

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

MATTHEW 23:13-39

THIS passage contains the most terrible words which ever fell from the lips of the King.

At the commencement of His ministry, in enunciating the laws of the Kingdom to His own disciples, He declared that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and now as we follow these woes through, we discover that He was elaborating that comparison, showing how the righteousness of these men had failed, how it had come short. His sentence was but a ratification of the definite choices which these men had made.

Here, as everywhere, we may do strange violence to the very spirit of the King by missing His tone, and failing to discover the pity which is evident throughout the whole of these strange and undoubtedly terrible words.

The final impression of the reading of this passage is that of the severity of Jesus, and His unbending loyalty to righteousness. But while that is true, it is impossible to read this carefully without discovering that the method was the method of tears, that from beginning to end there was evidence of sorrow; that there is a wail running throughout the whole of this discourse, as well as the thunder of denunciation. It is only as we catch these two tones that we shall understand all the meaning of this passage.

The severity of Jesus is discovered in the words He made use of; in the repetition of the word "**hypocrites**," in the use of the words "**fools and blind**," in the one terrible sentence that appalls as we read it, in which He called them "**serpents**" and "**generation of vipers**," in that most fearful illustration suggested by His use of the term the "**damnation of hell**." All these are terms which indicate the severity of Christ. We cannot cancel these terms, they are as surely here as anything else in the passage.

And yet not to discover the other tone is to miss much. There were tears in His voice; there was sorrow in His heart.

These things are not merely manifest in the last lamentation, "**Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem**," but in all the woes. We do violence to the spirit of the Christ, and to the genius of the whole passage, if we put into the reading of the word "**woe**" nothing but thunder. It was a wail of compassion as well as a message of strong and severe denunciation. Yet even this compassion was denunciatory, for in every case He declared that the woe was unto these men.

We have in this passage:

- First, the King's judicial verdict, His findings concerning the people to whom He was addressing Himself;
- Secondly, His judicial sentence.

In the Manifesto, the King had said to His disciples; **“For I say unto you, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of heaven”** (chap. 5:20).

Those words were spoken in the first section of the Manifesto. Immediately following we read, **“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill: and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:”**

He took up the law under which these people had been living, and so far from abrogating it, emphasized its binding nature by interpreting its inner meaning.

But He indicated the failure of the scribes and Pharisees by this declaration of requirement. This comparison between that righteousness of which He had come to teach men the necessity, and that of the Pharisees must be interpreted in the light of the Beatitudes, those words in which Jesus revealed the character which is necessary in His Kingdom.

We go back to that because we are now at the end of the Master's ministry.

That is how He opened it. We have now come to the passage in which He closed it; and the verdict which He found, as addressing the scribes and Pharisees directly, in the presence of the multitudes, is an elaboration of the suggestion He made at the beginning.

They stood before Him, in character the direct opposite of that which He described at the beginning of His ministry.

While not desiring unduly to press the comparison between the Beatitudes and the woes, this at least is true, that if we get the view of the whole character revealed in those Beatitudes, and then the view of the whole character revealed in the woes, the contrast is patent; they stand in direct opposition to each other.

Let us place the Beatitudes side by side with the woes, and we shall see how the King said in effect; I came to bring you face to face with God's ideal of righteousness; you have rejected the “blessed” with which I opened My ministry; there is nothing for it, therefore, but that I should utter the “woe” that must inevitably result from the rejection of the blessing.

The first blessing pronounced was upon poverty of spirit, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”** And the resulting blessing from that attitude was possession; **“theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”** Now mark the first woe of Jesus. **“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the Kingdom of heaven against men.”**

- Poverty of spirit results in possession of the Kingdom.
- Pride of spirit results in the closing of the door against such as would strive to enter in, by men who refuse to enter in themselves.

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.”

- In the first place penitence, the mourning which issues in the comfort of God.
- In the next place the things which are against the Kingdom of God.

They attempt to make a man proselyte, for which Jesus says in fine scorn, **“Ye compass sea and land.”** And the issue, **“Ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.”** The expression, **“the child of hell”** does not indicate the evil character that results, but rather the pain, and unrest, and misery that result.

We remember upon another occasion our Lord, referring in figurative and symbolic language to punishment, spoke of hell as the place **“where their worm dieth not.”** And so over against the comfort that comes to mourning and repentant souls, there is the pain and unrest and remorse that come to such as persist in the attitude of rebellion.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Over against meekness we have the woe against the blind guides, the exposure of the subtle casuistry which characterized the age in which Christ lived, which is the very essence of iniquity, the very opposite of meekness, the final expression of that pride of heart which is in revolt against God and issues in profanation.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” That is followed by the woe against men who were tithing mint, anise, and cummin, and were leaving undone weightier matters. This is a contrast between spiritual health and spiritual disease.

- On the one hand is the healthy hunger after righteousness;
- On the other hand the fastidiousness of disease, which is particular about the small external things of no matter, and feels no hunger after righteousness; the neglect of the weighty matters of law, which attempts to atone for itself by all the minutia of the tithing of small things.

Christ was careful to say that these things also should be attended to, but that the weightier things should not be neglected.

“Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.” The next woe was that upon such as veil internal vice by external profession.

We do not touch the heart of it until we read these words, **“full of extortion and excess,”** two things that stand exactly opposite to the merciful spirit.

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.” Standing opposite to that is the woe that describes these men. Mark it carefully, outwardly beautiful, but inwardly full of dead men’s bones and uncleanness! The contrast is striking between purity of heart, and the uncleanness of the inner life.

And, finally over against the blessing pronounced upon the peacemakers who are the sons of God is the woe against men who **“build the tombs of the prophets”** while yet they are the sons - mark the contrast - of the men who slay the prophets.

If in this contrast we do not find every woe set in direct contrast to every blessing, we at least discover that the character which our Lord described in that sevenfold Beatitude of the Manifesto, is in absolute opposition to the character which He described in this sevenfold woe of the final denunciation.

We might continue the contrast further, for in the fifth chapter there is the added and double Beatitude upon persons who suffer for righteousness’ sake; and when we turn over to the twenty-third chapter we find Him saying to these men, referring to the ministry which should follow His own crucifixion, **“I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes; and some of them shall ye kill and crucify, and some of them ye shall scourge, and persecute.”**

At the beginning of the ministry in the Manifesto, He said to the disciples gathered about Him who would enter into the suffering as they proclaimed that Manifesto, **“Blessed are ye when men shall . . . persecute you.”**

At the close of it He drew attention to the fact that the men of opposite character would be the men who would inflict the suffering, afflicting and scourging and crucifying those who should stand for righteousness.

Our Lord in uttering these severe words revealed first of all their absolute justice.

If we agree with the blessing of the character upon which He commenced His ministry, we must of necessity agree with the woe upon the character revealed in the men whom He denounced. He had spoken the words of abiding truth and righteousness, and every woe is but the other side of every blessing. The blessing was upon character, the woe was upon character; and the character upon which the blessing rested, was the exact opposite of the character upon which His final woe was pronounced.

The judicial sentence was a declaration of sequence.

“Wherefore ye be witness unto yourselves, that ye are the sons of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.”

One sometimes feels as though that word can hardly be understood by the Western mind. It is peculiarly Eastern. We Westerners have broken away more and more from the consciousness of relationship to our fathers. These men were perpetually boasting of their relationship to Abraham.

They said one day, **“Our father is Abraham.”** He said, You make your boast in your fathers, in your relationship to the past, you refuse to stand on the plane of isolated responsibility, **“fill ye up then the measure of your fathers,”** be true to the thing you boast, and do not now by the garnishing of the tombs of the prophets attempt to dissociate yourselves from the sins of your fathers.

- You are still of their spirit,
- You are still rejecting the right, as they rejected the right,
- You are still persecuting and will continue to do so.

We cannot believe that Jesus Christ was pronouncing sentence save as He was indicating the sequence. He was showing them what they would do, He was showing them what the issue of it would be; for mark what immediately follows the words, **“Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers,”** **“Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”**

When John the Baptist opened his ministry as the herald of the King, when these selfsame men came to him, he said with a touch of irony and scorn, **“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”**

Now at the close of His ministry Jesus took up the word and used it differently, with no irony, but with the terrible revelation of a necessary sequence, How can ye escape?

“Fill up the measure of your fathers,” you are the sons of the men who slew the prophets, you also have refused the righteousness of God. Carry this out to the end, and what then?

There at the beginning are the Beatitudes, the words indicating the Master’s purpose and intention for His people, accompanied by the conditions of righteousness upon which happiness must depend. Here He was talking to the men who had refused the conditions, and He asked, **“How can ye escape the damnation of hell?”**

Thus our Lord declared that the judgment of hell is the inevitable issue of refusal to submit to the truth of which the inward conscience has been convinced, for that is the meaning of His word hypocrites; *hypocrites are men who play the part that is not true in the externalities of righteousness, while within they are evil.* And there is a deeper significance, they are men who remain evil in their inner life, in spite of profound conviction. It was His declaration of sequence, His declaration that hell is the inevitable harvest of a man’s own sowing.

He then proceeded in the terms of His great lamentation to show that this is the result of their own deliberate choice:

“How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” That is the very heart of sin - **“Ye would not;”** the human will set up against the will of God. The human will set up against the will which had interpreted righteousness, and had expressed to men God’s desire for human happiness and blessedness.

“**Blessed**” is the word which revealed the purpose of the King. “**I would have gathered you.**”

Incidentally we have here another of those illustrations of the startling claims of Christ.

Mark the magnificence of it. He personified the nation in the city, as the prophets of the past had so often done.

“**Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killeth the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I** - the Galilean peasant, Jesus of Nazareth - **How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings.**”

His claim was that had they but come to Him, He could have gathered the whole of them from the impending judgment of evil.

It is an exquisite figure; simple, but more than simple. It is the coming out in the simplicity of truth, of all the great underlying fact of the Motherhood of God as well as that of His Fatherhood.

He said, “**I would have gathered.**”

Just that one Man, just a Galilean carpenter? A thousand times no; infinitely more, God incarnate! In these last words, standing there as the One Who had uttered the Manifesto, and the One presently to be rejected and cast out, He was gathering up all the brooding tenderness of the old revelation of God, and expressing it in that sobbing word of lamentation, “**I would.**”

His purpose was:

- Not to pronounce a curse but to bring a blessing;
- Not to wail in woe over failure, but to sing over men.

We remember the mother-figure of Zephaniah, “**The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty, He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy, He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing.**” This was His purpose, “**I would;**” and this was their sin, “**Ye would not.**”

Then He pronounced the sentence. “**Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.**”

Probably He was referring to the Temple as the center of their life, the place to which they had looked from long distances and to which He came at the commencement of His ministry, cleansing it and saying, “**It is written, Make not My Father’s house an house of merchandise.**”

He came and cleansed the Temple again and said, “**My house shall be called the house of prayer.**”

Now He said, “**Your house is left unto you desolate**” to you hypocrites, blind, fools, men in whom there is uncleanness, men who have rejected the throne of God, the righteousness of God, the mercy of God, and the will of God.

And yet once again, notice most carefully His claim. “**Your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see Me henceforth.**”

The desolateness of the house is created by the absence of the Master of the house. And in the next chapter He said, “**There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.**” “**Desolate.**”

But look at the King.

His sorrow we have spoken of, His judgment we have heard pronounced. What is this last word? “**For I say unto you, Ye shall not see Me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.**”

Who shall interpret that?

It is interesting to see how many interpretations there are, and how eager and anxious some are to adapt the word of Jesus, so that it can fit their own philosophy.

We do know what He meant as to local application, and local fulfillment of that Scripture; but we need to see, that even here, as He pronounced the final judgment upon a nation, a city; even as He spoke of their house being left desolate, hope was in His heart; and looking forward, He saw some hour in which they should say, “**Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.**”

After that survey of this passage let us notice two things.

First, that its study has meant an almost terrific revelation of the appalling issue of dishonesty. The word hypocrisy is the revealing one. The action of these men had been willfully wicked. Even their external cleanness was proof of their consciousness of the beauty of holiness, and their inward pollution was of choice. “**Ye would not.**”

At last that attitude must work out to its own issue.

In the words of Jesus, men become “**the children of hell,**” they pass to the judgment of Gehenna.

- This has nothing at all to do with the men who have never heard the message.
- This has nothing whatever to do with the men who have never confronted this Christ of God, this King of kings.

It has everything to do with us.

Standing in the presence of this Teacher and Lord, remember and know assuredly that any hypocrisy must issue in the harvest of hell. There is nothing else for it. If we who heard the “**blessed**” will not obey the condition, then we take our own way of set purpose toward the “**woe,**” and there can be no escape.

Behold the King!

What a solemn revelation we have of Him here. How gracious and yet how just.

In these words there is a revelation of His passion for righteousness, and also of His compassion for the worst and most degraded.

- His passion for righteousness never destroys His compassion for the worst.
- His compassion for the worst never destroys His passion for righteousness.

It is well that our hearts should be warned by these solemn woes.

The work of the King is not the work of excusing a man who persists in unrighteousness, and presently admitting him to the presence of God and the heaven of light. Naught that defileth can ever enter there, and the man who, in spite of all His ministry of infinite grace, persists in disobedience, passes to the judgment of Gehenna; there can be no escape.

The deepest and profoundest passion of the King, is the passion for the Kingship of God and righteousness, and if He must pronounce a doom it will be with tears, but it will be pronounced.

So let us ever bring ourselves to His judgment, and as we yield to that, pray for that which He will supply, grace to obey.

~ end of chapter 62 ~

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