**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 20 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE VINE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for severed from Me ye can do nothing.*

*John 15:5*

THESE WORDS ARE AMONG THE MOST SIMPLE, THE MOST SUBLIME and the most solemn which ever fell from the sacred lips of our adorable Redeemer. They were spoken to a small group of men who at the moment were alert with the fear of the approaching departure of their Lord. Where He was going they could not tell, but He had told them again and again that He was about to leave them, and that the pathway of His pilgrimage was overshadowed by clouds, and the method of His going must be that of suffering. These men were listening to Him in the quiet and subduing influences of the night.

The words were spoken, not at the commencement of Jesus' training of the twelve, but at its close. So far as His own mission was concerned, the words of the paschal discourses were resultant words, words into which He gathered all the emphases of His teaching, words in which, as in the case of our text, He uttered inclusive and exhaustive claims. If they were resultant so far as His own teaching was concerned, they were preparatory in view of what the disciples were called to do in the world.

We should remember, further, that these words of our text occur in the latter part of the paschal discourses, after the disciples had been at least hushed into silence and solemnity. The first part of Jesus' teaching on this occasion was broken in upon by the questions and objections, aspirations and difficulties, of perplexed and puzzled men. Peter, "Whither goest Thou? … Why cannot I follow Thee. even now?" Thomas, "We know not whither Thou goest; how know we the way?" Philip, "Shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Jude, How is it that "Thou wilt manifest Thyself unto us, and not unto the world?"

At last the questions were hushed, and the men were still. Then He spoke of the mystery of the coming union between themselves and Himself, and that principally in order to teach them, not the privileges that would accrue to them as the result of the union, but the responsibilities that would rest on them in view thereof.

Often our exposition of the teaching concerning that responsibility has been too narrow in that we have dwelt altogether too exclusively on the personal aspects of this particular text, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." Almost invariably in our exposition of this great teaching of Jesus we have dwelt on the joy and glory of being members of Christ as branches are members of the vine. We have thought of what that means to us in the way of abounding life and intimate relationships. These things are all true, but they do not constitute the final truth; they do not reveal the ultimate meaning of this allegory of our Lord. We have rejoiced in the resources which the figure suggests, and have altogether too largely forgotten the responsibilities which it reveals.

Therefore let me ask you to consider with me, first, the figure of which the Lord made use; second, the use which the Lord made of the figure, and that in order that we may come to a practical application of the teaching.

First, then, the figure of which our Lord made use. It is difficult to read the chapter without wondering where the Lord said these things. The fourteenth chapter of this gospel ends with the words, "Arise, let us go hence." There can be no doubt in the mind of any natural, simple reader of the narrative that at that point they left the upper room where the earlier part of these discourses had been delivered. Where did they go? It may be that they passed from the upper room, down through the street of the city, and out through its gates across the Kedron toward Gethsemane. If so, possibly on their way they would see the vines growing on the mountain slopes, and in the darkness of the night the fires of the vine dressers, in which withered and dead branches bearing no fruit were burned. Or it may be that they left the upper room and found their way to the great temple, for the Passover period was approaching, and at that time the priests opened the gates of the temple immediately after midnight that worshipers might pass into the courts. At that time the chief and distinctive glory of the temple gate was that of the golden vine, the symbol of Israel. One wonders whether, as Jesus used this figure, they with Him were looking at the actual vine on the mountain side, all gnarled, and showing marks of the knife provocative of fruit, and on the fires lit for the destruction of fruitless branches; or whether, perchance, in the hallowed and sacred courts of the temple they saw the glorious symbol of the national life on the gates.

Whether here or there matters little. That which is of supreme importance and to which I ask your most special attention is that when Jesus commenced this discourse with the words, "I am the true vine," He was not using a figure of speech that was new, but one which was perfectly familiar to the men who listened to Him. It is in order that we may understand the word of Jesus, so far as is possible, as the men understood it who first heard it, that I read that somewhat long selection of Scriptures, first the song of the ancient psalmist concerning the vine which God had brought out of Egypt and planted in His own vineyard, that marvelous description of its planting, and then of its ruthless destruction, until the sigh and sob of the singer became a prayer for its restoration in the economy of God. Then the two figures of the vine in the prophecy of Isaiah, the first telling of its failure, "He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes … He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry"; the second, the song that tells of restoration in the day of God, the song of a watered garden in which the vine grows, and over which God watches in infinite patience and care. Next in the prophecy of Jeremiah, that wonderful word, so rich in suggestion, "I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto Me?" Thus the figure of the vine runs through the Old Testament teaching; it was the method of the singer of the song, it was the figure of the utterer of the prophecy, and it was always used in relation to God's ancient people. The vine to the Hebrew was the nation of God.

In the New Testament, we find the Lord exercising His ministry among these very people and at last coming to that solemn and culminating hour, when, in Jerusalem, by parables He compelled the rulers to find a verdict against themselves and to pass sentences upon themselves. The last of these parables was that of the vineyard, the vine, and the men who were responsible for the vine in the vineyard. He asked them, What will the possessor do to these men who have failed to send him the fruit for which He asks? They, caught by the wizardry of His method, passed sentence upon themselves, "He will miserably destroy those miserable men." Then in august and awful dignity He pronounced doom on the nation which had been the vine of God as He said, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

The vine was ever the figure of Israel as the instrument elect for service; its fruit was to fill the whole earth. The vine of Jehovah was not a pleasant plant in His vineyard on which fruit should grow to be consumed for the maintenance of its own life; it was not even to be a precious vine on which should grow fruit which should give satisfaction to the heart of the One Who possessed it; the vine was to be that on which fruit should grow that should fill the whole earth; its fruit was intended for the world. That was the purpose of the creation of the ancient people of God. Seers, singers, psalmists, prophets understood this. They consistently taught that on His vine should grow clusters of fruit that should be for the benefit of the wide world: righteousness and judgment, equity and truth, mercy, love, beneficence; healing for all wounds, rest for weariness, the wine of the Kingdom of God for the gladdening of the heart of humanity. That was the purpose of God in the creation of His ancient people.

After Jesus had thus pronounced doom on the nation because it had failed to bring forth these fruits, He gathered His disciples about Him and said, "I am the true vine." Thus He carried over the figure of the ancient economy into the new. Among all the claims He made, none, in some senses, is quite so wonderful as this. With the songs and voices and messages of the past in their minds, He said to these men, "I am the true vine." By that word He assumed the responsibility that Israel had failed to fulfil. God had made of Israel a nation for the blessing of humanity, and it had failed. He had planted a vine whose fruit was to fill the whole earth, and behind them lay the history of its persistent and perpetual failure. Now standing in the presence of unutterable, final failure, upon which He Himself had been compelled to pronounce doom, He said, "I am the true vine." Among His own disciples He claimed that He had come to fulfill that in which the ancient people of God had failed.

What, then, had He come to do? To bear fruit, the fruit of righteousness and of judgment in all the affairs of the world. Listen to the keynote of the preaching of His herald, "Repent ye; for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Listen to the keynote of His own preaching, "Repent ye; for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Listen to the great word of Paul on Mars Hill when he said to the listening Athenians, God "hath appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He hath ordained." That was not a reference to the final day of judgment, the great assize when sentences are pronounced; it was a reference to the reign of right in the world. Our Lord, standing among the disciples, said, "I am the true vine," I am here for the fulfilling of the Divine purpose; from Me shall come the fruit that shall be for the healing of the world, and the satisfaction of its need; through My ministry righteousness and truth shall prevail, and humanity shall find the meeting of its need in the Kingdom of God. "I am the true vine."

If that were all then we should wonder and adore; but that does but introduce us to our text. "I am the vine, ye are the branches."

Are we not at least inclined to think that our Lord said, I am the main stem of the vine, that through which the life forces rise, and ye are the branches? As a matter of fact, He said nothing of the kind. He said, "I am the vine," What is the vine? The root, the main stem, the branches, the tendrils, the leaves, the fruit. The vine is the vine, the whole of it. The vine is not complete in its branches. The vine is not merely the root, out of sight. The vine is not merely the main stem up which the life forces pass to the uttermost reaches of the last and most delicate tendril. The vine is everything. That is the first amazing revelation of this figure of speech. Jesus said, "I am the vine." By that figure of speech He taught the incorporation with Himself of all believing souls, in vital, intimate union. "Ye are the branches." The branches are part of the vine. These men to whom He spoke were members of Himself, in new and mystic fashion, to be consummated presently by the baptism of the Spirit. Speaking allegorically and prophetically of that which presently was to be perfected by the way of His passion, resurrection, and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, He said, "I am the vine; ye are the branches"; that is, ye are parts of Myself, united to Me in a union so close and definite that I am incomplete apart from you, as you are incomplete apart from Me. As our Lord said in this particular text, "Severed from Me ye can do nothing," so, with reverent and almost awful sense of the solemnity of the fact, it is true that Christ stood there in the midst of the twelve, and said, in effect, Apart from you I can do nothing. Severed from you I cannot produce the fruit for which God has long been waiting! Severed from Me ye cannot produce the fruit for which the world is waiting! United with Me, and I united with you, then "I am the vine; ye are the branches," parts and members of Myself; and in that vine, that new and mystic entity in human history, consisting of Christ in union with His people, fruit shall grow that is to fill the whole world and glorify God. "I am the vine; ye are the branches."

Yet, if the figure is one that reveals the vital and intimate union between Christ and His people for the purpose of fruit-bearing, the whole teaching of the passage shows that continuity of relationship between Christ and men is dependent on their bearing this very fruit. "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit, He taketh it away," casteth it out to be burned. If the initial fact of union is of the grace of God, the continuity of union is dependent on the realization of the purpose of God.

It is not the burden of my message to you this evening to dwell on the personal advantages that accrue from this union with Christ. I know how fascinating the theme is, how full of value it is. Oh that we may remember it for the encouragement of our aspirations after good, and our seekings after holiness. Abiding in Him I have all resources for the perfecting of that character of holiness which expresses itself in righteousness. That, however, is not the ultimate value of the story. In this great figure of the vine Christ has revealed the fact that the purpose of the Church of God is bearing that fruit for which the world is waiting in its sickness, its sins, and its miseries. I am a worthy member of Christ only as I am a branch from which fruit is plucked for the benefit of the outside world. The life of the believer is the life of Christ by the ministry of the Spirit of God; and the ministry of the Spirit of God in the world, our Lord clearly defined in this same discourse, in the words, "He, when He is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and referring first to that which wounds and of judgment," wearies and blasts the world, sin; referring, second, to this very fruit which the prophets had described, righteousness and judgment, "He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry." Said Jesus, When the Spirit of truth is come, He "will convict the world" concerning these things, and reveal to the world that all these things are to be dealt with through Christ, that the sin that ultimately blasts and damns is the sin of rejecting Christ, "of sin, because they believe not on Me"; that the possibility of righteousness comes through the finished work of Christ, "of righteousness, because I go to the Father"; that judgment in the economy of God is already accomplished by the way of the passion of Christ, "of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged." Thus Jesus taught them that the Spirit of God Who was coming to be their Paraclete, their Comforter, their Advocate, was coming, not for their sakes alone, but for the sake of the world, that the world might be brought to the truth concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Thus we understand that by His use of this figure, Christ was saying, in effect, to these men, the Spirit will be able to bear His witness to the world only through the members of My Church. The Spirit is able to fulfil His ministry in the world only by bringing men into actual vital association with Christ, and by revealing through them what He is. He is the vine; in Him is all the fruit for which the world is waiting; but it can grow only on the branches; only through the branches grafted into Him and sharing His life can righteousness and judgment be given to the world.

This teaching reacts on the soul like a veritable fire. What shame, what wrong, what tragedy if a branch, if such a thing be conceivable, shall grow clusters of grapes containing the wine of the Kingdom of God, and consume them on itself for the enrichment of its own life. There can be no selfishness so devilish as the selfishness of the man who takes whatever comes to him from Christ, and fails to hand it on to other men. There can be no failure in the world so disastrous as that of receiving into the soul all the light and love and life of God by the bruising and the dying of the Son of God, and expending the sacred virtues and values on one's own spiritual condition, "I am the vine; ye are the branches." The purpose is fruit for the world. These words of our Lord, if most tender and gentle, are yet the most severe of all He uttered, as He teaches in this allegory that if there be a branch that fails to bear fruit for the world it is to be cut out of the vine and cast away.

For the fruit of the Son of God incarnate, for the rightness of His life, for the judgment of His mind, for the mercy of His heart, for the high ideals of His example, for the wondrous dynamic of His passion, for these the world is waiting; all the peoples that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, are waiting for the Vine of God, and for the fruit that grows therefrom.

Do we understand what this means? In order that the need of the world may be satisfied, the branches are responsible for abiding in the vine, for the maintenance of that relationship with Christ that shall issue inevitably in bearing fruit. Herein is revealed the profound malady of the Christian Church. Here is the reason why we are almost wearied to death with appeals from missionary societies for help. I know exactly the feeling that comes to you when the last appeal of some society reaches you through the post. You fling it down with weariness, and say in actual words again and again, Always these appeals, always these appeals! Why are there always these appeals? Simply because in the vine there are thousands of branches fruitless, withered, not abiding in Christ, not responsive to the propulsion of His life, limiting Him by refusing to allow His great life to sweep through all the soul and have its ultimate and final expression.

When first we saw the vision of the Christ there was the sense of allurement, and we went after Him with the flush of hope on the cheek, the flash of a fine endeavor in the eye; we were heroic and sacrificial, ready Crusaders.

How was it that we lost our first love? Because at some point we became calculating. When the call of Christ was to new heroism, and fresh sacrifice, and larger abandonment, we held back and refused; we began to argue that it was mere emotionalism, and as we stifled emotionalism we quenched the Spirit of the living God, and did despite to the tender emotions of the heart of Christ. That is the story of our failure.

Go through these discourses again and listen to the teaching of the Lord, and attempt to apprehend His outlook on the world. He saw the true order, and He saw the chaos. Listen, as you listen to Him, for the thrill of passion vibrating through His voice, the passion of a great love, the passion of a fierce anger. Observe Him, the Waster, the Destroyer of all that blights humanity; and observe Him the Builder, the Constructor of the city of God. Observe the vision of the Christ, see with His eyes; share the passion of the Christ, feel with His heart; watch the mission of the Christ and be with Him.

"I am the vine; ye are the branches." Then, if branches, we must be of the vine, and allow the life of the vine to master us, the purpose at the heart of the vine to inspire us, and the method of the vine dresser to have victory over us. Is it not in these things that we have failed?

What did He charge these men as to responsibility? He charged them that in order to maintain fellowship two things were always necessary: first, prayer, and, second, abiding in Him.

When reading this fifteenth chapter have you never felt there was somehow a break in the continuity at a certain point? Does it not seem for a moment as though the rhythm of the method of the teaching is broken in upon? Let me show you what I mean. "I am the vine; ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for apart from Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be generated for you." It is there that it seems as though there were a break in the continuity. Why introduce this word about prayer at that point? When you ponder long enough you will discover that the introduction of prayer at that point was essential to the argument. It was a revelation of the true place of prayer in the life of the believer. Let me put it, almost brutally, by saying, Prayer is not a trick by which we get something for ourselves! Prayer is a method by which we abide in such relationship with the vine that we produce something for the world. Prayer is inspired by passion for the Kingdom of God. Prayer is the branches desiring and demanding the life of the vine in order that they may bear fruit according to the nature and purpose of the vine. Prayer is the soaring of the soul to the height of perfect compliance with the will of God, the consuming of the soul with the passion for doing the will of God. The first operation of prayer in the economy of God, therefore, is not demand for what I need, but for what the world needs. In the pattern prayer mark the revelation of method: First, Give us this day our daily bread? No, a thousand times no! First, "Our Father, Who art in heaven. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is the highest plane of prayer. The first law of fruit-bearing is that of prayer which asks for yet more abundant life, for the mastery of the soul by the life of God revealed in the Son of God, and communicated by His Spirit. Dare we pray for that? If we dare to pray in that spirit tonight what will happen tomorrow? I cannot tell. It may be that if some of you begin to pray in that spirit, ere four and twenty hours have passed over your heads you will have abandoned your prospects, stepped out of the profession that is so full of hope, and given yourself to some dark lone corner of the world to pour out your life in sacrifice. Prayer asks for fulness of life that fruit may be manifest; asks for that purging of God that shall make life more abundant!

Once more to utter the thing already said, to abide in Christ is the secret of fruitfulness. How are we to abide in Christ? There are two most simple things I will say. First, abiding consists in the cessation of effort. The one thing you do not need in order to abide anywhere is strength. Weakness is the condition for abiding. I can abide in this pulpit for hours without putting forth any strength. I need strength to get out of it, not to abide in it. Do not be afraid of the homeliness of the figure. I have found Christian people strenuously striving to abide in Christ, and by their very effort separating their souls from Him. Rest in Him, abandon yourself to Him, that He may have His Way.

To abide means cessation of our effort, and it means the acceptation of His effort, relaxing all the life to the Lord Christ and letting His life have right of way. That is abiding in Him.

This does not necessarily mean perpetual, constant consciousness of Christ. It does mean when His voice speaks, we hear; that when He looks, we see; that when He beckons, we go; that when He commands, we act. In order to win the world He is waiting for that kind of obedience.

"Apart from Me ye can do nothing." There is no vision, no passion, no mission apart from Christ. All the failure of interest and effort in regard to missionary work results from poverty of life. The things which sever, what are they? In the unity of the vine, schism. In the individual branches, selfishness and sin. What is the remedy for all missionary failure? Not demonstration, not literature, not raising of funds. What, then, is the cure? Life, more life.

The vine from every living limb bleeds wine;

Is it the poorer for that spirit shed?

Measure thy life by loss instead of gain;

Not by the wine drunk, but by the wine poured forth;

For Love's strength standeth in Love's sacrifice;

And whoso suffers most hath most to give.