new conception be as false as was the old conception. There was a time when that brilliant and gifted woman, Annie Besant, changed her mind and announced that she was no longer a secularist and a materialist. She repented, she changed her mind, and she became a theosophist, believing in Mahatmas among Himalayan heights. She repented, but the direction of her repentance was wrong, the nature of the change was wrong, a false conception gave place to another false conception. Jesus does not come to men and say, You are wrong, get a new idea of life. Said He: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Herein is direction. Herein is the indication of what the change is to be.

The phrase is suggestive. There occur in the Scriptures of truth certain terms, which we need to consider; the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom, the Church. Now these terms of Scripture are quite distinct in their application. I absolutely differ from the teacher who tells me they are synonymous terms. They mean different things in different relationships and different applications. But they are related by a common principle, and it is by that common principle that the direction of repentance is indicated.

The Kingdom of God means the universal sovereignty of the Almighty. Everything is in it, and never gets outside it. Hell, as well as Heaven, is in that Kingdom. In Scripture the phrase, the Kingdom of Heaven, is always used in relation to the establishment on the earth of a heavenly order; and it is used wholly in connection with the redemptive work of God through His Son Jesus. The Hebrew theocracy culminated in Christ, the King; and in the coming of Christ the Kingdom came, and that is what He meant when He said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." But men said, "We will not have this Man to reign over us," and they flung the King out, and they have never admitted Him since, save to individual hearts and lives. But there were a few souls who said: "We will have Him for King"; and He said, "You shall be Mine"; and there began the Church in which the principles of the Kingdom are revealed, even though the King is absent from His world as to manifestation. That is the period in which we live. But the King cast out is coming back, or else this is all untrue! That Kingdom is being prepared for and is to be set up here, under the direct reign of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, without following these lines, what is the common principle in all these? The rule of God, the authority of the Most High over the affairs of men. The permanent principle in all these phrases is the direct right of God to govern individual life in its entirety, social life in all its relationships, and national life in its purposes and its policies. Do Christian people realize and believe this? The permanent principle, that for which Jesus came, and for which He stood, is that of the absolute right of God to govern every man's life in every part and detail of it. That is the Kingdom of Heaven. The absolute right of God to govern social life in all its interrelationships, husband and wife, father and children, master and servant, capital and labor. The absolute right of God to govern in national life, in its purposes and in its policies. We must believe this. Dr. Frank W. Gunsaulus has said in one of his books, "True statesmanship consists in finding out which way God is going, and getting things out of the way for Him." That is the whole truth. That is the principle. Now, Jesus did not say merely, Change your mind, but Change your mind toward that, and in the phrase that indicates the direction there flashes the light that reveals the failure. We can put the whole call into very simple phrases and words. Change your mind about God, and Change your mind toward God. God is exiled, enthrone Him! That is all, and that is everything. It is a call from godlessness to Godliness. I leave the national outlook, I leave the social application, and I listen while Jesus says to us, and God help us to hear Him: "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." We have lived under other lords. We have obeyed the impulses of sin, of self, of passion, of pride; we are wrong. We have wakened in the morning, and we have said: "What will please us to-day?" We are wrong. Change your mind, learn to understand that you never can live, till with the break of day we say: "Teach me to do Thy will, O my God." "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." It had its local application, but I take out the eternal principle, the right of God to govern human lives, to direct, immediate, positive, drastic, interference with every man. This is the keynote of the preaching of Jesus.

Some have dared to suggest what they would do if they were God. Oh, the blasphemy of it, whether it comes from brilliant novelist or neurotic essay writer! Jesus Christ has no dealing with a man who takes up this attitude. He says to him, "Repent." The first thing is that we enthrone God, and kiss the scepter, and bow the knee, and learn that we have no right at all except the right of being where God would have us be and doing what God would have us do. Jesus comes to enthrone God in human life, in human society, in national affairs, and in the world; and the line of repentance is indicated when He says: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." When men repent in that direction what will happen? Their conceptions will be Godly, their conduct will be Godly, and their character will be Godly.

And, finally, let us consider the possibility affirmed, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The prophets had all testified to the abiding fact of the Divine Sovereignty, and yet had looked forward to a centralized manifestation of that sovereignty in a person. Read them all; what is this they sing of, what is this they thunder about, what is this that makes the wail of their agony, and creates the passion of their hopefulness? The Sovereignty of God. But, Isaiah, what is your hope? Has the King come? No, harlotry and evil, abounding wickedness, are about us. What, then, is your hope? The coming Deliverer, and wistful eyes from mountain tops strained eagerly for the break of day and the coming of the Person in Whom and through Whom this Kingdom should be set up.

At last, the final prophet came, rough John the Baptist, and he said: "I indeed baptize you with water, but He that cometh after me shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and fire." The great cry of the Baptist rang over the plains about Jordan, and then another voice was heard, meek and low, gentle and sweet, and yet uttering the same drastic word, but now whispered with wooing winsomeness, "Repent." Who is this? He does not speak of another, He utters no prophecy of someone yet to come. He says "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Kingdom came when He came. "At hand" as to manifestation, the Kingdom was realized by this Teacher, this Man. "At hand" as to administration, the Kingdom was executed by Him in the affairs of men in proportion as they yielded to Him. "At hand" as to discrimination, He opens and closes the doors of the Kingdom, and by Him alone men enter it, and by refusing so to enter, He will exclude them from personal realization of blessing. Said He one day, "the Kingdom of God is" - not within you, a mistranslation absolutely, and yet a whole system of teaching has been based on it - "the Kingdom of God is among you." He meant literally, I am here, and where the King is, there is the Kingdom. Obey Me, and you have entered the Kingdom; trust Me, and I will unlock the doors of the Kingdom to you. It is by the way of the King that men come into the Kingdom. And, oh, let me discuss it no longer as a theory, but let me announce it as the evangel. Dear man, dear woman, dear heart, "Repent" - the word is stern and fiery - "for the Kingdom of Heaven" - and the word indicates the need of your repentance. But, ah, me, it merges and melts into an infinite music - "the Kingdom is at hand." Just where you are. The King is there. Turn to Him, and that shall be repentance. Believe on Him, and that shall be thy passing into the Kingdom. Trust Him, and that shall be the dawn of the veritable day of God in thy soul.

We have attempted to consider this great initial word of the Lord. Wide-reaching circles have stretched out around us. God grant that their infinite significance may have impressed us. And yet now here is the difficulty of it, here is the point at which the preacher becomes utterly helpless, save as the Spirit of God will use the human word to deliver the Divine message. Oh that I could so constrain you that you should forget the messenger and your neighbor and let these far-reaching circles of the Divine Government contract until you find yourself alone, standing face to face with Jesus Christ in solemn isolation before God His King.

Oh, man, for a moment shut out the nation, for a moment shut out society, shut out this congregation, and now hear this voice as it says to you, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Oh, the good news! The Kingdom is at hand. Repent; change your mind and so your conduct, and so your character, and so your destiny, for the King who calls you bears in hands and feet and side the wounds that tell of how He opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Trust Him utterly, and enter into His Kingdom even now!