**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 24 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**ETHICAL PERFECTION by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

*Matthew 5:48*

PERHAPS NO WORDS IN THE TEACHING OF OUR LORD HAVE given more pause to honest hearts than these. With a due sense therefore of their solemnity, combined with a conviction of the reasonableness of our Master, we approach their consideration. In doing so it is of great importance that we should guard ourselves against two perils which threaten us.

First, we must be most careful not to exclude from these words any of the Lord's meaning. We must not say that our Lord did not quite intend what He said. We must not indulge in that most pernicious form of Biblical criticism, the attempt to accommodate some high word of Jesus to the low living of our own experience.

Second, we must not include any more than He intended. It will be healthy for us if we can escape entirely from all merely technical theological ideas as we approach these verses. We have heard much of Christian perfection, a fine and beautiful phrase. I have occasionally been startled by Christian people who have said to me, Do you believe in Christian perfection? My reply to such an inquiry has been to ask, Do you believe in Christian imperfection? or, Do you believe in imperfect Christianity? Every man who is a Christian believes in Christian perfection. That such an answer to the inquiry may be an evasion of the intention of the questioner I know right well. There may be involved in the question certain conceptions, interpretations, doctrines, theological opinions. Now, it is from these that I desire to escape. Let us hear these words of our Lord just as He uttered them, with the simplicity of children.

With regard to the second of these perils, that of including nothing which our Lord did not intend, let us at once recognize that the change which we find in our Revised Version is most important and most accurate. The mood of the verb is future indicative, and not imperative. Our Lord did not say, "Be ye therefore perfect." He said "Ye therefore shall be perfect."

Yet immediately, in the interest of the first warning, let us recognize with equal care that the sense of the indication is imperative in its bearing on our responsibility, for all His declarations involve responsibility, just as all His commands implicate resource.

Comprehensively, this word of Christ is a summarized declaration of what He expects of those who are in His Kingdom, and therefore it is a summarized declaration of what is made possible to them by Himself.

He came unto His own Kingdom, and found it disorganized, degraded; He came to organize, to restore, to up-lift, to supply all the forces that were necessary for the remaking of men and the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God in the experience of the race. Confronting His own disciples, and speaking in the hearing of the multitude that had gathered about Him, He said, This is the sum total of My ethic, "Ye shall therefore be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Speaking to His disciples in the hearing of that larger multitude, He said, You shall be perfect, for I am here to make you perfect; that is the meaning of My mission.

Let us, then, consider, first, the central idea of the text, perfection; second, the perfection of the Father to which our Lord referred when He said "as your heavenly Father is perfect," and, third, the perfection of the sons which He declared to be necessary.

First, then, the general idea of perfection. The arresting word of the text is undoubtedly the word twice repeated, "perfect." This is the word which gives us pause, surprises us, the word which we have been so anxious to undervalue, the word which has made us declare that our Lord did not really mean what He said, but that we were to be as good as we could. It is impossible to consider or apply this statement of our Lord without carefully considering this word, both as to its actual meaning, and as to its use.

What, then, does the word mean? I am referring, of course, in the first place, to the actual word of the Greek New Testament. Let us get behind the actual word to that from which it came. A third remove from the word here translated perfect is a simple word, meaning to set out for a given point, not to go promiscuously, but to go toward a definite place. The suggestion of the word is that of traveling toward a goal. That is the root idea. From that word another was derived, meaning a limit, the conclusion of the journey, the destination of the traveler, the place toward which the journey was taken; and so the word came to mean a termination, a result, and ultimately, a purpose. From that word was derived the word which is translated "perfect" in this passage. The word therefore means realization, arrival at a destination, the state of being at the limit toward which the start was made.

In classic Greek this word was used of adults, as distinguished from infants, or children undergoing discipline. It was also used in the religion of Greece of those who were initiated into the mysteries; those who had passed beyond the novitiate were perfected, that is, they had arrived, they had reached the goal, the limit toward which they set out when they became novices.

In the New Testament this word occurs only in my text, and in one other place in the gospels, where our Lord said to the rich young ruler, "If thou wouldest be perfect, go, sell that thou hast and give to the poor"; if thou wouldest arrive at thy goal, come to fulfilment of that toward which thou hast been moving, crown everything that has preceded; then yield thyself to My control by sweeping out all that hinders, "sell that thou hast ... and come, follow Me." In the epistles it is found over and over again. It is there used constantly of those who are ethically adult, not complete in the sense of including everything that is intended by the being, and excluding everything that is not of the being; but grown-up, adult, having arrived at a definite goal. Such is the word, "Ye therefore shall be perfect," not babes ethically, not youths and maidens, but full-grown men.

The varying value of the word is illustrated by our word "perfect." We are conscious of the natural ambiguity of that word. We always need to interpret it by the subject of which it is used. It is not a word that always means exactly the same thing; it cannot. Here is a baby in its mother's arms. Is it perfect? Ask the mother. Meet the baby seventeen years hence, a youth. Is he perfect? Ask the youth. Add another four, five, half a dozen years, he is a man. Is he perfect? Ask the woman he considers perfect. Perfect as babe, perfect as boy, perfect as man; but always room for growth, advancement, development.

Perfect, then, means arrival at one particular stage of completeness, not the impossibility of procedure from that stage to another. Perfection is the reaching of a given limit. When that given limit is reached, there may be a new enterprise, a new vision luring to new heights, and so consequently a new process toward a larger perfection.

We are by this consideration brought face to face with the supreme difficulty, in the presence of which men have halted, have indulged in criticism, and have attempted to escape the force of the word of Christ, that of the consciousness of the necessary difference between the perfection of God and our perfection. All that we need for the moment is a recognition of the fact that in each case we must interpret by the subject of which we use the defining term. There are certain senses in which it would be absurd to imagine we can ever be perfect with the perfection of God. Therefore, all such senses are necessarily and properly excluded from our consideration. Our Lord, in infinite condescension, used this particular word "perfect" of God in order to accommodate to human understanding a great principle of human life and conduct. So much then for the abstract idea.

Before we consider in separation the perfection of the Father and the perfection of the sons, it is of the utmost importance that we remember that the statement of Jesus has as its central value the suggestion of likeness, and that most definitely. As your heavenly Father, that is just as your Father, exactly like your Father is perfect. That is not unwarranted emphasis. Whereas there are things we shall necessarily have to eliminate from our consideration, in the matter to which Christ was drawing attention He used the strongest word possible as He demanded on the part of His subjects perfection like the perfection of God.

The consideration of the two perfections will emphasize the difference. The perfection of the Father, the perfection of the sons, these terms marking distinction which must be multiplied by the difference between the Divine and the human.

Admitting that fact of difference, it is ours to look for the likeness which our Lord intended, for in the discovery of that likeness is the supreme value of our meditation.

What, then, is the perfection of the Father to which our Lord referred? This word "perfect" is never elsewhere used of God in the whole of the New Testament. It was manifestly an accommodation on the part of Christ. A great subject is suggested at this point, which is quite aside from our theme. I am more and more impressed, however, as I study these gospel narratives, with our Lord's choice of words. I suppose we are all undergoing a very interesting and profitable revolution in regard to the language of the New Testament as the result of the work of Deissman and others. This, however, is helping us to see more clearly with what accuracy and delicacy our Lord made use of words. He never spoke of His Father by this word on any other occasion. No New Testament writer ever dared to use this word of God. It was, I repeat, a manifest accommodation in order to teach some central lesson.

If the word means reaching a goal toward which a man has traveled, then immediately it cannot have any application to God, for essentially God has no goal toward which He travels. In the fact of His essential being God knows nothing of infancy in His own being, nothing of youth, nothing of age. The vision of Daniel, while poetic, is at the same time strangely illuminative, expressed in the figure that always arrests us, "the Ancient of Days." God, if I may use such poor human words, is always adult in the mystery of His own being. He is taking no journey toward a larger perfection. His perfection is absolute and final and eternal. Yet our Lord spoke of Him here by a word which is entirely on the human level, accommodating His word to the necessity of His teaching. Therefore it is evident that the word "perfect," when used of the Father must be interpreted by the limitations of the context. Moreover, Christ's use of the word is so closely associated with something He had said a moment before that we are compelled so to interpret it.

To diligent students of the whole teaching of our Lord - those who today are standing in a place of far greater privilege than these men occupied who were listening to Him - the interpretation of Fatherhood may be, for certain purposes, much wider. We have all that He said about the Father, we have all that He revealed concerning the Father, and we may, nay we must, take all into account when we desire to know God.

For the present purpose I confine myself to the Manifesto. In this Manifesto, of which our text is, as we have said, the crystallized declaration of requirement and resource, these are the things He taught about the Father. First, that He is in the heavens. I cannot help feeling that we Iose a great deal sometimes by not being more literal in our translation. Our Lord said, Your Father which is in the heavens; He taught us to pray, "Our Father which art in the heavens," always in the plural. I should not like to base any very definite doctrine on that, but it is at least suggestive of the omnipresence of God and the immanence of God, that He is as nigh as the very heavens of the atmosphere in which we live, and as far as the ultimate reach of the final heaven. In this Manifesto He also made these simple declarations concerning God: Your Father seeth, Your Father knoweth, Your Father feedeth. Yet all this is but the atmosphere, not finally revealing the perfection of God to which our Lord referred at this point, but helping us toward an understanding thereof.

Let us look back to some earlier words in this paragraph: "That ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." Now connect these words with our text, "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as, just as, your Father in the heavens is perfect." Do not quarrel with that illustration. I did not choose it. It is the Lord's illustration. The particular words of my text rise straight out of it, and must be interpreted by it. It is of the essence and reality of the teaching of this particular passage. "Ye therefore," not "ye shall be perfect," but "Ye therefore." Wherefore? On what does the "therefore" depend, and from whence does it derive its strength and urgency? "Your Father … maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." That is a revelation of God. First, it is a revelation of beneficence. Make the word "beneficence" as great as it is; do not degrade it by the low level of our common use of it. When we use great words let us think great thoughts. Beneficence is well-doing, doing well to, doing good to. Your Father is beneficent toward man as man, whether he be evil or good, toward the unjust or the just. Behind the beneficence is benevolence, well-wishing.

That is the Divine perfection to which our Lord referred, love desiring the good of all men, love doing good to all men, love set on men irrespective of what they are in themselves, love for the evil as well as for the good, for the unjust as well as for the just. There comes to my mind a story from the earliest days of my preaching. I have often told it. I will tell it again. A boy in a Sunday-school class one day said to his teacher, Does God love naughty boys? Certainly not, said the teacher. What blasphemy! Yes, God does love naughty boys. God loves wicked men, in their wickedness, and out of the arch of His blue heaven makes His glorious sun to shine on them, and out of the secret chambers where the rain is generated sends it forth in beneficent floods on the unjust as well as on the just. Do not quarrel with the illustration, it is not mine. You might criticize this if I were imagining it, but it is Christ's definition of the Divine perfection. "Your Father … maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." That is our Lord's description of the perfection of God. It is the ultimate distinction of God, that He makes His sun to shine on the evil as well as on the good. In the Colossian letter we have a great word of Paul's applied to human conduct which is equally applicable here, "Love is the bond of perfectness." What does that word "bond" mean? Ask your medical man to explain it to you; he can do it better than I can, 'sundermos', the ligaments of perfectness, holding all other things in unity and making them act harmoniously. The love of God is the bond of His perfections. Deny His love, and what, then, of His justice? How hard it will be, like the justice of man! What, then, of His holiness? How impossible for a man as man ever to find His way into it, to climb toward the light of it. Love is the bond of perfectness in God, and our blessed Master and King caught this one song out of the infinite music, and sang it to the ages. This is the Divine perfection, that He "maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust."

What, then, is the perfection of the sons to which our Lord is calling us? "Ye shall be perfect" exactly as your Father is perfect. Mark the idea of perfection thus interpreted. Again I pray you remember the necessary distinction between a father and sons multiplied by the difference between God and man. While remembering that, let us emphasize the thought of likeness. Christ said to His subjects, You must be ethically full-grown. To be ethically full-grown is to be men of whom it is true that thoughts and words are mastered by love, men of whom it is true that action is always love-inspired. In our previous meditation we considered the fundamental word of Jesus, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." The ultimate expression of that righteousness is love-mastered thinking, benevolence; and love-mastered activity, beneficence.

Take this whole Manifesto and see how the Lord interprets His own ideal. This word about love is the climax of our Lord's enunciation of laws as to earthly relationships. I glance back, and I find, first, the law of life as to murder and hatred; second, the law of purity as to the marriage relationship; third, the law of truth, that no man shall take any oath, but say yea, yea; the law of justice, that the man in His Kingdom shall overtake the demand of justice by such living as will make it forevermore unnecessary. The attitude toward human life as He describes it, the sacredness of the family, the preservation of the purity of the state; the attitude toward truth, the simple statement; the attitude toward justice. How are we going to fulfil these ideals? Only in love. Only out of life love-mastered can these things proceed.

This, then, is not a low standard. It is the ultimate, the highest of all ethical conceptions. Love is the secret of all righteousness, personal, social, national. That does not need arguing; it does need thinking about and remembering. Could war last for a single four-and-twenty hours if love mastered the peoples? That never will be until the King of love shall come and establish His Kingdom; but when He comes, that will be the issue. Every social problem that confronts us today would be solved if only we could make men live a life love-mastered. No sentinel is half so severe as love. If love stands sentinel in our lives, watching over our actions, we cannot lie, we cannot hate, we cannot slander. The measure of high and noble life is the measure of love-mastered life. How we admire that man who in company will not allow another man to be ill spoken of.

Who steals my purse steals trash

But he that filches from me my good name,

Robs me of that which not enriches him,

And makes me poor indeed.

Such a man is of all men most despicable, and the man who will not allow it to be done in his company is the man who is love-mastered.

Do not imagine that love is sentimental, sickly, mawkish, anaemic. If it were, then God deliver the world from it! Love is strong, virile, tremendous in its demands. Love makes demands on self. Love thinketh no evil, "rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. "

That is the God-like perfection which Christ demands, the love-mastered life which expresses itself in gifts bestowed on men without respect to what they are in themselves.

As I ponder these words, as I have pondered them in trying to understand our Lord's meaning, everything has at last gathered itself up for my own soul and my own heart into one question. I am not now so much speaking as a preacher, an expositor; I am telling you the things that have been happening in my own soul while I have been preparing for this service. As the light has shone on me, and I have caught His revelation of God in the perfection of His love, and have then heard Him say, You therefore shall be perfect exactly as your Father is perfect, the effect has been that I have been driven to the asking of one plain question: How?

For in the name of God, if that be the ideal it mocks my impotence. I grant its beauty and glory; I grant that if men live love-mastered lives all the problems are solved and righteousness is established. But how am I going to be perfect with that perfection, how am I to arrive at that ethically adult condition of life when I shall be mastered by love in my thinkings, in my wishings, in my judgments, in my actions? How?

The answer is in the text and in the context. I venture to suggest that our Lord might have used other figures of speech here. In some senses other figures of speech would have been as illuminative as this is, but they would have lacked exactly that thing which I am now feeling after. He might have said, "Ye shall therefore be perfect, as your King is perfect." Would not that have done? Yes, as the revelation of an ethic, but it would have lacked dynamic, it would have lacked the essential Christian secret. Your King makes His sun to shine on the evil and the good, and His rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Would not that have done? Quite perfectly for the revelation of an ethic, for the King is a King of love, but a King cannot give life to His subjects.

But our Lord did not use that figure, He used the figure of the Father, "that ye may be sons of your Father." Now the arresting word is not the word "'perfect" but the word "Father." That is a word of hope, a word that woos me, a word that suggests dynamic as well as ethic! I go back to the beginning of the Manifesto and I find that the word first appears when our Lord was telling these very men the purpose for which they are called to high character, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." He never used that figure of speech again till He came to the climax, the love-mastered life, "That ye may be sons of your Father ... ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Then everything that followed thrilled with it. Take the sixth chapter at your leisure, and do what I did when I was reading just before coming to this service, put a red line under the word "Father." Life is to be lived before "your Father" and not before men to be: seen of them. Your alms are to be given so that "your Father" may see them. When you pray, get alone and pray to your Father, and your Father will reward you. When you pray, say, "Our Father." When you forgive men, remember your Father will forgive you if you forgive them. When you fast do it alone with your Father. Do not be anxious about the necessities of this life. Your Father feedeth the birds, and your "Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things."

So the music runs. The King is Father; the subjects are sons. And therein is suggested the central verity of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He comes to give men not an ethic alone, but dynamic; not light on a pathway merely, but life enabling them to walk therein.

Such love of our fellow men must proceed out of life, and the Manifesto is not all the mission of the King. There was not merely the Mount of Light, whereon He enunciated the ethic that burns us:

There is a green hill far away,

Outside a city wall,

Where the dear Lord was crucified,

Who died to save us all.

We may not know, we cannot tell

What pains He had to bear,

But we believe it was for us

He hung and suffered there.

He died that we might be forgiven,

He died to make us good,

That we might go at last to heaven,

Saved by His precious blood.

Oh dearly, dearly has He loved,

And we must love Him too,

And trust in His redeeming blood,

And try His works to do.