

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY

MATTHEW 17:14-27

IN this section we see the perfect King in the midst of His imperfect Kingdom. He was on His way to that mighty work through which alone He could come into possession of the Kingdom, and as we accompany Him we see the difficulties confronting Him, and observe His methods in the presence of such difficulties.

To-day the King has come into His Kingdom. He is appointed and anointed as God's King. The Kingdom is not yet perfected, but His Kingship is established. The antagonism still continues; the conflict is as severe as ever, if it be subtler. The terms of discipleship are not changed. There can be no fellowship with Christ in the perfecting of His Kingdom save by the way of the Cross. Nevertheless the light of coming victory still flashes upon the way.

This paragraph naturally divides itself into two parts.

We have first, in verses fourteen to twenty-one, the account of the coming of the King from the mountain into the consciousness of the age in which He lived, the age which continues until now. In this picture we see Him coming down from the Mount, where, in radiant glory, He had been revealed as the prepared King; and now all about Him were the facts and forces of the age.

In verses twenty-two to twenty-seven, we have the picture of the King and His disciples.

We see Jesus gathering to Him His own disciples, and talking to them in view of the age in which their ministry was to be exercised.

Let us first consider our Lord's characterization of the age as it is found in the twenty-seventh verse; "**O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?**"

In these words we have a revelation of our Lord's consciousness of the condition of affairs in the midst of which He found Himself.

There was no thunder in the words, but rather the wail of a great sorrow; "**O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?**"

His use of the word "**generation**" shows that He was speaking of a far wider circle than that of His disciples.

He was referring to the whole condition of things in the midst of which He found Himself. And more. These words of Jesus Christ, spoken in local circumstances, come reverberating through the centuries, with perpetual application. If Jesus stood in our cities to-day He would say, “**O faithless and perverse generation.**”

“**Faithless,**” that is, lacking faith; a generation that cannot be provoked to faith. “**How long shall I be with you?**”

In other words, Jesus said, “For three years I have exercised My ministry amongst you, healing and blessing as I have gone, teaching the underlying principles of God’s Kingdom. How long do you need persuading to faith? How many evidences do you want before you rise into an attitude of confidence? What proofs are sufficient to provoke you to believe?”

Moreover, the age was not only “**faithless;**” it was “**perverse;**” which does not mean merely that it was rebellious, but that it was a generation twisted, and contorted; a generation in which things were out of the regular; a generation distorted in its thinking, in its feeling, in its action; a generation unable to think straightly, to feel thoroughly, to act with rectitude; a generation in which everything was wrong.

The use of the two words, “**faithless and perverse,**” indicates a sequence. A generation that loses its faith, becomes distorted, out of shape.

A people who live exclusively upon the basis of the things seen, form untrue estimates; their thinking is distorted, their feeling is out of the straight, their activity is iniquity, which simply means crookedness. That was Christ’s estimate of His own age. And the lament of the Lord’s wail is this, “**How long shall I suffer you? How long shall I suffer you?**”

What do you need to provoke you to faith, in order that, out of your faith may come the straightening of all your life in thought, and feeling, and action? So our Lord’s conception of human conditions is revealed in this lament over His age.

What gave rise to this cry of the King as He came down from the mountain into the valley?

Let us now look at the immediate things. We see first a father with his boy, and the picture is yet again a microcosm in which the whole fact is revealed in one single case. This father brought his boy to Jesus, and he said, “**Lord, have mercy on my son; for he is a lunatic, and suffereth grievously.**” He may have been epileptic, but let us leave it as it is without attempting to account for the condition. The deepest tragedy of the story is found in the words; “**I brought him to Thy disciples, and they could not cure him.**”

Luke chronicles something here which Matthew has omitted, the fact that the man used a very remarkable expression when he came to Jesus. He said, “**Have mercy . . . for he is mine only child,**” that is my only begotten son, exactly the same word which is used of Jesus in another connection.

In a moment we see the vision; two personalities confronting each other:

- The Only begotten Son of the Father,
- The only begotten son of man.

The son of man was demon-possessed, and nothing in the age was equal to setting him free. It was the age of culture, of refinement, of learning, of religion; and in the midst of the Hebrew people all the forces of light and learning were at work, but there was nothing that would touch that boy. At last they brought him to the disciples of Jesus, but they were not able to deal with him.

That is the picture of the age. The King, ready for His Kingdom, passed down the mountain into the valley, and found Himself confronted by that helpless boy, by that helpless father, by that helpless age, by those helpless disciples. Then there broke out of His heart the great wail, “**O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?**”

That is a true picture of the condition of things to-day.

We may take every one of these points, and find them being fulfilled in this particular age.

- We still have the demon-possessed sons of men.
- We still have the absolute helplessness of the most modern philosophy to set them free from the demons that possess them.
- And alas, the Church is sometimes as helpless as the rest!

Many Christian people are unable to cast out demons in this age; and it seems as though the Lord continues until now saying, “**How long shall I suffer you?**” What more do you need to provoke you to that living faith which lies at the back of all endeavor that is uplifting and ennobling?

But now let us observe the action of the King. He said to the father, “**Bring him hither to Me.**”

Oh the majesty of that word of Jesus! What confidence He had in His own ability! The boy was brought to Him, past the incompetent teachers of the age, past the feeble and faltering disciples, and it was but a few moments before He gave the boy back to his father, healed.

When the gracious deed was done, the disciples came to the Lord, or the Lord gathered the disciples about Him, and they said, “**Why could we not cast him out?**”

Would that the Church would give time to ask that question.

Then the Lord would say the same thing that He said to these men, “**Because of your unbelief** (little faith).”

If these men had been discussing the question in an annual religious assembly they would probably have come to a very different conclusion.

They would have decided that they were unable to cast out the demon because of the difficulties of the surroundings, because of the criticism with which the air was filled; for undoubtedly they were in the presence of men who were always watching them keenly. Or perhaps they would have accounted for it by the fact that this was a very peculiar case, one far more subtle and complex than any they had touched before. But Jesus said, “ **Because of your unbelief.**”

Perhaps this unbelief began at Caesarea Philippi, there at the parting of the ways, when Peter being the spokesman of the rest, had said, in the presence of the Cross; “**That be far from Thee!**”

From that time they had been afraid; they had been at a little distance from Him; they had held back; there had crept into their heart insidiously, unconsciously, questioning about Himself. They were not quite so sure of Him as they had been. They had thought that His method was to be purely educational, or that His method was to be a method of policy; but this rough and vulgar Cross, with blood, and shame, and suffering, had filled them with doubt.

Then these men who were afraid, and who were discounting their Lord - it may have been almost unconsciously, but quite positively - came face to face with a demon-possessed boy, and they could not cast him out because of their unbelief.

Lack of faith in the imperial and Divine Person of Jesus is paralysis in the presence of the world's need, and the world's agony. We may reduce our thinking about Jesus to the level upon which we attempt to get rid of the supernatural mysteries that surround His birth and His being, but when we do so we inevitably paralyze our power to deal with demon-possessed men and women.

Degrade Christ in thought by a hair's-breadth, and our faith is weakened.

Be afraid of Him, afraid to press after Him, even though the pathway be rough, afraid lest He be mistaken in His estimates and thinking; and, in that moment, we have lost power to deal with demon-possessed children.

In the last half of the paragraph we have our Lord's teaching of the disciples.

He repeated the very thing they had questioned and had feared. He took them back to the point where their faith in Him had weakened and faltered.

“And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again.”

How long that quiet time and that teaching lasted we do not know.

It is certain that for a time He stayed in Galilee, and taught His disciples, insisting upon the necessity for the Cross and the issue of Resurrection.

Now mark the impression He produced “**And they were exceeding sorry.**” That sorrow was a proof of their lack of sympathy with Him. That sounds a strange and contradictory thing to say. We always thought sorrow was sympathy, and sympathy was sorrow. In this case sorrow was lack of sympathy.

To the minds of the disciples there was a perpetual veiling of victory by suffering. During the months after Caesarea Philippi, Jesus was perpetually talking about His Cross, and He never did so without declaring His Resurrection. He said He would fall into the hands of men, and they would kill Him, and the third day He would be raised up again, and “**they were exceeding sorry.**”

Sorry that He should be raised up? That is unthinkable; and the only way to account for their sorrow is to recognize that they were so confused with the thought of the Cross, that they never heard the declaration of Resurrection, or else interpreted His story of Resurrection as Martha did when He said to her about her brother, “**Thy brother shall rise again,**” and she said, “**I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.**”

And perhaps these men, too, thought that when He talked of rising on the third day it was figurative. These men were unable to look through the Cross to the Resurrection. After this miracle at the foot of the mountain, they were still in the same condition, unbelieving.

There is a strange and beautiful story closely related to this.

“**And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money (the half shekel) came to Peter, and said, Doth not your Master pay tribute?**”

The negative form of the question shows that it was a question of criticism, a question of men who thought they had some occasion of complaint against Jesus. Peter replied to their inquiry by saying, Yes. And when they came into the house, Jesus, knowing what had happened outside, anticipated him, by asking him a question. The half shekel was not a Roman tax, but a Temple tax for every man, whether rich or poor; it was the redemption money.

Under the Divine economy it had a proper place and significance; but gradually, by the tradition of men, it had become an annual payment exacted by the authorities. And they came to Peter and asked him if his Master paid it. And he said, Yes.

Christ said to him, “**What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?**”

And the answer was correct. “**Of strangers.**”

Then said Jesus, “**Then are the children free.**”

He was reminding Peter of Caesarea Philippi. There Peter had said, “**Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**” Now Christ said to him,

“This half shekel is the payment of the subjects of the King, and you have said that I am the Son. When you confessed that, you did not quite understand the dignity and glory of the fact, for now you say that I pay this half shekel. You must have recognized that there is no claim on Me to pay it, if you had understood your own declaration, and the revelation of the Mount. It is for you to pay this because you are the strangers, the subjects, the people under the rule of the King. I am the Son.”

“Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them;” lest we put a stumbling-block in the way of these men that they may not understand, you and I will pay this together. **“Go thou to the sea, and cast a hook.”**

That is the only occasion in the New Testament where that mode of fishing is referred to. **“Cast a hook.”** Only one fish is needed. And he did it, and found a shekel. Not half a shekel-piece, for Peter and Jesus were together in this matter. **“Thou shalt find a piece of money (a shekel); that take, and give unto them for Me and thee.”**

Thus the King brought Himself to the place of submission in order that others might not be caused to stumble. He put Himself into fellowship with Peter.

“Peter, you must all pay the shekel, but I will pay it with you. You must take this place of submission; I take it side by side with you. In the commonplace of life I am with you, just as I was in the glory of the Mount, where all My Kingliness was manifested; just as I will be with you in the midst of the need of the age.”

And so it would seem that our Lord was leading Peter and the rest back to the faith in Him which they lacked, and from lack of which some of their number, left in the valley, had been unable to cope with the difficulty which presented itself.

The first application of this story, as ever, is a simple one.

We cannot exhaust the value of any of these stories in the day in which they happened, or in the circumstances in the midst of which we find ourselves in imagination. We must see Jesus standing in the age.

He is standing in this age now.

- Still He is saying, **“O faithless and perverse generation.”**
- Still He is saying, **“Bring him to Me.”**

But we cannot do it if we have lost Him in any measure, if our confidence in Him is not all that it was, and all that it ought to be.

If we place Him among other sons of men, one among many of the teachers of the nations, of the leaders of men, then we can no more take a demon-possessed boy to Him than to Buddha, or to Confucius, or to Mahomet.

It is only when He is to us mystery of all mysteries the greatest; the “**altogether Lovely**” as well as the Living One, not less than the portraiture of the New Testament, but incomparably greater, because John was right when he wrote, “**And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.**”

It is only when that vision of Christ fills our souls, and that conception of Him is the rock-foundation of our confidence, that we can hope to cast out demons in His name. In the midst of a great deal that troubles the heart, if we have that Christ, we can look up in His face and say, “**Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.**”

~ end of chapter 50 ~

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