**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 11 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*... thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.*

*Matthew 3:15*

THESE ARE THE FIRST RECORDED WORDS OF JESUS AFTER HE HAD come to man's estate. We have in the Gospel of Luke a record of what He said as a boy twelve years of age, "Wist ye not that I must be in the things of My Father (my Father's house)." That was a truly remarkable utterance characterized by all naturalness and simplicity, the naturalness and simplicity of a boy undefiled, artless, and sincere. They were words in which He revealed, even at that time, a sense of relationship that was mystic and peculiar, for there can be no doubt that His reference was to God as He said, "My Father's house" or "the things of My Father." Even then, also, there was a sense of responsibility resting upon Him, "… I must be in (My Father's house)." In that "must," moreover, there was revelation not of responsibility alone, but of response thereto. In that word the boy uttered the deepest thing of His heart, the central inspiration of the life that was opening full of beauty and full of promise, '"Wist ye not that I must be in the things of My Father (My Father's house)."

Between that hour and this of His baptism, eighteen years had passed, during which once again, according to St. Luke, He had "… advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men." There had been definite growth and development; mentally, in wisdom, physically in stature, spiritually, in grace with God and men. The double favor "… with God and men" was the outcome of the double fellowship of those eighteen years. Through them all He had lived with God and with men; in a close, perpetual fellowship with His Father and naturally with the people of Nazareth, not aloof from them but mixing in all their life.

As He approached thirty years of age, a strange and wonderful thing happened in Judaea. A voice was heard which was unmistakably the voice of a prophet crying in the wilderness,

Make ye ready the way of the Lord;

Make His paths straight.

It was a voice so prevailing that men crowded out to the wilderness to hear him, were swept by his fierce invective and his stern denunciation, and multitudes of them bent and bowed themselves in repentance. Among those who heard the voice was the Carpenter of Nazareth, and hearing it He answered it; "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John …" At this point in the narrative we have a statement which is a very arresting one. When this man from Nazareth presented Himself to the stern, hard, ascetic, magnificent prophet of the desert for baptism, John hesitated, and Said to Him, "… I have need to be baptised of Thee and comest Thou to me?" There is nothing really arresting in that, nothing very startling in it if we read it with our knowledge of Jesus; but if we remember that at the moment when John said it, he did not know Who Jesus was, then it became arresting, startling, suggestive. John himself distinctly declared later that he only knew that this Jesus was indeed the One Whose coming he had been predicting when he saw the Holy Spirit descending upon Him. When Jesus presented Himself, John had not yet seen that sign and so did not know Him as the Messiah. It may be that in their earlier boyhood days they had met and played together, but there had been long years of separation. John had retired in early life to the desert and there in loneliness, in meditation, brooding over the sins of his people, he had prepared for the stern ministry to which he was being called. Jesus had remained in Nazareth. Looking into His eyes he said, "… I have need to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" The explanation is not far to seek. John stands supreme in all the long and illustrious line of Hebrew prophets; brief, stern, and severe, he had so entered into fellowship with the righteousness and holiness of God that when he looked into the eyes of the Galilean peasant that day, he saw light that he had seen in no other eyes, purity which he had seen nowhere else, and without at all knowing Who He was, he recognized that here was One separated from the multitude in His purity, and he said, "… I have need to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?"

In that connection Jesus uttered the first words of His ministry that have been recorded, and in the uttering of them He struck the keynote of the whole of that ministry, unveiling in a flash the whole truth concerning it. With gentleness to John He said persuadingly,"… Suffer it now, ..." and then added, "…. for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

These words were introductory to His mission. They came out of a quiet mind, full heart, and fixed will. They were the utterance of One Whose mind had grown in wisdom, Whose heart had grown in grace, Whose will had been constantly yielded to the will of His Father. He clearly saw His mission and understood its deepest meaning and in quiet simplicity in this act He dedicated Himself to it.

In the words He uttered, we have first a revelation of the ultimate toward which His face was set; that ultimate is in this connection expressed in the word "righteousness"; "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Second, in the declaration we have a revelation of the work that was devolving upon Him and upon all those who were already in association with Him, John being among the number, as were the men of the past and those who ultimately come into association with Him, His disciples, and His church; "… to fulfil all righteousness." In the first suggestive word, "Thus," so pregnant with meaning yet so simple that we may hurry over it, He revealed the method by which His work was to be accomplished and the ultimate order of righteousness established.

Let us then follow these three lines of thought, considering first, the suggestion of these words of Jesus concerning the ultimate order, "righteousness"; considering second, the work which He revealed as His work and the work of all associated with Him, "... to fulfil all righteousness"; dwelling last upon the method revealed, "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

The keynote of our meditation is struck in the word "righteousness." Our difficulty is immediately created, as it is so constantly, by our familiarity with the word. It is one of the commonplace words of the Christian church, one of the great words which is no longer confined to the Christian church but has passed out and is perpetually being used by men of the world. What does it mean? We have sometimes said that by a shortening of the word we may gain access to the heart of the intention, rightness; and by still further shortening it we may come nearer to the simple statement of its profoundest meaning, right. Yet we are not finally helped by that. What is righteousness? Righteousness is found absolutely in God and in God alone. Turning back to the Old Testament Scriptures where the word so often occurs, we find one great illuminative passage in which the word itself does not occur but in which the whole fact is so poetically and forcefully set forth that nothing can be added to it. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we have the song which Moses wrote at the close of his life and taught to the people that they might sing it. It is found in the thirty-second chapter of the book;

For I will proclaim the name of the Lord:

Ascribe ye greatness unto our God.

The Rock, His work is perfect;

For all His ways are judgment:

A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,

Just and right is He.

An inclusive and final definition of righteousness lies within that stanza of the great song of Moses. This righteousness is absolute in God, and the measure in which man understands righteousness is the measure in which he knows God. All the Divine attributes are needed for the exposition of the righteousness of God. Righteousness is a greater word than holiness. Righteousness is the positive of which holiness is the negative. The babe in its mother's arms is righteous but not yet holy; righteous in that it is perfectly related to God until the touch of another shall spoil it; needing no priestly magic to make it a Christian. Holiness is the negative virtue which results from the exercise of the positive condition of rightness. In God both truth and grace are included in righteousness. In Him righteousness is not a hard, ethical condition, integrity alone. In Him righteousness has at its heart love and grace, tenderness and compassion. He "… will by no means clear the guilty, …" but He will die in the stead of the guilty, cancel sin and so render the guilty guiltless. Righteousness is absolute in God.

What then is righteousness in man? I want to answer the question individually, socially, and in regard to things. Righteousness in man individually is adjustment to God, thinking with God, feeling with God, willing with God. That means not merely what man is in himself, but all his attitudes and relationships to his fellowmen and to things. In man righteousness is adjustment to God. Righteousness is not the rendering of homage to God on a day, in a place, in an attitude. Righteousness is an adjustment of the whole life to God, every day, in every place, in all conditions, and in all attitudes. Whereas it is true that we cannot put God on the same list with our material possessions, it is also appallingly true, tragically true, that many people put their material possessions where God ought to be. Although it seems almost a frivolous thing to say, the frivolity is tragic, it is nevertheless true, there are men and women who are entirely adjusted to their houses, automobiles and bank accounts. They think in the realm of these things, they feel under the impulse of these things, they will under the mastery of these things. The tragedy of the business! That is all background and negative to our meditation. The thing that stands in the foreground and is the positive end of our meditation is that righteousness in a man is life adjusted in all things to God.

In social life, righteousness is the proper articulation of the lives so adjusted. Socially, righteousness is that relation between man and man which is the outcome of the adjustment of individual lives to God. The motive of relationship and the method of relationship result from the adjustment of life to God and its right relationship with Him. We imagine too often that we are in right relationship with God and then proceed in our relationships with our fellow men as though there were no connection between the two. Yet there is always connection between the two. A man whose relationship with his fellow man is wrong at any point is a man whose relationship with God is wrong in spite of his song, his creed, and his profession. To be adjusted to God in all truth is to be true, and the man who is true cannot lie to his fellow man. To be adjusted to God in grace is to be gracious, and the man who is gracious cannot be mastered by malice in his dealing with his fellow man.

Once again what is righteousness as to things? What do I mean by things? Just things! Houses, cars, bank accounts, trees, fields, birds, beasts, minerals, mountains, valleys, subtle and hidden forces not yet discovered, things already discovered such as electricity, anything, everything. What has righteousness to do with them? What does righteousness mean in regard to them? It means the discovery of things as to their being and as to their true purpose in the Divine economy. There is nothing inherently evil that God has created. What then, is the matter with the world? Men not adjusted to God, men not articulated as within that great adjustment have not discovered the forces that they need; or having discovered them, do not know their true purpose and are mis-using them. The ultimate Kingdom of God in this world will not be a kingdom from which are banished all the things that we see and touch. It will be a kingdom in which man has discovered them and their true meaning, and one in which man will no longer lay hold upon some subtle potent thing that has its purpose in the universe and use it for a kingdom in which things we call poisons will be relegated to their proper place, made use of, since all are gifts of God. Righteousness with regard to things means also the development of the thing discovered. An imperfect flower in your garden is proof of the lack of righteousness somewhere. Arrested development is proof of lack of righteousness. The opposite is true. Righteousness means that the flower found for the first time in the forest, under the touch of man in right relationship with God and in cooperation with his brother man will become beautiful with a beauty of which we never dreamed but which was potential in the flower when first man found it. The discovery and development of all the great and gracious, sweet and wonderful secrets of old mother-earth.

Finally, righteousness as to things means that they are used and not abused, that they are made the servants of humanity and not the masters of men; like the very Sabbath of God, they are made for man and not man for them.

In the presence of the great word we dream wondrous dreams, and no dream we dream approaches the glory of the reality of righteousness. Do you wonder that the New Testament writer upon one occasion made use of the words "… the fruits of righteousness. ..." Righteousness blossoms into beauty and produces fruits. Righteousness is a word full of beauty, and we, alas too often, have made it merely hard, mechanical, ethical. It is bursting with life. It describes man coming to the fulfilment of his manhood because his face is lifted to the throne of God. It describes humanity finding the true social order because human life is articulated as the result of the adjustment of the individual to God. It describes the earth, blushing with beauty, laughing with flowers, becoming more glorious in its light and more full of ease and delight in its being. It is God's great word, a word in which He sings out to men if they but have ears to hear it, the exceeding beauty of His own being, the exceeding joy of His own heart, the characteristic grace of His purpose for the people whom He has made.

If righteousness is absolute in God, and relatively in man is man's adjustment and articulation, what is righteousness resultantly? "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost," righteousness first, then resultantly peace, and finally, joy. What then according to the suggestion of that declaration are the results of righteousness? First peace. "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" said Jesus, in a world which at the moment was hushed and subdued by an appalling peace. Jesus was born when war had ceased and ceased by the agony of the surfeit of itself. The pax Romanum was upon the world for the world was worn out with struggle. The temple of Janus had been closed for a generation and there was peace, appalling peace. Jesus said: "… it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Out of the righteousness which He saw and toward which He set His face, there springs peace, not the pax Romanum but the pax Dei. The peace of God is not weariness, tiredness, inability to fight. It is rather full activity of life in rhythmic power without friction, without weariness. "… the Lord … fainteth not neither is weary." The peace of God grows out of righteousness. Humanity will never find that peace save by the way of righteousness. Out of that peace will come joy and joy is satisfaction, delight, rapture! That is God's ultimate for humanity.

We seem to have wandered very far, but we have come nearer than ever perhaps to the Man Who stood on the banks of the Jordan as He said, "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." These were the visions of His eyes, these the ideals of His mind, this the golden goal toward which He set His face. Now note His description of His work; "… to fulfil all righteousness." There is in that phrase the recognition of righteousness as possible. Righteousness in the thinking of Jesus was not a counsel of perfection, a forlorn hope. It was possible, first, because man can be adjusted to God. There is that in God and in man which makes such adjustment possible. The deepest truth of man's nature is that he is created for that adjustment. As Augustine put it long ago, "God has so fashioned the human heart that it never can find rest until it rest in Him." To take the great statement and put it in another form is to declare that it is possible for man to be adjusted to God. He is made for that, not for houses, cars, and credit at the bank, but for God. God has that in Himself which is kith and kin of humanity; He made humanity in His own likeness and image. Having made humanity, it is not merely true that humanity can only rest in Him, it is equally true that He can never rest save as humanity finds rest in Him. If you challenge that, I remind you of the words of Jesus when they criticized Him for breaking Sabbath, "… My Father worketh hitherto and I work." God and Christ can never rest until humanity is at rest. Jesus realized, moreover, that man can be articulated, that it is not impossible. I will borrow a figure of speech from an old prophet: it is not impossible for the lion to dwell with the lamb; it is not impossible that men of differing and diverse temperaments and races should come into realization of that unity which does not destroy their distinction. Under the illumination of the teaching of Christ and in the light of His principles and purpose, man discovers - mark the paradox but follow me - the value of difference necessary to total agreement; differences in form and fashion, in thought and outlook. Thank God there are differences! Yet differences is an ugly word; there are diversities, that is a little better. But let us borrow a literary word, diereses, that is differences which merge and mix with each other and make harmony. That is God's ultimate for humanity. That means differences not only as to types, temperaments, and races, but as to thought, and that within the Christian church first of all. As the years run on, a man comes to respect with profounder respect than he did, the opinion from which he radically differs. He comes to see that a man who stands for a doctrine of the church which is sacerdotal may himself be as true as the man who stands against him. Perchance in some sweet morning, when life's fitful fever is over, we shall laugh together as sons of God over the things in the presence of which today we quarrel and rend the body of Christ. It is for this larger outlook that Christ came, this harmony which is not monotony.

The word of Jesus recognized, moreover, that righteousness is already operative. To fulfil is not to create, but to co-operate, and set free, and enable it to complete itself. I believe with John that "… the whole world lieth in the evil one"; but I also believe that that which lieth in the evil one is potential with righteousness. As the evil one holds the world in his embrace, he holds that in his embrace which he cannot forever hold. I believe with all my heart

That cannot end worst which begun best

Though a wide compass first be fetched.

Of course there was also recognition of righteousness as hindered, held back. That is the supreme thought and therefore it needs no argument.

So we come to our last thought. The word "thus" suggested the method. What did He mean by "thus"? He meant that from which John shrank. From what, then, did John shrink that day when he looked at Jesus? I believe John had welcomed eagerly all who really came in repentance for baptism, but when Jesus came he said, "… I have need, to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" He shrank from the idea that the sinless should confess sin. Jesus confessed sin when He went to that baptism. He shrank from the idea that the righteous should repent. When Jesus went to that baptism, He repented. He shrank from the idea that the free with the freedom of purity should seek remission of sins. When Jesus stooped to baptism, He sought remission of sin within His own soul. John looking into the eyes of Jesus said, It is wrong, this cannot be! Thou art sinless, "I have need to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" How can the sinless confess sin? How can the righteous repent for sin? How can the free ask for remission? Jesus said, "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." By the very things from which thou art shrinking, righteousness will be fulfilled. Righteousness will be fulfilled by the Sinless bearing sin, by the Righteous repenting for sin on behalf of others, by the Free seeking to be bound in order to break the bonds and set at liberty those that are bound. Never let us read this story and forget those meanings of the baptism of John; it was baptism unto the remission of sins by way of repentance. John, or his disciples, plunged beneath the waters of the Jordan all that came owning their sin, declaring their repentance, and seeking remission. When Jesus was baptized, He confessed sin, He repented for sin, He sought remission.

Whose sin? Not His own, but yours and mine. When John saw Him again, it was after the quietness of the night, after he had seen the descending Spirit, and there had come to him the overwhelming conviction that his hands had plunged beneath the waters of symbolic baptism the Christ of God, the Messiah. On the day after, John looked at Him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world."

Now carefully observe our Lord's use of the plural pronoun: "… it becometh us." The word was spoken to John, "It becometh us," it becometh Me, as well as thee; it becometh thee as well as Me; it becometh us. It is as though He had said: "John, I will show thee the way. Thy mission has been a Divine mission. Thou hast been the herald of My coming, thou hast proclaimed Me as coming with a fire and a fan! Lo, I come; but "…thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Righteousness will never be fulfilled by the voice that denounces sin; righteousness will never be fulfilled by the voice that thunders against it! All of which is necessary but such ministry will never fulfil it. There is only one way, it is the way of the Cross, it is the way of fellowship with humanity in its sin, repentance for its sin, and the bearing away of its sin.

He gathered into this "us" all the men of the past who had trodden the sorrowful way. There was a day when Moses said something that revealed the deepest in him more wonderfully than anything he said before or after. It was the day when in the presence of God, he said of the sinning people: "… this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold; Yet, now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book!" That is the way by which the people were lifted and saved. There was a later day when another man wrote: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Ghost … I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh." That is the way the Kingdom is coming. Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness; by standing with the sinner, and confessing the sinner's sin; by sharing the burden of it, repenting for it, going down to death if need be for the saving of the sinner. "… thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

For us the wondrous facts and forces are centralized in Him. He is the Righteousness of God, the Revealer of the beauty of righteousness, adjusted to the will of God. He in the articulation of Himself with others will set up the Kingdom of God. He is the One Who fulfils all righteousness.

At last John in mystic vision heard Him speak and this is what He said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, … the beginning and the end" of the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. He is the strength of our fellowship in the method. I cannot take up that Cross and share the burden of sin and repent and suffer with the sinner save as it is true of me that the love of Christ constraineth me and that the life of Christ masters me. Where these things are so, we shall enter into fellowship with the suffering by which, and by which alone, the Kingdom is to come.