**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 07 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE POWERS OF THE PRESENCE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. And what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.*

*Matthew 18:18-20*

THESE THREE VERSES CONSTITUTE AN INCIDENTAL STATEMENT by our Lord of essential truths concerning His Church. After the confession of Peter He revealed two secrets to His disciples, that of the Church and that of the Cross. Prior to the experience at Caesarea Philippi He had never referred to His Church, neither had He spoken specifically of His Cross.

The Church, according to that first revelation, was to be at once His building, embodying the principles of the Kingdom; His army, at war with all opposing forces; and His witness, holding the keys of the Kingdom as the interpreter of His ethic to the world.

The Cross, according to that earliest explicit statement, was by the appointment of God, Jesus' way through suffering and death to resurrection, and, consequently, to the place of full and final authority.

Both these secrets were arresting and amazing, and their influence is discernible in all Jesus' subsequent dealings with His disciples. It was in the midst of instructions in this atmosphere, on the subject of forgiveness of sins, that is, human forgiveness of sins, that our Lord made the statements which constitute our text. I deliberately take them from the context, because they are complete within themselves. I do not propose to show the bearing of these statements on the subject which our Lord was dealing with at the moment, but to consider them themselves. Taken in the order of their utterance, you will observe that they consist, first, of two declarations of power vested in the Church, and, second, of a revelation of the secret and nature of that power.

The words are very familiar, and therefore it is all the more necessary that we observe them carefully. This is one of those familiar passages which we read through quickly, imagining that we know them; and we do know them, and yet, because of our easy reading of them, we may miss the things which are of supreme importance in them. In order to understand this teaching of our Lord, we must observe the interrelation between the statements. There are, first, two distinct statements concerning powers vested in the Church, and these culminate in, and are completed by, our Lord's revelation of the secret of these powers.

Each of the first two declarations is introduced by a phrase arresting attention. First, "Verily I say unto you"; and then, "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Second, "Again I say unto you," and then "if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven."

But to take those two statements apart from that which follows will be to misinterpret them. We must link them with that which follows, which is introduced by a word relating the final declaration to the first two: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them."

So that we have - and thus we may divide our meditation - first, a revelation of the twofold power of the Christian Church in the two declarations, and a revelation of the secret of that power in the affirmation concerning His perpetual presence within the Church, when the Church is fulfilling the conditions laid down. Even at the risk of wearying you, I emphasize the importance of noticing the three declarations, and how they are linked to each other. First He said, "Verily I say unto you," arresting attention by that particular formula. Then, in order that He might note the fact that He was about to say something beyond that which He had already said, He again arrested attention by the words: "A gain I say unto you," and then He made the second declaration. Finally He introduced His last statement by the word "For," showing that there is no meaning in either of the earlier declarations apart from the final one.

Let us first consider our Lord's teaching concerning the two powers vested in the Christian Church. These again must be seen in their interrelationship. As a matter of fact, in this wonderful passage our Lord passed from that which is manifest and external to that which, in the life of the Church, is secret and hidden; and, finally, to that which is the deepest and profoundest matter.

The manifest and external power is that the Church is to be the interpreter in the world of His ethic, that the business of the Church is to set up the moral standards for the ordering of human life, and to do that by revealing to men what God's will is concerning them. Now, in order to fulfil that, the Church must herself be familiar with the place where the secrets are discovered; and so He passed from that which is external and manifest to that which is secret, the power of prayer vested in the Church.

With regard to the first power, in order clearly to apprehend our Lord's meaning we must free our minds from false prejudices concerning the statement, "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." As we read the verse today we are in danger of being in bondage to certain false ideas concerning its meaning. If only we could hear the words as they were heard by the men to whom they were first said, I think many of us would be startled, because the simple meaning of the words would be so self-evident, and would be so different from meanings which we have associated with them. Let me say broadly - not to discuss the subject at any length - that when our Lord uttered these words to His first disciples they would not convey to the disciples the slightest suggestion that He was conferring on them anything in the nature of sacerdotal power. Gradually the idea of binding and loosing has been transferred from things to persons, and all unconsciously we read the verse as though our Lord had said something quite different, as though He had said, "Whomsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whomsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven," as though He had conferred on the disciples some power by which they should hold men in bondage to their own sins, or set them loose from the responsibility accruing from their sins. There is a certain sense in which that is true. There is a teaching of our Lord that reveals the fact that He has conferred on His people in the exercise of their ministry the power to declare sins forgiven or retained; but that is not the subject in this statement. Here the consequences of sins are not in view. Rather, the thought is of the determination of what sin is. It is the setting up of a standard. As I have said, if only we could have heard these words uttered we would have understood as the disciples did. These were the common phrases of the hour: to bind, to loose. They were the phrases of the scribes, who were the moral interpreters of the age. The literature of the time abounds in illustrations. Great masters or rabbis were set over against each other in ethical discussion. This man binds such and such a matter, while this man looses it. The meaning of the phrase was that according to this man's interpretation, we may do thus and so, and, according to that man's interpretation, we may not do thus and so. Binding and loosing were words used in the common speech of the times, and we can understand our Lord's words only as we understand the meaning in that sense.

Briefly, then, what does the statement mean? That what the Church allows morally, ethically, is allowed, that what the Church forbids morally, ethically, is forbidden; that in human life the Church's responsibility to her Lord is to interpret to men the law of God, to set up the moral standards. Her business is to enunciate the law, to determine standards, and in hours of crisis to decide questions.

However, let me immediately draw attention to what that really means. What is this authority of which He was speaking? Was He telling these men that they might sit down in council, to discuss together whether or not men might do certain things? By no means. "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven," and why? Because these men would voice the will of heaven. What they bound on earth would be bound in heaven, and what they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven, because originally these things were bound in heaven or loosed in heaven. The Church is not to discuss, not to attempt to formulate, but to express the law of heaven, the will of God, the ethic of eternity, in its application to the activities of time. The Church is to be the medium by which the will of God for man shall be known, shall be declared, shall be proclaimed, and that as to the standards of conduct and in the determination of questions as they may arise. But all the Church's decisions and determinations are of no value if they result merely from her discussions. They are valuable only as she is the voice of the good and perfect and acceptable will of God.

Therefore, the reading of this verse necessitates a warning. It is a most perilous verse if taken out of its connection. If today there should arise some new section of the Christian Church, which, basing its authority on this passage, should proceed to discuss the whole question of moral standards in order to give their opinion as to what men ought, or ought not to do in individual, social, and national life, forgetting that they have neither vision to see, nor right to affirm, nor power to enforce, save as this final thing is true in experience, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst," the result would indeed be disastrous.

Now, let us suggest an inquiry. How far has the Church of God this power today? No mere expression of my opinion would be of any value. I suggest, therefore, a simple test for your thoughtful consideration. Whenever in past history the Church of God has enunciated the ethic of heaven for the government of life in the world, one result has followed - or shall I be more accurate if I say, an alternative of result has followed? - men have obeyed, or they have opposed definitely and positively. Wherever the Church has lost the power to speak the actual will of God to the age, then though she has spoken her own thought, her own opinion, attempting to foist on humanity her own conceptions of what humanity ought or ought not to do, what has been the result? Absolute indifference. The Church addresses itself to the age as to the moralities of individual life, and the age is amused and goes its own way. The voice of the Church is heard speaking in the presence of great crises, but those who in the conflict are not listening to what the Church has to say. Is that so? If so, it is because somehow the Church has lost, her power to speak the veritable Word of God. I do not say that if the Church shall speak the Word of God, and enunciate the law of heaven to men, they will obey. I do say they will either obey or fight. Look back over the history of the Church. Every hour of ethical revival resulting from her ministry has been an hour of conflict and persecution, as well as an hour of reformation, remaking, and restarting of the true inspirations of human life. The terror of today is this, that we are not heard, that we are not noticed. Men care nothing about what we bind. They do not ask to know what we loose.

Let us pass now to the second of these declarations of our Lord. Here we are coming inside the Church. Let us prepare ourselves to hear these words of Jesus without any reservation; for if in the first case we have been in danger at least of reading into the words of Jesus values which they were never intended to contain, in the second case we have been strangely in danger of reading out of them values that lie within them. These words of our Lord are most remarkable words. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven." How many of us believe that? In general terms, we of the Christian faith and the Christian name immediately say, Of course we all believe it. But do I believe it? I challenge my own soul. With all reverence let me put this statement of the Master in another form. This is what the Lord said, If the desires of two expressed to the Father symphonize, sound together, about anything, it shall be done, generated, caused to be.

The things Jesus said about prayer are stupendous. In this word concerning the power of prayer vested in the Church two spheres are recognized: two of you on earth, My Father which is in heaven - the material and the spiritual, the things of which the senses may be conscious, the supreme spiritual fact that the senses may never discover. Notice again the contrast of persons, "two of you," "My Father." Notice, finally, the related activity: the two symphonizing in desire and in petition, the One causing the things to be for the two desiring. That is the picture. Whether that is scientific or not, I will postpone the discussion for a hundred years, because we shall know more about these things then. I am not at all eager to know whether this is true according to philosophy or science. It is true according to Jesus: two, their desires symphonizing, sounding together; One, the Father Who is in heaven, doing what the two desire. That is the power of prayer.

Here, again, a word of warning is needed. This is a most perilous verse if taken out of its connection, and we do not discover the real meaning of our Lord if we read it alone. We may build on it every form of heresy concerning prayer. We may imagine that this teaching is that if any two of us want something, and we agree together, we may get it straight-way. That is not in the statement. We must read on: "because where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them," His presence in the midst conditions the desiring, inspires the asking, and produces the answer.

Let us pause again for inquiry. How far has the Church this power today? What do we really know about symphony of desire expressed to our Father in the consciousness that the Lord Himself is in the midst? Sometimes I have made my protest against attempting to measure the strength of a church by the number attending the prayer meeting, and I know full well that a large number does not constitute a prayer meeting; but I know also that the number of absences reveals weakness on the part of those who are not there. If preaching is enough, then our Lord was mistaken. If multiplied organizations are what the Church needs, then He was entirely blind, for He gave no instructions as to the multiplication of organizations. He said if things are to be done, God must do them, and God will do them when you know how to ask Him. That is brutal and vulgar language as compared to the exquisite and beautiful language of the Lord, but that is what He meant.

If our moral influence is lost it is because we are not making use of our spiritual resources. If the world is indifferent to us when we talk of things that ought to be, and that ought not to be, it is because we are attempting to touch the restless, rushing world and arrest it, while we ourselves are suffering from the same fever of restlessness and rushing, and know nothing of the dynamic forces that are generated in the place of fellowship and prayer.

And so we pass lastly to our Lord's revelation of the secret of power in these two matters. If we are to have that ethical authority that binds and looses, commands attention and creates obedience or opposition; if we are to have that spiritual power that enables us in agreement of desire and expression to ask, and thus to produce, how is it all to be done? And we come to the final statement, in a few moments to reconsider it. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." Mark the place, mark the conditions, but supremely observe the presence.

The place, and the glory of this statement of our Lord is in its dealing with place. I can indicate it for you exactly in two words: "where … there." They signify exclusion and inclusion.

The exclusion of all special places. Walls are demolished. "See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Veils are rent in twain, places are all superseded. Where? Not in Jerusalem, not in Mount Gerizim, not in St. Peter's at Rome, not in Westminster Abbey, not in Westminster Chapel. Oh yes, in all of them, but in none of them! The where of Jesus is universal, cosmopolitan, inclusive as well as exclusive.

As I sat and thought of this morning's matter my mind went back over my own life, and some very simple incidents came back to me. I went back to the days of youth on the Cotswold Hills and to rambles with one friend. We walked and talked, and we came to a stile, and there we halted. The fields were all around us, and no one else was near. There we two sat and talked of our Lord and of our Master, and then together, gathered in the Name, we prayed. There was a Third, "I am in the midst."

Then I remembered how, when I began to preach, I was conducting special services in Yorkshire, and some miners told me it was easy to preach, but that it was a different thing to cut coal. And so I went down with them and cut my stint all day long in a Yorkshire coal pit. Going along the workings, I suddenly came to a siding, and I heard a man say, Hallelujah! He was a Methodist. I paused a moment, and went in to that working, and two or three of us had a few minutes' talk, and we prayed there for the meeting to be held that night, and for someone whom they were anxious about. There down in the depths of the earth, three miners paused, for a moment, and a mission preacher prayed. There were the two or three gathered together, and the Lord was in the midst, and in the mine was the place of worship, and present were the priest, the altar, the sacrifice, the right of prayer, the power of prayer. There was generated the dynamic force that moves toward the coming of the Kingdom. Coming home from America on board a great liner with George Macgregor, one sunset evening, at the end of the boat, we talked of the things of the Master, and, our conversation merging into prayer, we knew the Presence, the real Presence.

Where? There! In the cottage, in the conventicle, in citadel, in the church, in the cathedral. Not because these places have been officially set apart, but because they are consecrated by the two or the three gathered in the name.

But in these words of the Lord we have also the revelation of conditions. First as to number, two or three. There is definiteness and indefiniteness. Definite, two, the smallest gathering possible. You cannot have a gathering of one. You cannot be a church by yourself, my dear friend. A good many men would like to be. There must be two; this promise is not for the individual. Oh, thank God, there are gracious promises for the individual, I am not saying that I cannot pray alone. Our Lord was more insistent on private prayer than even on the fellowship of prayer. In the Old and the New Testaments the individual promises are many, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word." That is a great promise for the individual. But this refers to a gathering, an assembly, a fellowship, a koinonia. Two, there must be a definite meeting.

Then observe the indefiniteness of it. Two or three: units or tens, or hundreds, or thousands; it does not at all matter.

But what is the principle? In My Name! The more one ponders this word of the Lord, the more marvelous does it become in its mystic quantities, as well as in its clear and definite pronouncement. "In My name," quite literally, into My name. The phrase includes the thought of coming unto the name, and passing into the name, and consequently being in the name. It was in order that we might understand the phrase, "In My name," that we read those two passages, one in Matthew, and one in Philippians. They are the two great passages about the name "Jesus." I take those two passages, and I ask, What do they reveal to me? Jesus, according to the angelic prophecy, signifies His power to save His people from their sins. According to the apostle's teaching, God has given Him that name, "that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess." Then the two thoughts associated with the name are those of purity and authority. Purity not merely demanded, but communicated; He shall save from sins. Authority exercised: He is Lord of all.

What, then, is to be gathered into His name? To be gathered into His name is to receive His salvation, and to be made pure. To be gathered into His name is to submit to His authority, and to be ruled absolutely by Him. Now, give me two men, or a man and a woman, or two women, or two little children, who are gathered in His name, who have yielded themselves to Him, that He may make them pure, who have yielded themselves to Him that He may master them; where such are so gathered, He says, there am I. That is the Church.

Gathered, or led together, suggests the idea that some attracting power brings these people together. It is the attractive power of the Lord, interpreted to the mind of man through the ministry of the Spirit. So disciples are gathered together.

Thus we come to the great central truth: "There am I in the midst." Oh, if we could but see that picture, two or three gathered, and the Lord in the midst. Who was the Speaker? A little while before He had said, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" The Son of man was the Speaker! And immediately He was answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"; and He answered, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father." The Speaker was the Son of God! Son of man, on the level of the two and the three; Son Of God, identified with the Father. Son of man, on the earth; Son of God, in the bosom of the Father in heaven.

Now we see how that affects the other subjects. How does it affect this matter of prayer? If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything it shall be done for them of My Father, for I am in the midst of the two or three gathered in My name. First He is in the midst of those gathered, creating their symphony of desire and of asking. Second, He is in the midst, co-operating with the doing of the Father in giving. If these things be true, then the matter of supreme importance is that we get to prayer.

How does that affect the declaration concerning ethical authority? What you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, what you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, because I am in the midst, interpreting to you heaven's will, and so enunciating through you the true law for earthly conduct.

These, my brethren are high Church doctrines. These are the doctrines of our Lord Himself; and it is because we have so largely lost them, and have indulged in vaunting and boasting about a freedom that lacks the true spiritual note, that the world does not listen to us when we talk about binding and loosing.

Are we conscious of weakened powers in prevailing prayer? Then our first responsibility is that of gathering together in the name anew; and we must do so by the appropriation of His purity, by the way of His salvation, and by submitting to His authority, that in us the Kingdom may be established.

In proportion as He is King of my life and Lord of my salvation, in that proportion am I ready for the gathering together with other people of like loyalty to the Lord. Where there is such gathering together with the Lord in the midst we have the true place of prayer, and we hear the true voice of God.

If that first responsibility be fulfilled, then our consequent responsibilities are those of exercising the powers created, both in the practice of prayer and in the proclamation of the law, that through us our Lord may carry on His ministry and win His victories.