

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

MATTHEW 19:1-22

THIS paragraph constitutes one of the interludes which characterize the third section of the Gospel according to Matthew. In it Christ is seen turning to the multitudes, from His more immediate work of instructing His own disciples. The King, rejected already by the rulers, and growingly the cause of perplexity to the multitudes, yet responded to all who came, according to their needs.

There are four classes represented here.

- The multitudes that came to Him in need, bringing their sick with them;
- Those that came in the critical spirit, attempting to entrap Him in His talk;
- Those that came impulsed by natural affection, bringing their children with them;
- One who came with a profound inquiry and a sincere desire for help.

And there are four subjects dealt with by the King. He invaded four different spheres, and revealed His power in each.

- The physical, as He healed disease;
- The ethical, as He answered the criticism of the critics;
- The social, as He rebuked the disciples, and gathered the children in His arms;
- The spiritual, as He flashed light upon the pathway of this man who came to Him.

Through all the story we, who are following the pathway of the King with loving interest and adoring hearts, are impressed by the ease with which He dealt with the varying conditions.

The first is a brief story, contained within the first two verses. The occasion was that of His departure from Galilee. His life there was closed, His work was done, His message was delivered, His power was made manifest. He went into the borders of Judea beyond Jordan. His face was set toward Jerusalem. He had said that it could not be that a prophet perish out of his own country. He had said to them over and over again since Caesarea Philippi, that he “**must go unto Jerusalem and suffer . . . and be killed . . . and be raised.**” The must of His Passion was upon His heart and soul. As He came into the coasts of Judea He found Himself again surrounded by great multitudes of people; and although details are not given, it is perfectly evident that the people came bringing their sick folk with them. We simply read, “**He healed them there.**”

In that sentence is the revelation of a mighty compassion, and an equally mighty ability.

There are no details, yet do not let us miss the grandeur of the scene, the pathos of it, the greatness of it, the tenderness of it, the glory of it.

We see the King. The years of His earthly life were drawing to a close. He had enunciated His ethic, exhibited the benefits of His rule, enforced His claims; and He knew full well what the verdict of the people would be; **“Crucify Him, crucify Him,” “we will not have this Man to reign over us.”**

He had told the disciples this, and He was now setting His face towards that final fact of the Cross. Nevertheless when these people crowded around Him with their sick folk, all the compassion of His heart responded, and He put forth His might to heal.

In the next section we have:

- First, the question of the Pharisees, and the Master’s answer;
- Then the objection which they raised to His answer, and His reply to that objection;
- Finally, the surprised comment of His disciples, and His answer to them.

First, the question and the answer. We at once see that the question was of the hour, something which was then debatable. They said, **“Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?”**

There was something behind that question, a division of opinion amongst the rulers; two schools of thought were involved. The whole dispute arose out of the teaching in Deuteronomy 24:1.

“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.”

Now there was a difference of opinion between two masters, Hillel and Shammai, as to what Moses meant by these words.

Hillel had been the mightiest influence in Judaism for long years as a teacher, and had been dead about twenty years when Christ was teaching. He had maintained that in that word Moses allowed divorce upon the ground of what we to-day should speak of as incompatibility of temperament.

Shammai held that there was only one cause for divorce.

The two schools had many bitter disputations as to which was right; and that dispute was in the background of this question to Jesus.

By way of answer, Christ first revealed the true foundation of the marriage relation;

“Have ye not read, that He Which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh?”

That was in itself a full and final answer. The method of the King here is to be carefully observed. In the presence of a surface difficulty, He appealed to the foundation of eternal principle. He ignored Hillel and Shammai; He passed Moses; and sweeping back through interpreters and lawgivers to the divine arrangement, He said, **“at the beginning.”**

This method of our Lord is in itself a revelation of the final law of life. The things that Moses said were transitory, having application only to certain times and places. If we are in doubt or difficulty we are not to appeal to teachers who are interpreters; to a lawgiver who was the lawgiver of an age, and whose ethical code has been superseded by a higher; we are rather to make our appeal to divine intention.

Having thus appealed to the age-abiding principle, He made application thereof:

“For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall be one flesh.”

Thus He revealed in a sublime statement the awful sanctity of marriage. The marriage relationship is to supersede, because of its sacredness, the most sacred relationship that can exist apart from it, that of the child to father and mother. Christ made no allowances for the difficulties by which these men were surrounded, and by which we are surrounded, these declarations of incompatibility and dissimilarity. Christ lifted the subject to the pure altitudes of the divine intention as to the sanctity of the marriage relation. Then He came down to the level of their disputes: **“What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”**

Mark the marvelous meaning of this. To express the thought of Jesus in other words, it is as though He had said; According to the divine intention a man leaves father and mother, and cleaves to his wife, in the high sanctity of the marriage relationship. If that ideal of the marriage relationship has been realized, then let no man break in upon it, **“what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”**

Jesus did not mean to say that every man and woman living together in civil relationship is married in the sight of heaven; but He did mean to say where this ideal lies at the basis of the marriage relationship **“let not man put asunder.”**

A marriage according to eternal principles, and according to the sanctity of this ideal, is consummated by God.

Then they brought their objection, and the objection was stated in the terms of their own dispute - **“Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?”** What they meant to say was, For what reason did Moses command it; what were the grounds of his permission?

Jesus replied in effect that when Moses gave that permission, he accommodated himself to the need of the hour; there was in the permission, contravention of the divine intention, but it was made necessary by the hardness of men's hearts, by the fact that they had lost the simplicity and tenderness that made it impossible for them to realize the high ideal.

The permission of Moses to a hardened people is not to be taken as the final standard of ethics in the Kingdom of God.

Then He proceeded to utter words which, if read by Christian people, answer all these difficulties for the present hour, **"I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery; and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."**

To that nothing need be added! No man, believing on Christ, and taking Christ's pure name on his lips, can say that upon the basis of dissimilarity, or upon the basis of incompatibility of temperament, there may be divorce.

Oh the tragedy may be a lifelong tragedy, but for the sake of the strength of society, and for the sake of family life, we must accept the standard of Christ. It is a solemn and a searching word; it makes indissoluble the bond once made, save for the one, and only sin. If there be suffering, that is not the fault of Christ, or of God; it is the result of the violation of the ideal of the marriage relationship; and the penalty must remain until the end of time.

Having thus dealt with the Pharisees, the disciples in amazement said; **"If the case of a man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry."**

This was not so much complaint as a recognition of the high ideal which was set up by Christ. They said in effect, The ideal is too high for the present life; had not men who are going to be true to God, better live the celibate life?

Christ's answer to them is important for all time. He did not contradict their view, but said; **"All men cannot receive this saying."**

To what saying did He refer? Not His own, but theirs. Thus Christ declared that the celibate life is not for all. It may be for some. All men cannot receive it; which does not necessarily mean that they are weak, but that they are not called to it, for it is only given to some. He named three classes of men who can observe the celibate life:

- Some are born to celibacy;
- Some are made celibates - a class with which we have nothing to do, the reference being local and obsolete,
- Some choose celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Christ did not condemn such; He spoke of them with respect and honour; but He would not allow His disciples to condemn the men who did not observe the celibate life. It is not given to all.

Thus He forbade His disciples to build upon His underlying principle a rule or set of rules to be observed by all men.

That was the perpetual method of Christ.

We cannot build rules upon His principles; we must deal individually with the underlying principle.

Here is a man to whom it is not given, he is not called to the life of celibacy, and we must not apply any rule to him. Here is another man who is called, and for some purpose that we cannot understand, he devotes himself to celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God. That man is to be honoured; but he is not to despise a man who does not devote himself to celibacy. This is the perpetual method of Christianity; every man must find his own rule out of the principle. We cannot make rules for our fellow men.

Christ recognized two things in this wonderful passage.

- He recognized first of all the absolute sacredness and sanctity of the marriage relationship; and safeguarded it from every attempt to break it down and undervalue it with words of burning fire;
- He recognized with fine taste and beautiful sympathy, that there may be those who will devote themselves to the celibate life for the Kingdom of God, and declared that they are to be held in absolute esteem.

When the Christian Church preached the doctrine of celibacy for its ministry, they erected a rule upon a principle, with disastrous results, as we know full well. Nevertheless there have been men devoted to celibacy in the ministry of the Roman Church; but again and again, because men have tried to bind their lives by rules never intended for them, they have violated the very principle upon which they attempted to work, and that is always so.

To be governed by Jesus Christ is to be governed by Him directly and immediately, and by principles which one must apply to one's own life, always declining to allow others to make rules.

The last two paragraphs are very familiar. We have first the exquisite story of the children.

In observing the Master's method with Him, notice first the young ruler's arresting question concerning goodness, which indicated the fact that he was already on the track, in that he connected life with goodness; **"What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"**

The question moreover revealed the fact that in his thought of the Teacher as good, he had come nearer the mark than he himself knew.

Then Christ flashed upon him external light, the light of the Second Table of the Decalogue with all its requirements concerning the relation of man to man. And the young man stood erect, and said, **"All these things have I kept . . . what lack I yet?"**

Then the Master, instead of flashing upon him external light, sent light right through the darkened cells of his inner life, and revealed the fact that he was a self-centered man, never having found his true King, never having kissed the sceptre, or bent to control. He found that the power of the things that ministered to selfish desire was greater than the call within him after goodness. **“He went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.”**

Perhaps that was not the end of the young man, but it is the end of the story.

One of two things happened.

- Either there was a day when he turned back again to Christ and the Cross, and found life;
- Or he found a tomb for his soul in the very things he refused to give up, when Christ called him so to do.

Now let all the others pass out of sight.

The King fills the vision, as He deals with disability in forceful ease; establishes the ethical standard of marriage for all time; gathers all little children into His arms and into His love; and flashes upon the soul such brilliant light that whether that soul walk henceforth towards death or life, the pathway is perfectly clear.

In the presence of such a King; because of what He is, we say,

“True hearted, whole-hearted, faithful and loyal,
King of our lives, by Thy grace we will be.” ‘

~ end of chapter 53 ~

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