**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 25 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE WAYTO THE ALTAR by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*If, therefore, thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

*Matthew 5:23,24*

THESE WORDS ARE FOUND IN THE MANIFESTO OF THE KING, and constitute part of the section safeguarding the sacredness of human life. After the enunciation of fundamental principles of character and influence, and the value of law in itself, that Manifesto contains the new laws of the Kingdom conditioning earthly and heavenly relationships. The laws of earthly relationships deal first with the foundations of society, forbidding murder and adultery; then with the pillars of society, insisting on truth and justice.

The sacredness of human life is recognized, and murder is forbidden. The method of the King in the enunciation of His ethic was to put His own commandment into contrast with that of the old economy, not abrogating it, but fulfilling it. In the old economy the word of the law, definitely, sternly, simply, forbade the act of taking life: "Thou shalt do no murder." The new prevents the act by dealing with the mental attitudes which precede it. The King warned the subjects of the Kingdom against anger, for in that there is peril. Anger in the sense of intense displeasure may not meditate revenge at the moment, but it would rejoice if the one against whom it proceeds were to suffer. Yet sterner words fell from the King's lips in condemning contempt: "Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca," the supreme term of contempt, "shall be in danger of the council," that is, citation before the whole Sanhedrin. But if a man shall say to his brother, "Thou fool," the language of malice, of insult with intention to wound, then the only fit punishment for such as he is that he be taken outside the city walls and cast into Gehenna, the place of refuse and of burning in order to destroy it. The severity of the ethic is apparent. Yet the tenderness of the ethic is equally apparent. Under the old law the sinner is arrested red-handed. Under the new law he is arrested because of those attitudes of the soul which, unless they be held in check, canceled, made not to be, may eventuate in the act of murder. All this is tremendously searching, but the matter is not done with. Our Lord did not end at that point. This preliminary survey has been necessary in order that we may find the atmosphere of our text.

Let me ask you now carefully to observe in this text the word "therefore." "If, therefore, thou art offering thy gift at the altar ..." It would be manifestly unfair to take this text without recognizing its relationship to all that has gone before. It is impossible to read any text which is ushered in by the word "therefore" without inquiring, Wherefore? What, then, is the simple meaning of the text in its first application? Because these mental moods of anger and contempt and malice are forbidden, therefore, if any man has given his brother occasion for such moods he is to act at once so as to remove them. If thou art angry with thy brother, thou art in danger of judgment; if thou shalt say to him, Raca, in contempt, thou art in danger of judgment before a higher tribunal; if thou shalt say to him, Thou fool, thou art refuse socially, fit only for destruction. Then turning to the brother man, Jesus said: Therefore, if when thou art coming to the altar thou rememberest thy brother has something against thee which may inspire a feeling of anger, contempt, or malice in his breast, go and be reconciled to him, not for thy sake only, but for his sake, lest he become guilty of sin. That is the first application of the text. We shall return to it in the course of our meditation.

Realizing this to be the first application, we may consider its wider reaches as they include the subject of restitution and reparation in their relation to our acceptance with God.

We shall observe three things in these words of Jesus: first, a supposition, "If, therefore, thou art offering thy gift at the altar and there rememberest ..." Second, the clear, definite, imperative command of the Lord: "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother." Thirdly, and finally, the gracious, ultimate welcome: "Then come and offer thy gift."

In dealing, first of all, with the supposition I desire to remark that this was not a doubtful hypothesis; it was the recognition by our Lord of a fact not only generally experienced, but always experienced. Approach to the altar of God always quickens the activity of conscience: "If, therefore, thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee ..."

Let us think of this a little carefully. First, it is interesting to note our Lord's references to the altar. He never referred to the altar except here and on one other occasion, so far as the records reveal. The other occasion is found, interestingly enough, in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, wherein is chronicled that last terrific address of His in Jerusalem. Here we have the Manifesto introduced by beatitudes, "Blessed …"; there, in the last address, we have denunciation, with ringing, thrilling thunder, "Woe … woe ... woe …" In that first Manifesto, and in that last denunciation, our Lord referred to the altar. It is quite evident that He was making reference to an existing order and that the men who heard Him knew exactly what He meant. The whole religious symbolism of Hebraism was present to their minds. The picture suggested is the common one of a Hebrew man coming to the altar of God, bringing a gift. It will readily be admitted further that if our Lord made reference to the existing order He did so in harmony with the highest, deepest, spiritual intention of that order. It was not a mere passing reference to that which was external, spiritual, formal; it was a reference to that which was internal, spiritual, dynamic, to that true coming of man to the act and attitude of worship which was symbolized by the altar. The reason for reading as part of our lesson the passage from the Old Testament in which we find the first instructions ever given to the Hebrew people concerning the altar will immediately be seen. It is important to remember that those first instructions concerning the altar were given immediately after the enunciation of the decalogue containing the inclusive words of the law. After they had been pronounced, the people besought Moses that they should hear the voice of God no more, but that he alone should speak to them, so filled were they with fear. In answer to that request Moses declared that there was no cause for fear, that the purpose of God was good and gracious. Immediately following that, these simple instructions concerning the making of the altar were given. If an altar was made it must be of earth; or if of stone, of unhewn stone. It was to have no steps. All this was primitive and simple, but suggestive of tremendous spiritual necessities and principles. By the altar men were to be for ever reminded that their approach to God was not on the basis of their own ability or righteousness or cleverness. The altar must be of earth, the commonest material, or of unhewn stone, so that man should not glory in that by which he approached God which was of his own creation. There were to be no steps for the ascent to the altar of God - and mark the word - "that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon," a word unveiling the spiritual fact that if a man climb to an altar for his approach to God he reveals his nakedness and unpreparedness for approach. The altar suggested approach to God by man, and more, approach to man by God, for "in every place where I record My name I will come unto thee and I will bless thee."

The altar, moreover, was the place of sacrifice. Man approaching the altar was coming to God always recognizing, even though he might not be able to explain, the mystery of the whole fact, the necessity for approach by the way of sacrifice. We know how far these people wandered from spiritual comprehension, and remember how in the day of Christ they were almost blind to spiritual values; but when our Lord referred to the altar He was not a ritualist, He was not a formalist, He was referring to all that the altar stood for; man drawing near to God by the way of sacrifice. When He uttered the great word of the Manifesto, He already knew that the time would come when under the constraint of the Spirit, an inspired writer would write, "We have an altar"; that in Himself the way of fellowship was being provided, all the foreshadowed values were being fulfilled; that in Him man would find his way to God, as in Him God had found His way to man. In His Person and through His mission,

Grace comes down our souls to greet,

While glory crowns the Mercy-Seat!

With all this in mind, we listen to the supposition of the Lord. Coming to the altar is approach to God. Coming to the altar is coming to the hour and place of worship. Coming to the altar is finding our way into fellowship with God by means of mediation and sacrifice. Coming to the altar is the recognition of the sovereignty of God, of the supremacy of His will. Without any further argument, it is perfectly evident that coming to the altar produces recollection of any violation of that will. No man ever seriously draws near to the altar without remembering.

This is invariable, and it is inevitable. Let it be borne in mind that the wrong done, to whomsoever it was done, whensoever it was done, is fixed in the mind of the man who did it. There are forgotten things that are not forgotten. They are forgotten, I am not conscious of them now; but they are not forgotten, they are hidden away in my mind, covered over by other things. Some of you remember how Scott in Guy Mannering, in a very quaint way, refers to the disorderliness of some minds. He says that Dominie Sampson's mind was like "the magazine of a pawnbroker, stowed with goods of every description, but so cumbrously piled together, and in such total disorganization, that the owner can never lay his hands on any article at the moment he has occasion for it." There are minds like that. However orderly our minds may be, there are things buried away in it of which we are not conscious at the moment; but they are there. There is a little expression we often use in conversation and public speech: "Call to mind"; we all know the possibility of calling to mind. No wrong we have committed have we really forgotten; it is there, covered over, much to our own ease, guilty ease, perilous ease, dangerous ease; but it is there. When we approach the altar we remember. There is no need to go far for illustration. Thank God, we do not know each other's secrets, and thank God we need not unveil them to any human being; but in this very hour we have been remembering. One of Watts' greatest pictures is called "The Dweller in the In nermost." It is a representation of conscience, with a star on her forehead, with a trumpet and arrows lying on her knees. The outstanding wonder of the picture is the green, fiery eyes. Yes, but we forget her. We are unconscious of her eyes, and we do not hear her voice, and the trumpet and the arrows seem forevermore to lie on her lap. But when we approach the altar, she looks, and her glance searches us; she speaks, and with trumpet tongue; she acts, and those "arrows are sharp ... in the heart of the King's enemies." The dweller in the innermost is awakened when we draw near to the altar. This word of Jesus was not a rhetorical allusion, it was the recognition of a psychological activity of which everyone who really knows what it is to draw near to the altar of God is conscious. When men first come to the altar of God they remember sins of the past; and in every subsequent approach, if wrongs have been done, they are remembered. It is so whether we will or not. "O Lord, Thou hast searched me, and known me." It is desirable that it should be so, and if we really know our own hearts, the mystery of them, and the meaning of sin in its vileness and poison and power, then we shall cry out as did the psalmist:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me, and know my thoughts;

And see if there be any way of wickedness in me.

The supposition being considered, let us hear what the Lord says to a man in that moment when approaching the altar of God he remembers. "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother." That is the command. We may express all that the command means by saying that the activity of conscience which results from the approach to the altar must be the inspiration of immediate action. Observe with great care what is meant by these words. By them our Lord has revealed the fact that the altar never condones or cloaks sin. The altar is the way to purity, not an excuse for impurity. The intention of the altar is to loose from sin, not to hide it. If for a single moment we imagine that in our coming to Christ we come that sin may be hidden, we do not understand the meaning of Christ's mission.

The altar calls on man to co-operate with God to the utmost of his ability in this moral restoration. The very first value of the altar is that it reminds a man of his sin. The very first value of Christian worship is that it starts the activity of conscience, and compels men to think of the actuality of sin. The first value of Christ's presence in the world is not forgiveness, but conviction. In His presence men know sin. When men come toward God through Him they discover sin. One of the last things of religious and social significance that W. E. Gladstone said was that our age was suffering from a lowered sense of sin. I do not know what he would have said had he lived today! We often mourn that men seem to have no consciousness of sin. We are under the spell of certain pseudo-scientific attempts to deal with religion. When a modern scientist tells us that the intelligent man does not think about sin it is a most unintelligent statement. The intelligent man faces every fact of life, and sin is a fact from which there can be no escape. I say that the first value of man's presence before Christ is that he will know himself a sinner. Coming to the altar - for "we have an altar" - we remember the things of wrong, the things of evil.

A consequent value of the altar is that it absolutely refuses to harbor the man who is not prepared to co-operate to the utmost of his ability with God for his own moral restoration. "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother."

What, then, we inquire carefully and with solemnity, is man's utmost? What can a man do in this hour when conscience is awakened, when his whole life is suddenly arraigned before the penetrating awfulness of the eyes of his own conscience? He can do the thing he knows. That of which conscience has just spoken to him indicates his immediate and only responsibility. That one thing demands immediate action. Go to thy brother directly, immediately, without hesitation, crucifying pride; and, looking into his eyes, be reconciled to him. The one thing that conscience speaks of must be dealt with.

Look, I pray you, at the spiritual significance of all this. The man is seen leaving his gift, and leaving the altar. Geographically, he is traveling from it; but the near way to all the values of the altar is that journey on which he goes to find his brother. He is leaving the altar only geographically; all the while the altar holds him to its own spirit and intention, brings him near to the God Whom he is seeking, and leads him along the pathway that eventuates in purity. The journey away is the near way to the altar.

The limits of responsibility are set further out than we generally think. That which man seeks as he seeks his brother is not his own peace of mind, but saving his brother from those attitudes of mind, anger, contempt, malice, which may make his brother sin. No deeper social note is found in all the teaching of Jesus than this. Why am I to co-operate with God for my own moral restoration? Not alone for my own heart's ease and quietness, but because I am involving the man I have wronged, not by the wrong I have done him, but by the wrong he may do himself if he become angry, contemptuous, malicious toward me. Every journey from the altar that leads back to the altar is a journey to serve someone else and save him. So has God bound us up in the bundle of life. "None of us liveth unto himself"; each one lives unto his brother. Therefore, because the law in the Kingdom is stern, forbidding anger, contempt, malice, therefore take this journey and find thy brother.

The limitations are entirely reasonable. We are to deal with that which is remembered between ourselves and the man we have wronged. I am to go straight away to him; there is to be a meeting between two; I am to make my confession to him, and such restitution as I am able to make, such reparation as lies within my power. Somehow, I am to find my way into his heart.

There are other teachings of our Lord which would warrant us in saying that if that man will not receive me I am not to blame; the Lord will deal with him. But have you ever thought how remarkably rare a thing it is for any human being to refuse to forgive? Sometimes we hear of such refusal, most often in novels, but sometimes also in actual life. Alas and alas! I have known such cases, but they are rare. I have often been amazed to find how a bad man, to whom another confesses sin and asks pardon, is ready to forgive and blot it out. In any case our responsibility ends at that point, and in that direction lies easement from morbid and unworthy regrets.

If I am speaking to some individual soul, and I pray and believe that I am - perhaps to many such - I pray you do not interfere with the Lord's quite clear command. Do not say, I remember that one thing, but then there have been other things; I will try to remember them all. Perhaps I may as well say that the sermon this evening is in answer to the letter of a troubled soul that has reached me from the other side of the world, telling me of agony, of desire to make restoration. The writer said, I beseech you preach on the subject and send me the sermon. That I propose to do. Therefore let me say that the letter is a revelation of false attitudes towards this question of restoration and restitution; perfectly sincere, to be pitied, to be loved into the light, but wrong. The one responsibility concerning restoration in order to be reconciled to God is that we definitely go and deal with the one thing conscience names. Tomorrow it may name another thing; then we are to deal with that. Do not let us trouble ourselves with things that in the last analysis are very doubtful, or force ourselves to deal with things in the past with which it is quite impossible that we should deal.

Finally, listen to the welcome. "Then come and offer thy gift." Here we may summarize the teaching by declaring that such immediate action in response to conscience whose activity has been aroused by approach to the altar prepares for the appropriation of the advantages which the altar offers. Let that man come back who has taken his journey, who has, so far as he is able, accomplished its purpose, and let him take up his gift and offer it. The altar is for putting away sin. This man has co-operated with God to the utmost of his ability; his approach is now sincere, open and worthy; let him come.

Now the altar is of value. There is an activity of grace which that man still needs, and of which he never felt the need so profoundly as in the hour when he has done his utmost to co-operate with God toward moral restoration. Never so perfectly before did he know his need of absolution, cleansing of the soul, restoration to fellowship with God. Then, said Jesus, Let him come. He will come now, not as a formalist, but in reality. He will come sincerely, and coming sincerely will be received.

The grace of which the altar is the symbol is now to be received. Grace to deal with the wrong which has been righted, for its stain is still on the conscience of the man; its desolation abides. Grace will now deal with that. As between this man and his brother the wrong has been righted; but only God can right it as between man and Himself. This God does, and that is grace in its meaning and value, in its mystery and its mercy.

Let the man remember that he may now come to the altar not alone for the wrong which he has righted so far as he is able, but also for the wrongs which he cannot right, In the moment when conscience has awakened are some to whom it is too late to go. Thank God for the altar! Without it I could have no hope. There are some to whom we cannot go without involving others, and therefore we must not go. We can make restoration only when it may be between ourselves and those whom we have wronged. The confessions that we sometimes hear in inquiry rooms when dealing with souls about sin, made flippantly, involving another, are never sincere. So far as I am concerned, I have no pity for such, and no dealings with them. The confession of sin is lonely, singular, peculiar. There are confessions I can never make, speaking impersonally and as a representative man, for I have no right to involve others. I can go to the altar. I shall carry with me the shame and the wrong and the suffering of some things to the end; but I can trust God's grace for both myself and all the influence of the wrong I did to others, knowing this, that He will not hold them responsible for that for which I alone was responsible. So we must rest in the grace of God. All the strange involutions and intricacies of wrongdoing we must leave at last at the altar.

Those who in the presence of the altar have no questionings of this kind, no remembrances, need very seriously to consider their religious life. Let us be practical, let us be immediate, let us exclude all the world but this congregation, this sanctuary, this hour, this service. Then let us inquire; This coming to God, is it vanity, or is it reality? If it be reality it rebukes us; we remember! If it be vanity we remember nothing, and pass flippantly through the service - the singing of the hymns, pleasant; the sermon, endured!

To the sensitive soul to whom coming to the altar is reality let me say that continuous approach in sincerity enables us to keep short accounts with our own conscience. The thing rebuked in this service can be set right if we will have it so.

The dire peril of carelessness in such matters as these is that conscience becomes hardened. The dweller in the inner-most becomes blind. The altar brings nothing to our remembrance. We never blanch with fear or blush with shame. It is an appalling thing that a man may come to that condition.

There is, however, another peril, the peril of unbelief in the mercy of God. The conscience becomes morbid and sees things that are not there, multiplies transgressions that have never occurred, and turns certain things in life into sins which are not sins at all in the economy of God. Spirituality is diseased, anemic, weak, trembling, often simply because man will not trust in the incredible mercy of God. Do you remember that supreme line in F. W. H. Myers' poem, one of those lines of poetry of which there are few in our language that come out of the essence of eternal things?

God shall forgive thee all but thy despair.

The only thing God cannot forgive is refusal to trust in His love. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem … how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings ..." Was ever figure so vibrant with the infinite passion of God? "And ye would not." Ye would not trust My love! Ye would not respond to My love! "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

I pray you, do not doubt the mercy of God. If you have heard Him calling you to some hard task, some rough pathway, some difficult business between thyself and thy brother, know this; that if thou wilt tramp that pathway, and "lay in dust life's glory dead," then from the ground there shall blossom red, "life that shall endless be." The hard journey leads at last to the altar, and the way of the altar is the way of peace.