**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 25 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE SANCTIONS OF ORDINANCES by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? to save a life, or to kill?*

*Mark 3:4*

THE STORY OF THE HEALING OF THE MAN WITH THE withered hand is part of a larger whole. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story, and each places it in relation to the cornfield dispute about the Sabbath. Matthew and Mark read as though both events took place on the same Sabbath; Luke, however, distinctly says that the healing of the man with the withered hand was on another Sabbath. The difficulty in the mind of the enemies of Jesus, both in the cornfield and in the synagogue, was that of His apparent violation of the Sabbath. Moreover, there can be no escape from the conviction that this attitude on the part of Christ which caused their criticism and aroused their hostility, was definite and intended. In all the incidental wonders which He wrought He was moving quite definitely along the line of an illuminative and corrective mission. Whereas there can be no doubt that every incidental putting forth of His power was an expression of the compassion of His heart for needy men, the way in which he selected the hours and the occasions proves the larger purpose of His will. Not only did he heal this man on the Sabbath day, He also cast out an unclean spirit; probably on two separate occasions He healed Peter's wife's mother of a fever, He loosed the woman who had been bound in infirmity for many years, He healed the man with the dropsy, He gave sight to the man born blind, and He healed the man who had lain in the grip of infirmity for eight-and-thirty years, as He found Him in the porches of the Bethesda pool, all on the Sabbath. These workings of wonders on the Sabbath day were all wrought in the atmosphere of conflict concerning the Sabbath. We find not merely the story of the deed recorded and the declaration made that it took place on the Sabbath; we also find, side by side with these statements, the account of how He challenged them or they challenged Him. I repeat that He definitely violated the Sabbath according to their conceptions of the Sabbath.

The meaning of this maintained and definite attitude on the part of our Lord is revealed very clearly in these two stories: the story of the disciples in the cornfields on the Sabbath plucking the ears of corn and Christ answering the criticism of the Pharisees, and the story of how, on coming into this synagogue, He entered into discussion with them and then healed the man with the withered hand.

I propose asking you to fasten your attention with me on this story of the healing of the man with the withered hand, not so much in order that we may observe its wonderful teaching concerning the method of Jesus with individual cases, but in order that we may consider this attitude of Jesus, and endeavor to understand His meaning, and apply the values to ourselves.

First, I am going to trespass on your patience as I attempt very rapidly to reconstruct the story from the three accounts that we have; I read them of set purpose. I maintain that here as elsewhere in the gospels these stories are not contradictory but complementary. Each man told the story from his own standpoint quite simply, not necessarily giving all the details. The careful comparison of the three will enable us to see what happened, and so prepare us for the study of this particular word of Christ.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of His entry into the synagogue, and of the fact that there, in the synagogue, was the man with the withered hand.

Mark and Luke tell us that when He went in, the Pharisees watched to see whether He would heal, that they might accuse Him. Yet in their watching they paid Him an unconscious compliment: they expected that He would heal. They already knew enough of Him to know that the one man of all the crowd of worshipers most likely to appeal to Him was the most needy man in the crowd, the man with the withered hand.

Matthew alone tells us that they not only watched Him, but challenged Him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?

Mark and Luke declare that then Jesus first called the man to stand out, called Him from the place that he occupied in the synagogue, and that the man came forward, and standing in the midst where he might be observed, became the center of observation.

Matthew tells us - and I believe it was at this point that it happened - that when the man stood forth in the midst, Jesus asked two preliminary questions, "What man shall there be of you that shall have one sheep, and if this fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man of more value than a sheep?"

Mark and Luke tell us that He answered their question by asking a question. They had said, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?" He asked "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? to save a life, or to kill?"

Matthew alone tells us that He added to that this word, "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day,"

Continuing to follow the course of events, we find that Mark and Luke declare that He "looked round about on them." Mark alone interprets the look in the words, "being grieved at the hardening of their heart."

The three evangelists then declare that Jesus addressed Himself to the man in the terms of an impossible command, "Stretch forth thy hand." Immediately the man obeyed and was healed, Matthew adding that beautiful touch of comparison, that the hand "was restored whole, as the other."

Luke tells us of the madness of His enemies, and of the fact that they communed as to what course to pursue.

Matthew and Mark declare that they went out and took counsel to destroy Him.

From that narrative let us now take three central words. First, their question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?" Second, His argument, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? to save a life, or to kill?" Finally, His answer, "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day." Once again, narrowing our outlook, our text is the argument of Jesus in that atmosphere.

If as the result of that grouping of the records, we see that crowd of hostile souls, that man with the withered hand standing in the midst, and that lonely and imperial figure of the Lord; if we understand that the mental mood of the rulers was that of questioning his attitude toward the Sabbath, and if we see Him violating the Sabbath according to their view, we shall be a little nearer the heart of the theme.

I now leave their question and His final answer, and confine myself to His argument, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do harm? to save a life, or to kill?" Listening to that argument there are three things I desire to impress on your attention. Therein I discover, first, a remarkable revelation of our responsibility in the presence of all human need. Second, in that argument I discover an equally remarkable revelation of the true value of ordinances, especially Divine ordinances, the Sabbath being the illustration. Finally, in that argument, I find the ultimate test of religion.

First, then, as to the revelation of responsibility in the presence of human need. Let us go back to the synagogue. Taking the case of the man as typical, we see him disabled, incompetent, and suffering. All students of the New Testament, and of the method of the Master's ministry, are familiar with the constant merging of matters material and spiritual in His actions. The physical was always both sign and symbol of spiritual condition. We see in this man with the withered hand, a type of humanity disabled, incompetent, suffering. We shall miss the whole value of our study unless we fasten our eyes resolutely upon that man in this way. We need not travel back to the synagogue, he is in this house; we meet him every day in office, store, shop, professional walk. The children of the King, the disciples of Christ, the servants of God, are constantly face to face with the man with the withered hand, the withered heart, the withered soul, spiritually disabled, spiritually incompetent, spiritually suffering; and over and over again spiritual disability, incompetence, suffering, reveal themselves in physical disability, incompetence, suffering. All human need was focused, suggested, symbolized, by the man in the synagogue whose right hand was withered. What, then, is our responsibility in the presence of that man?

I pray you listen to that which to me is the most arresting, startling, marvelous thing in my text. Said Jesus, with that man standing there: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm? to save a life or to kill?" Mark most carefully the startling alternative that Christ suggested: "To do good, or to do harm? To save a life, or to kill?" That is the most disturbing of revelations to the complacent negativism which so often passes today for vital Christianity. There is the man with the withered hand, the incompetent man, on the highway, or in the synagogue; if you see him, you either do him good or do him harm, you either stretch out a hand to save him, or you help to kill him.

The average Christian man, to say nothing of the man of the world, is in revolt against this alternative of Christ. He says: I am doing nothing to help, but I am not harming. I have not stretched out a hand to save the man, but I have done nothing to kill him. That is not Christ's outlook. It may be that refined paganism imagines it can be neutral in the presence of human incompetence, but Christ says not to help is to harm, to fail to stretch out the hand of love is to have complicity with the forces that destroy. That is the heart of the argument. It is the revelation of Christ's attitude toward humanity, of God's attitude in the presence of human incompetence and sorrow. God is such that in the presence of human sorrow He must either help or harm, and harm He cannot; He must either save or kill, and kill He cannot; and therefore we have Calvary, the Cross of His blood, the breaking of His heart, the sacrifice by which He lifts crushed, bruised, broken humanity and remakes it. Let no man name the Christian name and claim relationship to the Christian fact who in the presence of the incompetent man passes by and because he has not added another blow imagines he has fulfilled his Christian duty. To do harm or to do good, to save or to kill, are the graphic, drastic, startling alternatives of Jesus.

Of course, all this must be interpreted by the measure of our ability to do good or to save life. In the strict economy of Divine justice we shall be judged by that measure. I do not say that unless I can save a man I kill him. I do say that when I stand in the presence of need, unless I put forth what power I have to help toward salvation, then in the measure of the help withheld I harm and hinder. To leave the man stranded on the highway when my hand stretched out to him would have helped him but one yard toward home and health and God is to be guilty of his further sinning and further failing. This is the startling alternative of the text, revealing in a most remarkable way our responsibility in the presence of human need. If the man with the withered hand lives with us, lives in our neighborhood, and if we who bear the Christian name and wear the Christian sign pass him, and merely look and pass on, upon us lies part of the guilt of his ultimate undoing. It is that conception of responsibility which was the inspiration of Christ's perpetual violation of the false view of the Sabbath, and we naturally turn therefore to our second consideration.

We have in this text, then, second, the revelation of the true value of ordinances. Take the Sabbath as the type, for that was the matter at issue in this story. I go back for one moment to the story preceding this, for in that story our Lord uttered words concerning these men which are vital to our consideration. When the Pharisees criticized His disciples for plucking the ears of corn, among other things Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." Those familiar with the Greek New Testament will remember that in that particular phrase we have the Greek preposition 'dia', which I think we have somewhat loosely translated by our preposition for: "the Sabbath was made for man." Dia used with the accusative always has one significance, therefore I make no apology for reading the text in another way, "The Sabbath was brought into being as the result of man and not man as the result of the Sabbath"; or perhaps I might take another slightly different method of translation and read the text thus, "The Sabbath was brought into being on account of man, and not man on account of the Sabbath." That is the fundamental word.

There are certain things of interest in this statement to which I refer only in passing. You will notice that our Lord said, The Sabbath was made for man, not just for the Jew. Much controversy today about the Sabbath is due to the fact that we look on it as a Hebrew institution. According to the Bible, the Sabbath is older than the Hebrew institution. The Sabbath was made for man, it was made as the result of man; man first, the Sabbath second, not the Sabbath first and man consequently.

Here we are at the root of the whole question as to the place and value of ordinance. If, indeed, the Sabbath was made on account of man, as a result of man, for man in that sense, it must never be desecrated by being made an instrument of harm to men, by being made a reason for helping to kill a man. There is the incompetent, disabled, suffering man! What is my duty to him? To help him, to heal him, to save him. But it is the Sabbath! Is he therefore for twelve or four-and- twenty hours to suffer his agony? That is the blasphemy of all blasphemies. The Sabbath was called into being on account of man, and not man on account of the Sabbath. If I may attempt to gather up what seems to me to be the intense and remarkable light of this word of Jesus and express it in a brief way, I would do it thus: the sanctity of the Sabbath must not destroy its sanctions.

What are the sanctions of the Sabbath? The well-being of man. If you take the Sabbath and make it so sacred and separate that you allow a man to continue to bear his burden alone without attempting to help him, you are making the sanctity of the day destroy the sanctions on which it rests.

So with every ordinance. I need not say human ordinances, for I have little care concerning them. I would break them all with pleasure. I care nothing for human ordinances. I am speaking of higher things, I am speaking of Divine ordinances. There are not very many, according to the New Testament; but there are some. There is the ordinance of preaching; I do not hesitate to call it an ordinance. There are the ordinances of prayer, and of worship; there are the ordinances of Christian baptism, and of the supper of the Lord. Over all these New Testament ordinances, so finely independent of the trivialities of ritualism and so instinct with abounding life and spirituality, high and sacred as they are, we must write this dictum of Jesus: These were called into being on account of man and not man on account of them.

What is the meaning of preaching? Preaching is not an institution to which man shall be compelled to attend in order to live; preaching is an institution for the proclamation of the living word of God that men may live and thrive and grow thereby. It is made for man, not man for it.

What is the institution of prayer? Why is the Church called on to be a priesthood? What is the meaning of intercession? It is not something ordained, which man must use in order that it may continue. Prayer is ordained for man, for his healing, for his helping, that he may come nearer God. For these purposes the ordinance of prayer has been established.

For what end is worship ordained? Now we are getting back very near to our story, to the synagogue, the temple, and so very near to this hour, and this building. What is the place of worship for? Worship is ordained for man and not man for it. The ultimate purpose of our worship and our gathering together for worship is the healing and helping of humanity by bringing humanity into living, vital, relationship with God. God is not demanding that man shall conform simply in order to fulfil an institution that He has created. He made the institution that men in it and through it may find their way to Him. So also with baptism and the supper of the Lord. All ordinances are made for man, and if we are making any Christian ordinance an excuse for leaving some man half-dead on the highway while we observe it, we are blaspheming the sanctions of the ordinance, and so are sinning against God.

Take the Sabbath again as test. In the economy of God the Sabbath is the true test of our understanding of the Sabbath. God's Sabbath is the day for rest and worship. But there in the synagogue is a man with a withered hand. What am I going to do with that man because it is the hour of rest and worship? Let him suffer? Therein is proof that I do not understand the Sabbath. In the presence of that man it is my duty to break the Sabbath, give up my rest, turn from the holy shrine of worship to the holier shrine of service to help him. By so doing I keep Sabbath according to the Divine purpose.

I go further and declare that the Sabbath is the test of our conception of God. Let us return to the cornfield once more, to listen to something that Jesus then said to these men on the question of the Sabbath. The words are recorded in Matthew, "If ye had known what this meaneth, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless." In that word Christ declared that the very method they adopted for defense of the Sabbath was demonstration of their ignorance of God. They did not understand mercy. If you had understood God and the passion of His heart, said Jesus, in effect, you would not have blamed the guiltless.

In the light of this great word of Jesus it becomes our bounden duty to test all our ordinances and arrangements. The test of the church is the man with the withered hand. If to the church no such man comes it is for one reason and one only, that Christ is not there. To the church Christo-centric, gathered about the living Lord, the man with the withered hand will surely come. If he be not in the midst, it is because Christ is not there. Let it be known that the loving, tender, strong, mighty, saving Christ is in the midst, and the incompetent, disabled, palsied, spiritually defeated will come. They become the test of the church. If the ordinances and organizations are so perfect that there is no time for them, or if to deal with them would violate the regularity of the sanctuary, then the sanctuary is a sepulcher and of no use to God or man. That is the supreme test of the church's life and the church's work, and of all ordinances.

So I come finally to notice that this text offers the final test of religion. We fix our attention no longer on the man with the withered hand, but on the rulers. Look on these rulers, only let us look at them as Jesus saw them. There is nothing more remarkable in these stories than the emphasis laid on the fact that He looked at them before He healed the man. I draw your attention to the fact that Mark interpreted the look in the words "being grieved at the hardening of their hearts." So remarkable is that declaration, so full of awful light, that one almost trembles to make any attempt at exposition. He looked at them with anger. Do not minimize the word, I pray you. Let us have done with all this soft sentimentality that imagines that Christ was incapable of anger. The word "anger" here suggests the sudden stretching out of the hand in a passion that is active and moves toward punishment.

But just as I am arrested by the flaming fire that flashes from the eyes of the looking Christ, fire that is evidently the fire of actual anger with these rulers, Mark leads me behind the anger in the mind of Christ and writes for me the strange and startling word, "being grieved." The Greek word there is a striking word, and this is the only place in the New Testament where it occurs. We find it again and again in Classical Greek, but nowhere else in the New Testament. Expositors and scholars have come to the conclusion that the only word by which you can convey its meaning is our word condolence. What is condolence? Just grief with. Condolence is in its truest sense that which I feel with you when you are in the midst of grief. The mystery deepens. He was grieved with whom? They were not grieved. They had no sense of shame. He was in sympathy with all that must inevitably come in the moment of their awaking to the unutterable folly and failure of their own attitudes. Grief with them was His fathoming of their sin to its deadly depth and its unutterable darkness. It was the Cross of Calvary, the passion of God manifesting itself in the midst of human failure.

Now observe the reason of that anger and that grief. Because of the hardening of their heart, not because of the hardness of their heart as the Authorized Version renders it, but, far more accurately, because of the hardening of their heart. It was not merely grief over a condition, it was grief over a process. The word "hardening" there is a word that describes a process, the process by which the extremities of a fractured bone are united by a callus. Not the hardness, but the hardening. They were hardening their own heart. If we see these men set in this light we see that they were allowing a false religious conviction to dry up the springs of emotion in the presence of the man with the withered hand; they were allowing prejudice in favor of a false conviction to stifle the conviction that He came to bring them, the conviction of what their attitude ought to be in the presence of all human need. That is the picture of the rulers.

How far are we guilty of their sin? We are verily guilty if for us the Sabbath stifles compassion, if we are so eager to fulfil the obligations of worship that we have no time to stretch out a hand to help the man who needs our help. If we feel that it is more important that we should pray than that we suffer to serve and save, then verily are we guilty. We are guilty of awful sin when worship fails to inspire service. If in coming to this house we have observed the duty of a day, and entered into the realm of rest, and there shall abide with us on the morrow no driving, inspiring impulse to rescue the perishing and care for the dying, then this hour of worship is the most disastrous instrument for hardening the human heart, deadening its emotion, destroying its spirituality. When slavery to the letter denies the spirit, when loyalty to the sanctity undermines the sanctions, then are we guilty of the very sin of these rulers.

In the measure in which we are guilty, Christ's attitude toward us is the same as was His attitude toward these rulers. He is grieved, He is angry, He is already on the threshold, leaving the synagogue; and we can recall Him only as we consent to violate professional regularity in the interest of the compassion of the Kingdom of God.

I pray that this great truth, burning, scorching, arresting the soul, may flame before us in the midst of all our worship. Not to minister, even to our own highest spiritual need, does this building exist; or, if it do, then verily it is a sepulcher; but for the sake of the man with the withered hand, for the sake of the man with the withered heart, for the sake of the man with the withered soul, paralyzed, incompetent, undone, that we may help, heal, remake; and to that end and that end alone Christ abides in the midst.