

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MATTHEW 11:20-24

WE now turn to the subject of the impenitence of the cities. There is something startling in the words with which this paragraph commences: "**Then began He to upbraid.**"

This spirit of upbraiding seems to be so foreign to Him, so unlike Him; and yet such an idea of Him reveals a very superficial understanding both of the cause and the meaning of His upbraiding.

If we think it is foreign to His nature to upbraid, and to pronounce woe, because we think of Him as loving and gentle, we misunderstand love. Jesus is quite capable of being stern, severe. There is such a thing as the wrath of the Lamb, even though that description seems to contradict itself.

If we are astonished, as we hear Him, in the midst of His teaching, upbraiding cities, it is because we do not understand love perfectly.

- Love is not always gentle, sometimes it is rough.
- Love is not always uttering sweet, smooth things.

By the very necessity of its own nature there are moments when its speech is rugged, scorching, devastating. We have neither understood the Master, nor His essential love, if we really are surprised in the presence of such a section as this.

Three cities are here named by the Lord Himself Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. We have no account of any visit to Chorazin, but it is perfectly evident that our Lord went through all these cities, and incidentally this whole passage shows us how much more Jesus did than we know.

Chorazin was one of the cities in which most of His mighty works were done, and yet we have no account of His work there.

Then we pass to Bethsaida, and we find that the records refer to frequent visits by our Lord.

We need to remember in passing, that from the city of Bethsaida, Peter, Andrew, and Philip had all followed Him, had obeyed Him, had repented in answer to His call, and set their faces towards the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we come to Capernaum we are almost irresistibly driven back to one of our earlier studies in the Gospel (chapter 4:12-16).

We have already seen that in the prophecy quoted there, interpreted from the Jewish standpoint, when they spoke of “**The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,**” their terms were those of reproach, because that whole district, more than any other, had become influenced by Gentile thinking.

But when the King began His work, this public ministry of the Kingdom, “**He came and dwelt in Capernaum.**”

That is always His method. If there is a district neglected, abandoned, forsaken, there He comes and dwells. So we know of Capernaum that it was the adopted home of Jesus for a long period, during His public ministry, the center from which He went forth upon His way.

That fourth chapter goes on to say, “**From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**”

When John preached that, he did so in the tone and with the emphasis of severity.

When he was cast into prison Jesus commenced His more public, set, and orderly ministry, with exactly the same message, and He delivered it in Capernaum. He came and dwelt there, and Capernaum then first heard the word of the King spoken with His own grace and tenderness, and ineffable sweetness, “**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**”

But now we see Jesus looking out upon the cities where most of His mighty works had been done, and we hear Him beginning to upbraid. What was the cause of His upbraiding?

“**Because they repented not.**”

This does not merely mean that Jesus was angry because they did not obey Him. That was true in a sense, but the reason of the anger lies deeper. It was not selfish resentment at being rejected; that was never present in the upbraiding of Christ; there was something infinitely deeper. We must go back to the initial word of Jesus: “**Repent**” that is, Change your mind, for whenever a man changes his conception, his thinking is changed, and his conduct.

The real creed of a man is the inspiration lying behind his conduct, and when Jesus began His ministry, and said to men, Repent, change your minds, He was doing a simple and yet a searching thing.

He was asking men to change their ancient conception of things, in order that their conduct might be changed, in order that finally their character might be changed. That is always the order.

- First, the conception; then the external conduct based upon it;
- Finally, the character resulting therefrom.

Christ's word was not only Repent. He indicated the direction of the change necessary; for a man may change his mind, and the new set of convictions may be as false as the old - "**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**"

The mind must be changed in the direction of submission to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The root-wrong in all civic life then, and to-day, is godlessness; the fact that God is left out of account in its arrangements. So it was in these cities of the past, Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum and the rest. He came to the city and He said, Change your mind toward the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand; it is here, embodied in the Person of its King. I am here to show you the Kingdom, to lead you into the Kingdom, to be your King within the Kingdom. Change your minds towards it. He had healed their diseases, and in the enforcement of His claims, He had been calling these cities to change their minds towards God, and towards the Kingdom of God.

He had shown the real meaning of the Kingdom of God.

As we have seen, every miracle of Jesus was a revelation of what the Kingdom of God really means when it is perfectly set up. None of the miracles of Jesus was a violation of law; they were all reversions to law.

Here was a man diseased; He healed him. He was not violating the law of the universe by doing so. Nay, verily, He was restoring the law broken by the presence of disease. All the way through, His mighty powers, operating in the realm of the physical, were revelations of what the Divine Kingship meant, and what the Kingdom of God really is.

He had been to Chorazin, and to Bethsaida, He had dwelt in Capernaum, and in these three cities He had said, "**Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.**"

In these three cities, by mighty works, He had shown the meaning of the Kingdom; but they did not repent; and because they did not repent He began to upbraid them.

Now the second question that we ask is, What was the note of His upbraiding?

The words "**upbraid**" and "**woe**" in this paragraph are mutually expository. We can only understand the upbraiding, as we hear Him say "**Woe**"! We can only understand what He meant when He said "**Woe**" as we catch the tone of His upbraiding! The meaning of upbraiding very literally is that *He reproached them*. Reproach may be perfectly pure, and inspired by love. It may, of course, be impure, and inspired by hatred, but that was impossible with Jesus. We take the word, then, in its simplest meaning. He reproached the cities.

"**Woe unto thee, Chorazin!**" is not the thunder of someone highly angered, not the denunciation of some plague that is about to fall on the city; it is rather the wailing declaration of what must inevitably result from the city's own deliberate choice of action.

“There is a wail in the woe,” said one of the old puritan commentators, and in that sentence he comes to finest exposition of the meaning of the “**woe.**” Jesus meant to say, You have refused to repent, you have deliberately chosen for yourselves the woes that are to come upon you, you have deliberately refused the light, and chosen the darkness; by refusing the life you have chosen the death. He was not pronouncing a judgment which He would inflict capriciously; He was announcing the result which they had deliberately chosen, and from which there could be no escape.

How have these woes been carried out?

Remember they were woes pronounced upon cities. There is absolutely no trace of Chorazin to be found to-day. Men have never been able perfectly to agree about the site of Bethsaida. While Dr. Thomson argues for the probability of the site in Naphtali, a great weight of opinion is against his decision, and so we may broadly say Chorazin and Bethsaida, cities of nineteen centuries ago, rich and flourishing, in the midst of which the Bang came with light, and life, and love, have absolutely vanished as cities, because they repented not.

The woe has wrought itself out by the working out of the law from which there is no escape, this simple law whatever a man or city chooses, that is the destiny of the man or the city.

I should like to lay emphasis upon this principle, in case someone should merely be interested in the exposition, and find no message for himself. This is the supremacy of Jesus, the sovereignty of Jesus, and the full majesty of Jesus, that, when He confronts a man or a city, then in the light of His coming that man or that city must make its choice. If the city shall return and repent, it shall be exalted to very heaven. If it will not hear Him, it must be thrust down into darkness. It is not His hand that thrusts it out; it is the city’s own hand which slays itself when it rejects God’s Kingdom.

This is still more markedly emphasized in the words which He addressed particularly to Capernaum, in which, town He had dwelt:

“And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day”

And He answered, I tell you no. Thou shalt be thrust down into Hades, into death, into darkness, into obliteration. Remember again, this was a civic word, the word concerning a city.

Observe the connection of this doom with the word He had spoken at the first:

“Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Capernaum had refused to repent. Then said Jesus to Capernaum, “If you will not repent, do you suppose you will ever gain the benefits of the heavenly order? Do you suppose you can set up heaven’s order, when you have rejected heaven’s King?”

If you refuse to hear the voice of the King, will you be exalted unto heaven, with heaven's order, where love is the impulse, and light is the illumination, and love the energy? Do you hope to climb into the realization of a perfect civic life when you refuse the King? Nay, verily; thou shalt go down into Hades. Capernaum desired the heavenly order, as all cities desire the heavenly order; yet, while the great ideal was seen, refused to repent."

And in the prophetic words of Jesus more than prophecy if prophecy be merely foretelling, but great prophecy if prophecy be foretelling with forth-telling of God's will - Capernaum has passed down as a city into Hades, into darkness, and into death, and into cessation. Why? Because she refused to repent at the call of the King.

From this upbraiding of Jesus, what is the teaching of value for us?

First, that the greater the light the greater the responsibility. That leads us to touch upon a part of this section to which we have not yet referred Jesus' comparisons. Look at them briefly in order that we may make other comparisons presently.

He said, "**It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you.**"

More tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin and Bethsaida. Tyre and Sidon were cities then existing. Then when He came to Capernaum, the most highly blessed of all the cities, He said, "**But I say unto you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.**"

Sodom was a city that had long ceased to exist It had been blotted out of existence for specific reasons hinted at in the Old Testament history, clearly declared in later prophecy. He took the cities of Tyre and Sidon, and put them into comparison with Chorazin and Bethsaida; and the land of Sodom into comparison with Capernaum.

Thus He revealed the truth that responsibility is always created by light.

Tyre and Sidon had not been visited as Chorazin and Bethsaida had been. Tyre and Sidon had perchance heard the rumour of His work, but He had not come into the midst of them. They were two living cities when He spoke.

We hear His word and bow in the presence of it. He declares that it will be more tolerable for the cities of our own day to which He has not come, than for the cities to which He has come if those cities refuse to repent.

When He speaks of Capernaum, we have a yet more startling contrast.

We have but to read the history of the Old Testament which is veiled and guarded with an extreme delicacy, to know how fearful were the conditions of life in Sodom, how awful was the corruption that held that wealthy city fast in its grip.

At least the Old Testament history reveals this much to us, that there were not ten righteous men to be found in the whole city, and therefore it was swept out. Could anything be worse than Sodom? Yes, Capernaum.

Now the possibility is that Capernaum never descended to the beastliness of Sodom. The probability is that the sins of Sodom, judged by all human canons, were far more terrible than the sins of Capernaum; but Jesus Christ said in effect, If Sodom had received My light, if Sodom had heard My message, if Sodom had seen My works, it would have continued until this day.

That is to say, in the sight of God, sin is never measured as it is in the sight of men. We measure sin and call it vulgar, or debased, or pardonable, or excusable, according to some false measurements of our own. God measures sin by the light a man has had, or a city has had.

The city to which Jesus has come with His message, in which He has manifested His mighty works, if it refuse Him, and His ideals, if it will not crown Him, is guilty of a more terrible sin than the sin of the city which has sunk to the lowest level of beastliness, if it have never heard His message, and never seen His work. This is Christ's own estimate.

Let us, then, proceed further with our comparison. We have compared, following our Lord's word, Tyre and Sidon with Chorazin and Bethsaida, and Sodom with Capernaum. Now let us compare Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum with the cities of to-day, simply indicating a line for solemn consideration. Our cities know Jesus Christ far better than Chorazin, Bethsaida, or Capernaum; because when Jesus Christ was in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, according to His own estimate, He was straitened, limited. His mighty powers operating very largely in the sphere of the physical, because He had not yet unlocked the gate, had not scattered the fire, had not yet Himself bent His head to the great passion Baptism.

When Jesus came to Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum, He was a Man among men, a Teacher among teachers. He was infinitely more, for His words at once lifted Him above all other teachers in His own age; and the purity of His life, its glorious beauty, perfect tenderness, elevated Him above all men in character. Nevertheless, as men heard Him they had nothing to base their conclusions upon save His imperial presence and the essential and inherent truth of the things He uttered.

We have a great deal more:

- We have His resurrection from among the dead, attested by witnesses, proved by the miracles of the centuries.
- We have in our midst to-day works that are far more wonderful than any miracle He ever performed in the physical realm.

Do we, as Christians, quite believe it?

Before Jesus went away He said, "**Greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto My Father.**" There is a sense in which He did not value the miracles as credentials, but put them in a secondary place.

He said, “**Believe Me . . . or else believe Me for the very works’ sake.**” “**The works**” constituted a secondary line of argument - Now He has been demonstrated in the centuries in His own Person by the resurrection, as that resurrection has been demonstrated in the life and progress of the living Church; and that Church by His living presence, His spiritual presence, is more wonderful and powerful than His bodily presence was, and He is still working miracles - more marvelous, more wonderful, than any He wrought then.

Need we labour this point? If our cities have but eyes to see, in every quarter of the globe miracles are being wrought by Jesus Christ more wonderful than any He wrought while He was here miracles of so renewing men in the inner facts of their life, that in the power of that renewal, they renew the externality of their lives.

This is the supreme miracle. The supreme miracle is not that the body shall be healed, but that the spirit shall be healed. The supreme miracle is that a man low - sunk in the social scale, a beast, a plague to the city, may be touched by the Spirit of Jesus and be re-made, and become one - who blesses the city wherever he goes. These miracles are on every hand.

What has this to do with us? Everything! If we are prepared to receive the King on His own terms, if we are prepared to obey His “**repent,**” in the individual life, and if we are prepared to set our faces toward Him for the establishment of God’s Kingdom, individually, then socially, and in all civic matters; then our cities may be lifted into the realization of the blessedness of the Kingdom of Heaven. But if we turn our back upon the proof Jesus gives, if we turn our back upon the ministry He exercises, if we will not crown the King by obeying Him, then nothing can save the city. Its sorrows will put out its joy, its sighing will make its songs to cease, its sin will submerge it as sin has submerged the cities of the past.

Our duty, therefore, as Christians, is to preach the Evangel, to carry the great Gospel not narrowly but broadly, yet always with insistence upon the primal necessity of the yielding of the individual will to Christ, in order that the social relationships of the city may be influenced from that standpoint of regenerate humanity.

May God grant we may so live and serve as to help to bring our city into line with His law, and into obedience to His gracious will.

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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