

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MATTHEW 11:1-19

HAVING charged and sent forth His disciples on their first work, the King went forward with His own work of teaching and preaching in enforcement of His claims.

His path was now beset with new difficulties, and the attitude of His enemies was marked by increasing opposition.

In this chapter some of these things are vividly revealed. It is one of general survey in which different aspects of the obstacles confronting His work are brought before us in the revelation of the different attitudes of mind with which He had to deal, as He went forth upon His work. They are all typical. The same attitudes still confront His disciples as they go forward to service.

Let us first glance at this section in rough outline.

- In verses two to fifteen we have the story of John, in which the perplexity of the loyal-hearted is evident.
- Then, at verse sixteen there begins the second section of the chapter, which is a very brief one, occupying four verses only. In this section we see the unreasonableness of His age.
- In the third section, beginning at verse twenty and ending at verse twenty-four, we are brought face to face with the fact of the impenitence of the cities which He had visited. He names Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum.
- At verse twenty-five begins the final passage in which we meet with quite another class of persons, which the King described as babes.

Four classes are thus revealed, and so four aspects of the opposition and difficulty which the King encountered.

In each of these we see the perfection of His method.

- The loyal-hearted, who was perplexed, He corrected and vindicated.
- The unreasonable He committed to the judgment of time.
- The impenitent He cursed.
- The babes He called to Himself for rest.

First let us consider this story of John.

A great many have attempted to defend John from what they seem to think a lapse in faith and confidence in the King Whose herald he was. In attempting to defend John from this supposed lapse of faith, it has been suggested that he sent his disciples because his disciples were wavering, and he knew that if they came into contact with Jesus, and had His answer, they would be re-assured. While there may be an element of truth in the suggestion, when John sent the question, there can be little doubt that he was strangely perplexed; it was a question not of disloyalty but of perplexity.

Some have attempted to account for the question by saying that John, after the thrilling excitement of preaching to thousands, and being now in prison, was like Elijah under the juniper tree, disheartened. That however is hardly likely. John was too accustomed to loneliness to be disloyal because within prison walls. His hard and rugged life in the wilderness had probably made him quite independent of the soft raiment and luxury of kings' houses; and one cannot believe there was a tremor in his courage.

His question was rather an evidence of the continuity of his courage.

The thing that surprised him was that Jesus was not doing exactly what he thought He was going to do. He neither doubted nor faltered in his convictions about right, but he doubted and faltered as to the method of the Master.

Let us therefore look at John and Jesus, and then at Jesus and John; that is to say, let us take first the question of John and the answer of Christ; and, secondly, Christ's vindication of John, after John's disciples had gone back with their answer.

In order to understand the question which John sent by his disciples, we must place the works of Jesus into contrast with what John had said of Him before He began His public ministry.

John had been an almost fierce ascetic, thundering against the sin of his age. He had shaken off the dust of his feet against the cities, and had gone into the wilderness; and by that wonderful attraction of a man with a living message, he had drawn multitudes after him. There on the banks of the Jordan this rough, rugged, magnificent man, the final prophet of the Hebrew economy, had thundered against the sins of his time, had singled out from the crowds about him, the ring-leaders who were seducing the people from loyalty to God, and had called them a generation of vipers.

Having denounced sin, he had spoken of the coming King in a wonderful description: **"Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly cleanse His floor; and gather His wheat into the garner, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."**

This was magnificent and majestic language, describing the King as a great and mighty reformer, breaking down abuse, sweeping out oppression, gathering precious things, and blasting evil things as with thunder-bolts. John in prison inquired about the King; and the prophetic fire was still burning within him, the passion for righteousness was still like a blaze in his heart.

They told him that Jesus had gathered a handful of men, had gone up into the mountains, and had been talking to them; that He had healed a leper; that He seemed to be doing gentle, sweet, loving things. So far there had been no word of judgment. So far no woe had fallen from His lips. His was a mission of mercy, not of judgment; and John in prison was strangely perplexed. Abuses were everywhere; lightning was needed to blast them; and He was healing men.

Men had turned their back upon the Divine government; they should have been dealt with in judgment; and He was preaching good news. John thought He would have smitten the oppressor to death; and He was singing the song of the Gospel. Out of the perplexity of his heart he sent his disciples hurriedly to Him, with the blunt and honest question, **“Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”**

Now carefully observe the Master’s method with such perplexity of the loyal. Jesus said to his disciples:

“Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.”

If we are surprised at the question of John we are more surprised at the answer of Jesus. But we miss the whole point if we do not notice that He linked the story of His works with a great prophetic word which John, who was of the very spirit of the prophets, would understand.

When the answer came back in the words of Jesus to John, he must have found in it a new interpretation of the mission of the King. The last thing Jesus said was, **“The poor have the gospel preached to them.”**

This was a quotation from the great prophecy of Isaiah, and from that portion of it which He had already read in the Synagogue as He entered upon this very work that was causing John perplexity (Isaiah 61:1, 2). When Jesus read that in the Synagogue at His induction, He did not read the whole statement, but stopped before the last clause, **“the day of vengeance of our God,”** ending with the words, **“to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”**

- He it is Who proclaims the acceptable year of our Lord.
- He it is Who will proclaim the day of vengeance of our God.

He has never proclaimed it yet.

In the Bible there is only a comma between the two, and that comma indicates a measurement already of over nineteen hundred years.

But the proclamation will be completed:

- **“This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”**
- **“He shall appear the second time without sin unto salvation.”**

He Who came to usher in the day of the acceptable year of our Lord, must come to usher in the day of vengeance of our God. When John's disciples came back and told him what Jesus did, that He was making the blind to see, the lame to walk, raising the dead, and giving them life, he knew that He was fulfilling the ancient prophecy. He would turn back to it, and would see that the first part of the Messianic mission was the preaching of the acceptable year of our Lord; he would come to understand that he had not been wrong as the herald of the King, to speak of thunder and of judgment; but that he must understand the larger value of the Messianic work, and know that, before the final judgment falls, there is a mission of tenderness and grace, and healing and wooing and blessing.

In effect Jesus said, Go back and tell John to look again at the things that puzzle him, to look at them in the light of his own prophetic mission, in the light of the declared purpose of God concerning Me, of all that has been written concerning Me; tell him to look more carefully, and there will be light instead of darkness.

Are you troubled about Jesus? Then look more carefully and comprehensively at the very things that have troubled you, and you will find the mist merge to light, and a larger understanding will end in the solution of all your problems.

The King added another word, very tenderly, not rebuking him, but warning him, **“And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me.”** “If you cannot perfectly understand My method, trust Me. If you are not able for the moment to see how I am going to accomplish that upon which your heart is set as a passion, do not be offended, do not stumble, do not halt, trust Me perfectly. That is always the word of the King to His followers.”

Then Jesus turned to the crowd who had heard John's question, and who might have been inclined to say, John has evidently failed, he is afraid, he is trembling; and He said to them in effect, “Let Me tell you the truth about John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? Do you imagine he is weak and trembling?”

And the question carried its own answer in the very tone and emphasis in which the Master asked it. No wind shook him. He dared guilty Herod, and told him the truth.”

“But what went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?” - a man, weak, enervated, spoiled by luxury. And then with infinite and fine scorn, **“Behold they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses”** - not in kings' prisons that is the emphasis. John might have had soft raiment if he would excuse the king's sin. Make no mistake about him because he has sent Me this question.

This was the King's defense of a loyal soul, and it is very beautiful.

“But wherefore went ye out for to see? a prophet?”

He had brought them back from wrong impressions to the earlier and the truer thought of John.

“A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.” he was the herald of the King, commissioned, inspired, sent before His face.

**“This is he, of whom it is written,
“Behold I send my messenger before thy face,
Which shall prepare thy way before thee.”**

He had prepared the way for Jesus, having fulfilled the prophetic word of Isaiah, **“Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”**

The throwing up of a highway is a rough, laborious process. Kings will pass along the highway presently, but there must be a great deal of work to prepare it blasting with dynamite. That was the work of John; no reed, no soft man, no mere prophet was he, but the last of the prophets, the herald himself, flinging up the highway and preparing for the coming of the King.

And then the Master spoke perhaps the most wonderful word of all:

“Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist.”

The simplest exposition is that of changing the phrasing. Of natural men, never has there been a greater than John. It was Christ’s tribute to his moral fiber, to his mental breadth, to his magnificent natural endowments. Born in the priestly line, he turned his back upon priestism to become the rough prophet of the wilderness; he was a statesman seeing national life and understanding the national sore; and he had rent the garments that hid the sore, and laid it bare in all its hideousness to the gaze of his age.

Then the King accounted for the fact that he was perplexed:

“Notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

This again is a passage which has been very much discussed. The only way to understand it is to take it in close connection with all the rest of the defense of Jesus. Our Lord meant to say, You have seen this man who naturally is greatest among men; asking a question in perplexity.

Yes, there are things he cannot know, there are methods that he cannot understand, and presently the least soul brought into the Kingdom will have greater light than this man, with all his natural endowments, has had in the past.

Presently the little child who comes into My Kingdom by the mystery of My mercy, might, and passion, will have more light than John, until he also comes to understand the sweetness and mercy and majesty by coming into this Kingdom of power.

John was in the light that preceded the Kingdom, and the weakest inside knows more than John. Upon this vindication of John the King based an appeal to the people. He said of the prophets, **“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.”**

Theirs was not the message of experience and realization; and one five minutes of experience is worth long years of anticipation; one single half-hour in the Kingdom, by the mystery of the death of the King, has more of light, than gathered in all the centuries before His work was done. **“The prophets and the law prophesied until John.”**

Now said Jesus, **“The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force;”** because men cannot understand the method, they must enter in by the violence that tramples under foot all pride, and is content to trust the King.

Then followed the last word of Jesus to the people about John; **“And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come;”** this is the reformer; follow him, obey him, and he will lead you by his thunder past Sinai until you find yourself in the presence of the dawning light and the new glory of the rule of the Kingdom of God.

And so we come to that brief paragraph in which the King complained of the unreasonableness of the age.

Having answered John’s questions, and vindicated him, He put John into contrast with his age John, the rough, the violent, the magnificent, the strenuous.

Of the age He said, **“It is like unto children sitting in the markets,”** and they are **“calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.”**

Anyone who has children understands the figure perfectly.

There come moments when nothing is right, and the only unanimity is that of complaint, of dissatisfaction. What is the meaning of it among children? First, an evil nature which they have inherited. Do not be angry with your bairns when they are discontented they derive their nature from you. Then there is weariness which they have contracted. And again a little, strong, tender, shepherd-like discipline is lacking. All that was the matter with the age.

Mark His application of His illustration. **“We piped unto you, and ye have not danced.”** John came, and you all piped to John, you went out after him, you made him popular, you crowded to him, but he did not dance to you, he thundered at you. **“We have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.”**

The Son of Man is come, and you wail in His presence, but He has not lamented; He has been your friend, comforting, cheering, eating and drinking with you; and you say He is gluttonous.

Oh, the unreasonableness of the age!

And what was the King’s answer?

“Wisdom is justified of her children.”

Of these John in prison was to be told; and these were the evidences of His right, refusing to obey which, the cities were condemned. The works of John and Jesus were wise. They were both the methods of God. To the restless and unreasonable age the King declared that wisdom would yet be vindicated in John's ascetic strength, and in His own comradeship of tenderness.

The supreme value of this study is its revelation of the King as a worker.

The picture of His dealing with John shows us that honesty is always valued and patiently answered. Let us be true with the Lord; do not let us affect a confidence which our heart does not feel. Only, if the doubt be there, instead of turning our back upon Him and abandoning His cause, instead of turning to the philosophies of men for explanation of the method of God, let us go straight to Him and tell Him.

Oh the comfort of being able to go into the Master's presence and tell Him that He is doing something that we cannot understand. He loves honesty, He would rather the Thomas who blurts out his unbelief, than the Judas who kisses Him.

Thank God for John, who was honest, and more, thank God for Jesus, Who received the honest question and answered it so patiently and so perfectly. His answer to all such doubt, is a call to a larger vision of the facts creating the doubt.

~ end of chapter 25 ~

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