**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 23 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH EXCEEDS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven.*

*Matthew 5:20*

THESE ARE THE CLOSING WORDS OF THE FIRST SECTION OF the Manifesto of the King. As to their first value, they reveal the personal responsibility of all those who are to teach the ethic of Jesus. The arresting notes are two: first, Kingly authority; and, second, ethical severity. Let us take them in their wider meaning and application as revealing the ethical demand which the King makes on His subjects.

A matter of supreme importance - if a man is to speak out of the consciousness of his own age, and I think he must so speak if he teach the word of God to his age - a matter demanding far more attention than has been given to it lately, is the fact that the moral standard of Jesus is an infinitely more severe one than that of any other teacher. No one will imagine that I undervalue the gospel of His Grace. I shall have to return to it ere I have done; I cannot preach in the atmosphere of this Manifesto without ending under the shadow of the Cross. Nevertheless, I fear that sometimes we have preached the gospel of His grace at the expense of the demand of His ethic. To dwell on the severity of His ethical demand and His interpretation of morality is our present purpose. Yet let us immediately recognize that to which we shall return by way of conclusion, that these words of Jesus must be heard in the consciousness of the whole of the mission of the King, in which mission He acted as Saviour as well as Sovereign, as Lover of the souls of men as well as Lawgiver.

The statement as a statement is perfectly clear, even if it is startling. Speaking to His own disciples, men who had already crowned Him, so far as they had received light; men who had already yielded themselves to His Kingship, so far as they were able to comprehend His meaning, He said, "Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the Kingdom of heaven."

When thus set in their true context, these words of Christ become the more startling: they were words spoken, not to the multitudes, although the multitudes listened, but to men who had already crowned Him in the measure of the light which they had received, to men who were to go out and teach His ethic.

Let us attempt to understand this word of Jesus by considering, first, righteousness as the central idea of the declaration; second, the insufficiency of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees; and, third, the righteousness which exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The clear implication of the passage is the importance of righteousness. That is the perpetual Biblical atmosphere. Among the fundamental things of the Bible, so far as human conduct is concerned, is the supreme message, that righteousness is of paramount importance. That, of course, is the Christian conception, or, to come at once to the very heart of the thought, the master passion of Jesus was righteousness. The inspiration of that passion, if we may dare to press so deeply into the mind of Christ, was that of love. The master passion of all His doing was righteousness, not mercy but righteousness, not pity but purity. Mercy, yes, and pity surely; He was infinite in His compassion and in His tenderness, but never at the expense of right, never by making peace with wrong, never by lowering the standard of Divine holiness, or explaining away the awfulness of Divine purity. The master passion of all His teaching, of all the wonders He wrought, of the life He lived, of the very Cross of His dying, was the establishment of righteousness, and the bringing of all things into harmony with the holiness and purity of God. Those who do not agree with these assumptions of the text will be entirely outside the line of argument as we proceed. Only as we realize that, in the last analysis, the supreme matter of all life and conduct is that it should be righteous, shall we really be prepared to listen to these words of Christ, or be able to grasp their meaning and see how searching and wonderful they are.

What, then, is righteousness? If it be possible for me so to do, I want to escape from theological definitions. I want us to get at the simplest idea, at the abstract idea, at that which is true and commonly known as true in the consciousness of thinking men. In its ancient form, as you will remember, our word read right-wise-ness. That is to say, it came from a word "right-wise," which had as its main value the word "right." That is the fundamental word. Instead of righteousness, say righteous; and instead of righteous, say right; and you are touching the very central thought. Yet immediately you discover that this is not definition. So we press the question further. What is right? If we take this actual word of ours we find that its simplest meaning is No crookedness. Do not stay yet to read into that the moral value, but take it in its simplicity. The root word is a word which means to stretch, so that if you will take in your hand a piece of string, looped and twisted, and stretch it, that is righteousness, that which is perfectly straight. The straightest course is the right course. Go back to your school days and remind yourselves of this phrase, a right line, a straight line. What is a straight line? The one that goes most directly from point to point. Right is that in which there is no loop, no crookedness, no doubling, no deviation from the truly straight. Such is the idea in the word.

We immediately see why in that wonderful process of the formation of our language, the building up of words by which to express ideas, that word was made to stand for the supreme idea in the moral realm: no duplicity, no double dealing, nothing in the nature of a lie either in word or in thought, but straightness, truth, the shortest course.

Twice I have said that righteousness means the shortest course, and I am perfectly sure that in the minds of some there has been protest against the declaration. I sympathize with the protest. One of the devil's suggestions was that the King should take the short cut to the Kingdom - I will give thee all the kingdoms of the world for one moment's homage, a short cut to the kingdom, the shortest way! Would it have been the shortest way? Would He ever have gained the kingdoms so? Was not the lie of evil insidious in that it suggested as the shortest way the way that never reached the goal at all? That is the method of evil. It confronts the soul with a lie. I go back to my definition; right is the shortest way. To take an illustration from the life of our Lord makes one pause, and I do it reverently - Christ's shortest way to the kingdoms of this world was the way of the Cross, and the long travail of the millenniums. One brief, short moment of homage to the devil, and He the Son of God could never have gained the kingdoms! It seemed so easy to take the short cut. I pray that God may write the inner value of that on the heart and soul of every one of us. Some of you were thinking of actually yielding to the suggestion made to you, that you should take the short cut of iniquity toward the goal that you ought to reach by tramping and travail. In God's name refuse. The lie lies in the temptation that it is a short cut. Right is the nearest way to every honorable goal. I repeat, the stretched out, straight line, the right line, goes most quickly from point to point.

If that be our word, great as it is in its suggestiveness and its root values, I take up my Bible and ask, What is righteousness as herein revealed? I am still dealing, not with the word in all its great evangelical values as they appear in the New Testament, but with the word itself, as to its abstract idea. I find the old Hebrew word translated "right" has exactly the same significance, "straight." I find the Greek word has another meaning which will help us. The Greek word comes from one which means to show a thing, that is, to be self-evident. The Greek, former of words, the builder up of language, formed a word for moral rectitude from a root which means self-evident. There is wonderful illumination in that fact also.

The Bible idea of righteousness may thus be expressed: God is the absolute and eternal standard of right. Consequently, human conduct is righteous as it conforms to His will and approximates His character. These Bible writers and Bible teachers, of the old dispensation and the new, never stayed to argue whether God is righteous. That is their fundamental assumption. On that all Biblical teaching proceeds. The Bible position is that God is holy, and therefore His doings are righteous. He is the one eternal, final standard of what is right; consequently, righteousness in human life is conformity to His will and approximation to His character.

Those who do not accept this standard are totally unable to follow the argument of Jesus in my text, for the man who does not admit that God is the ultimate, eternal standard of right, whatever his own view of right may be, stands on a lower level than the Pharisees, for the Pharisees started there, as I shall try to show you. That was their fundamental conception. Those who believe that God is the absolute, eternal standard of right, and that man is right in the measure in which he lives in conformity with the will of God and approximates His character, may go forward in this meditation.

All this is fundamental; but there are differences in the apprehension of what the will of God is, and in these distinctions we shall discover what our Lord meant when He said to the men who were entering into His Kingdom that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

I think we shall be very unfair to the meaning of our Master if we begin in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, that chapter from which I read one extract in connection with our lesson, that chapter vibrant with the thunder of His awful woes against these very men. I think we must not begin there. I think we very often miss the keen edge of what Jesus said by beginning at the wrong place.

Where, then, shall we begin? Let us ask who these Pharisees were. The answer to the inquiry may thus be stated. The Pharisees were the Puritans of Maccabean period in Jewish history. Their very name means separated ones, and I do no violence to the name "Pharisee" when I say it means Separatist. That is precisely what they were. We have no history of the actual period in our Bible, but we have the history of its beginning in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and we have revelations of the conditions in the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. God's ancient people, or a remnant of them, were established at Jerusalem, without any king or prophet. There originated the order of the Scribes, for Ezra was the first. As time proceeded these people were threatened with complete absorption by the Greek power that swept over that whole region, and in that period, of which we have no Biblical history, but of which we have a good deal of authentic history, Judas Maccabeus became the deliverer of the people. There was a period of victories, and these Hebrew people suffered as a result, for they were in danger of forming alliances with the surrounding peoples and of being corrupted by that Greek influence which stood in direct opposition to their own conception of God and religion. It was then, when, humanly speaking, the Hebrew people were threatened with that most terrible form of extinction, absorption, that the Pharisees arose. The passion which actuated those who founded the order was one of loyalty to Jehovah. They constituted themselves into a definite order. I think when we read the New Testament we sometimes forget that the Pharisees were members of a very definite order. There were not more than six or seven thousand of them. The order was a close religious corporation. They banded themselves together as men who would be entirely separated from the Gentiles, from those whom they described as the common people, that is, those who did not take those special religious vows, and especially from the Sadducees, who were the rationalists in religion. The movement was born of the highest, holiest, passion. The order of the Pharisees was an order of men who stood for purity in religion in an hour when Hebraism was threatened by contamination by Greek influence, which would have cut the nerve of the religion of Jehovah. There can be no question, and those who are most familiar with the history of those times will agree with me, that they were the saviours of the nation, the men who enabled that remnant to stand against the encroachment of the forces of worldliness that were sweeping down on the people. These were the Pharisees, and these were the men with whom Jesus Christ was brought into immediate contact, when He began His public teaching.

From the commencement of His public ministry to the close we see Him flinging Himself with all the force of His personality against them and against their teaching. How are we to account for this? Let us look at them again. Let us see what had happened to them in the course of the years, not tracing the movement but seeing the result as it is revealed to us in the New Testament. What had their righteousness become? Let us inquire what was the base of it and examine the structure of it in order that we may understand the failure and insufficiency of it.

What was the base of the righteousness which the Pharisees taught? Conformity to the will of God. When you speak of the Pharisees, remember that they were the most religious people of that period, they were the most orthodox, the men who stood by the old theology, No one will imagine I am condemning orthodoxy, or sneering at old theology.

When we come into the Acts of the Apostles we find that the opposition was not Pharisaic, but Sadducean. So long as Jesus was teaching morality, the Sadducees had no quarrel with Him; they were indifferent; it was the resurrection doctrine that put the Sadducees into opposition with Christ. The Pharisees were religious, orthodox, and the base of their morality was their belief that man must conform to the will of God. Wherein, then, lay their failure? In order to answer that question, let us observe the structure which they had built on that base. Three things characterized their righteousness: it was, first, external; second, it was exclusive; finally, therefore, it was evasive of essential righteousness.

It was, first, external. It consisted in a most complex and elaborate system of regulations of life by habits. As every man entered the order he took two vows of initiation. The first was to tithe everything eaten, bought, or sold. The second was not to be the guest of the Gentiles, and to observe all ceremonial purifications. These were the fundamental vows of initiation to the order of the Pharisees. Now observe what had happened in the process of the years. In their desire to interpret the law of God and to make it binding they had added tradition to tradition. A little careful study of the Pharisees reveals things that are almost too absurd to be mentioned. Here is one simple illustration of their traditions. If a man should walk through the cornfields on the Sabbath day he must wear the lightest sandals, as if he wore heavy ones and trod on the corn and thus forced it from its husk, he was threshing on the Sabbath! You smile at that, but I know Puritanism today which is quite as foolish! They attempted to explain the meaning of the thought of God by their own foolish tradition until they had heaped tradition upon tradition, and the Lord said to them, "They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their fingers."

Moreover, their righteousness was exclusive. They held in supreme contempt all who were outside their own order. In the New Testament we become quite familiar with their attitude toward the publican. That phrase, the "common people," in itself full of beauty because it describes, not the people of one class or caste, but all sorts of people, when used by the Pharisee included all those who were not Pharisees, learned and illiterate, rich and poor, bond and free, the common herd outside the Pharisaic order, on all of whom the Pharisee looked with profound contempt. Notice another revelation of the exclusiveness of the Pharisee, and I shall reveal what is in my mind by again quoting from the words of Jesus, "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte: and when he is become so, ye make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves." There is no stronger proof of exclusivism than the passionate desire to proselytize someone else and bring that other person to your view. You reveal your exclusivism in no surer way than when you attempt to take hold of the man you hold in contempt because he is not with you, and compel him to your way of thinking.

Finally, their righteousness was evasive. Accentuation of the letter had destroyed the spirit. The Sabbath was held so sacred that in the observance of it its hallowed sanctions were denied, so that when His disciples passed through the cornfields and plucked the ears of corn the Pharisees complained that they were breaking the Sabbath, and Jesus said, "If ye had known what this meaneth, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." Have you ever really examined that answer of Jesus? These men were insisting on the sanctity of the Sabbath in such a way as to harm humanity, and Christ swept their traditions away, declaring that even the sanctity of the Sabbath must give way to the sanction of caring for humanity. They would not work on the Sabbath, but they would hold their feasts on the Sabbath, provided Gentiles prepared them. Consequently, I repeat, the very accentuation of the value of the letter had destroyed the spirit.

Wherein, then, lay the failure of these men? What was wrong? If the base of their righteousness was the conviction that righteousness is conformity to the will of God, wherein were they wrong? In that they did not know God. Consequently, they were unequal to the interpretation of the will of God. They did not understand the nature of His holiness. They did not understand the nature of His love. Out of that ignorance of God they proceeded to attempt to bring men into conformity to the will of the God Whom they did not know, and Whose will therefore they did not know, with the result that they libeled the God Whom they professed to extol, and degraded the national conception of God by misrepresentations, enforcing a righteousness which was external, exclusive, and evasive.

The result was the degradation of all life; the degradation of their own spirit to the hard, harsh, critical, cynical, self-satisfied temper which they manifested, the degradation of all their disciples, on whom they laid burdens that they themselves would not lift.

As Jesus moved among these men, the most religious and the most orthodox of men, He flung Himself with holy passion and fervor, and spoke strangely biting words of sarcastic denunciation against their righteousness, against their conception of righteousness, against their attempt to establish righteousness. I will defy you to find me a single unkind or harsh word Jesus ever spoke to sinning man or woman; harsh words were all reserved for false religious teachers, men who misinterpreted God to other men, and who cut the nerve of essential righteousness by attempting to substitute for it the righteousness of triviality and tradition, men who did not know God. Against these He hurled the final anathemas, the awful, appalling woes, of the twenty-third chapter of Matthew.

What, then, are the bases of the righteousness that Christ calls for? Knowledge of God. That is first. According to Christ, all righteousness is conformity to the will of God, Who is love, and Who therefore is a God of holiness. As we read the Manifesto and follow its teaching concerning life and its value, marriage and its sanctity, truth and its expression, justice and its manifestation, until we come to the last expression of love, love of enemies, we are driven to say, Who is sufficient for these things? And the answer is: None other than the child of God, for he alone knows God and is able to obey Him.

The manifestations of the righteousness which exceeds are suggested by the words, "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The word "therefore" tells us that we cannot read that command alone, we must go back. What is there before? "Your Father which is in heaven … maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." God-likeness is righteousness according to Jesus Christ. Love active, love so active that the sun shines on the evil as well as on the good, love so active that God does not withhold His rain from the fields of the unjust man. That is righteousness in the economy of heaven. I am perfectly well aware that we have left some of you far behind. We have left the mere moralist out of sight! This is more than mere morality. The manifestation of righteousness according to this ethic is God-likeness, active love, positive purity, fellowship with God. Presently, the King continued: "Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them," and He gave three illustrations, the giving of alms, the offering of prayer, and fasting, all things that are unnecessary! The merely moral man who has no conception of spiritual things, and no knowledge of Jesus Christ, puts all this out as unnecessary. Christ takes these things and says they are to be observed but not to be announced; they are to be secret things. "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" in your giving. When you want to pray, do not announce to the crowd that you are going to pray. Some of these things ought to sift us. I think there are some people who never pray unless there is a special convocation and everyone knows they are going to pray. If you want to fast, fast in loneliness, and do not go out wearing the solemn face which plainly says, I have been fasting but wear a joyful countenance while your hunger is helping you to do things for God.

The victories of the righteousness which exceeds are those of personal tone and relative influence. The supremest proof of righteousness for the other man is your tone, your temper, your spirit; "Love rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth." I know people who are very careful never to smoke, and never to go to the theater, never to play cards; and I listen to them when they suppose they are talking religiously, and they are saying hard and bitter things against Christian brethren with whom they do not agree. That is the Pharisaism that Christ hates!

Pharisaism became the chief force against Christ because it lifted the incidental things to the level of essential things, and degraded the essential until ultimately it destroyed them. Said Christ, "Ye tithe mint and anise and cummin," to the neglect of judgment and mercy and faith. Christ does not undervalue the observances which express life. He did not say your righteousness is to supersede the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, but it is to exceed it. He went on, and said: "These ye ought to have done," judgment, mercy and faith, "and not to have left the other undone." He is not careless about the expressions of life, but demands that the details of habit shall be expressions of life, and not substitutes for life. Righteousness in the economy of Christ is an inspiration and not a prison. The Pharisees made it a prison and shut men inside it. What did Christ say of the men they shut in? "Ye make him twofold more a son of hell then yourselves." Righteousness must be the inspiration that touches the secret springs of action, purifying everything at the source.

Behold the King Who uttered the words, Himself realizing righteousness in all the fact of His life, Himself manifesting righteousness in all the glory and beauty of His tender compassion and His tremendous loyalty to truth and holiness.

Finally, behold the King enabling men to be righteous according to His pattern as they put their trust in Him.

I never can have the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees save only as He will take me, dwell in me, and make me love with His love, and see with His eyes, and be compassionate with His compassion, and angry with His anger, compassionate toward the sinner, but angry with his sin. May we know that righteousness through the Lord Himself.