

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MATTHEW 7:13-28

THE final words of the King in this Manifesto are full of dignity in very deed the words of a King. Nay, rather, and more correctly, they are the words of the one and only King of men. They are words of warning; thrilling with the concern of a great love; vibrant with the majesty of His own power. The passage may be divided into two main parts.

- In the first section (vv. 13-23) the Lord laid upon those who had been listening to Him a threefold responsibility;
- In the second section, the very last utterance of the Manifesto (vv. 24-27), He laid before them alternative issues.

The Manifesto was introduced by the words; “**And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them**” that is, the disciples, not the multitudes. At the end He spoke still to His disciples, for the things He said cannot have their first application to the outside crowd. He desired to set up the Kingdom of God everywhere; therefore He had instructed those who were already in it, that they were to live it, and teach it, and apply it in all the larger relationships.

Speaking still thus to His own, He laid upon them a threefold responsibility:

- First as to the beginning (vs. 13-14);
- Then as to progress (vs. 15-20);
- Finally, as to issues (vv. 21-23).

Notice carefully the sequence of these three.

First, *responsibility as to the beginning*: “**Enter ye in at the narrow gate**” - that is, get into the true way.

Then responsibility as to progress upon the way:

“**Beware of false prophet**” - that is, be true to truth after you have entered the Kingdom.

Finally, live in the light of the ultimate day; and remember that then, no profession of relationship or of service will avail, but one thing only - life homed in the will of God.

These, then, are the words which condition responsibility as to the way, as to the truth, as to the life.

- **“Enter ye in at the narrow gate,”** that you may be in the true way;
- **“Beware of false prophets,”** that you may live in the sphere of truth;
- Live in the light of the final day, that your life may be not only progressive, but finally rounded out to that perfection for which God is seeking.

Said Jesus on another occasion to men and the words flash their light upon this passage **“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”** **“Enter ye in by the narrow gate,”** and find the true way, for **“I am the Way.”** **“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves,”** but listen to the true Prophet, Who is essential Truth, for **“I am the Truth.”**

Walk in comradeship with Him upon the way, having come to Him for entrance to the Kingdom. Do not depend upon what you do, but upon what you are. Do not trust to the fact that you have named the name of Christ, and have rendered Him service. Trust only to the fact that you are in yourself, as He was in Himself conditioned in the will of God, for **“I am the Life.”**

Now let us examine these one by one.

First, He brings us to the wicket gate.

He pointed to the wicket gate in the very first words of the Manifesto. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”** Poverty of spirit, lowliness, and meekness, constitute the true tone and temper of the mind that is, submission, allegiance, and obedience. That was the beginning. It is very sweet and tender in its wording; but we know, if we have come to the King, that it is a drastic requirement, which demands the giving up of everything that interferes with a man’s quick and ready obedience to the King.

Now He brings us back again to the wicket gate, and shows how men enter.

Notice the figures of speech of which He makes use. There are two entrances and two ways. He describes them. There is a narrow gate and a wide gate; a broad way and a straitened way. Yet to leave these things grouped in that way is not to catch the final movement of this suggestive teaching of Jesus. We need to keep the way in each case in relation to the gate. Doing so, we find that in effect the King says:

“You enter this Kingdom by a very narrow gate; and you walk along a straitened way which for evermore grows broader, until at last it becomes broad in the fulness of eternal life. If you enter through the other gate, it is wide, it is easy to get through; and you walk along a broad way, which is for evermore straitening, until at last it becomes destruction.”

We generally take these verses, and deal only with the gateways and the pathway immediately beyond the entrances. Never omit the final words in either case; it **“leadeth to destruction,”** it **“leadeth unto life.”**

The word “**destruction**” suggests the narrowing of things, the limitation of things, the imprisonment of everything. It means a condition of life in which aspiration never realizes, in which a man is shut up within the things that are narrow. So that Jesus says: “If you refuse My teaching, if you will not have this Kingdom, then you go through the wide gate and find yourself on a broad way, which may be smooth, and even flowery, but it ‘**leadeth to destruction.**’ The man who is only looking at the gate and the road he is tramping to-day is a fool. Lift your eyes and look ahead.”

The wide gate and the broad way of refusing this King and His ideals, and refusing allegiance to Him “**leadeth to destruction;**” the way narrows, until the soul is in the prison-house. But on the other hand and with this positive element we are now more interested the way into the Kingdom is by a narrow gate; and the way is a straitened road. But it “**leadeth unto life.**”

What does He mean when at the close of this wonderful unfolding of law He brings us back to the narrowness of the gate, to the straitness of the way?

These conditions imply the making of heroic character! For entrance to, and abiding in, this Kingdom there can be no dilettante fooling with the passing hours. If men would pass that gate and walk that way they must enter into strenuous life.

If a man should tell you that Christianity is an easy softness, he knows nothing of it. If a man should tell you that for your life there is nothing to do, he is right as to the initiation of it by the act of God, for life is the gift of His grace; but he is wrong as to human responsibility for entering into it.

- Every man who would enter this Kingdom must come through the narrow gate.
- Every man who would live in this Kingdom must walk the straitened way.

There is no great kingdom which man desires to possess which does not bring him to a narrow gate and a straitened way.

Those who have set their faces, honorably and splendidly, toward proficiency in medical skill know there is the narrow gate and the straitened way of toil hard, strenuous toil.

Those in whom there burn the fires and the passions of the true artist can never expect to succeed by going through a wide gate and treading a broad way. There must be the infinite patience which takes pains. Was ever a true artist born who had not to take pains?

These illustrations are on a low level; lift them into the higher.

If you would possess the Kingdom that includes all kingdoms; if you would live within the Kingdom in which all values are to be finally perfected and realized, you must get through the narrow gate and the straitened way. No man can be a Christian in all the full senses of the word who is not prepared to get to the wicket, and strip, and tramp the straitened way. These are the words of the King, and He knows! He gained His redemptive authority by submission;

He yielded Himself to the supreme authority of His Father, and we read this very startling thing concerning Him in the Scriptures of inspiration. **“He . . . learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”** That does not mean that He learned to be obedient through suffering; but that He learned obedience experimentally through treading the pathway of suffering.

So He brings us back again to the wicket. It is a narrow gate, a straitened way; and with that infinite tenderness, so characteristic of Him, just as He has taken hold of us with a grip of infinite power and charged us to strip, He points us to the ultimate, the infinite life. When Jesus says life we have nothing to add.

Secondly; as to progress, He said; **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.”**

Notice very carefully that our Lord is not warning us against heretical views in this passage. He is not warning us against heterodox teaching, so far as heterodoxy means a wrong system of truth; but He is warning us against the prophet who is a wolf, but who wears a sheep’s clothing; that is against the orthodox veiling of heterodox life. He is not warning us against a man who does not exactly express truth in the terms with which we are familiar; but He is warning us against the wolf in sheep’s clothing; the teacher who affects the speech of orthodoxy, but lives a false life; not the man who holds a false doctrine, but the false prophet. His prophecy may be perfectly accurate, his preaching may be absolutely orthodox, but the man is false. That is the man who will lead farthest from truth.

It is possible to pronounce the shibboleths of the Bible in the most accurate manner, and yet for the heart to be far away from their purpose and intention. Here it is not intellectual heterodoxy; but men who laud the teaching, and deny the spirit; men whose appearance is outward and ostentatious; who appear in sheep’s clothing; but whose energy and influence are wolfish.

How are we to know these men? This evil cannot be dealt with by a committee, or conference, or synod, or council. We cannot find out whether a man is orthodox or heterodox in life, by examining him in words. We can only know men by their fruit. We must wait. **“By their fruits ye shall know them.”**

Our Lord introduced and closed His statement by that word; but between, He made an appeal as to the accuracy of His position, first by asking the question: **“Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”** It is as though He said, This is a true test. Is not fruit the final test of the nature of life?

Notice how He immediately proceeded - **“Even so.”**

Have you ever tried to connect that **“even so”**? Have you asked yourself why He said **“even so”**? He asked them, **“Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?”**

There was the answering, No, on the faces of the men. Perhaps they shook their heads, as though they would say, Of course not. **“Even so”** shows that He had carried their judgment, that they had agreed with Him; that it is impossible to gather fruitage from any tree save that which is the outcome of its inner life.

One of the Puritan Fathers, writing on this passage, said: "It is quite possible to put grapes on thorns. It is quite possible to put figs on thistles, but they cannot grow there."

It is quite possible for a wolf to wear a sheep's clothing, but it cannot grow a sheep's clothing. And when our Lord had asked the question, and gained the assent of the judgment of His hearers, then He made a great positive affirmation; "**Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit;**" and a great negative affirmation, "**but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit;**" and then a further negative statement; "**A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit**"

It is the repetition of a principle from which we cannot depart. We cannot gather good fruit from a corrupt tree.

We cannot make any appeal against such repetition as this, in which our Lord by affirmation, negation, question, and by renewed affirmation, stating the case from every standpoint, asserted this great truth; that the test of the prophet is the prophet's life. It is a searching word for the prophet, to be spoken quietly, to be thought of seriously; to the testing of which every man who opens his mouth to prophesy, should bring his life every day and every hour.

And once again; as to the issue, the King said, perhaps, some of the most solemn things He ever said.

Profession of allegiance is absolutely valueless. We all believe that. To hear the law, and to disobey, is the most terrible kind of profanity of which man can be guilty. This does not need arguing, but simply restating, because of its terrible solemnity and its most searching application.

You have perhaps heard somewhere a child of the slum using profane language, and you have said, He is taking the name of God in vain; it is a terrible sin. It is. But when you prayed, "**Our Father, Which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,**" unless you had let His Kingdom come in your life, your profanity was worse than the profanity of the man on the street, your blasphemy was more terrible than the blasphemy of the child of the slum.

Jesus said, "**In that day**" the light of which flames over all these days if we have but eyes to see - "**In that day**" He will say to the man who says, "**Lord, Lord,**" but does not obey Him, "**I never knew you.**"

Yes, the blasphemy of the sanctuary is more awful than the blasphemy of the slum.

To pray, "**Lord, Lord,**" and to disobey Him, is of the very essence of villainy. That is what Judas did; kissed Him, and betrayed Him! If these words of Jesus have startled us with their severity; let us know that there is a profound reason for that severity.

Finally as to the issue. This, perhaps, is a more searching word still.

“Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out demons, and in Thy name done many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.”

Listen to what they say. “We have done.” Yes, they had done everything but the Lord’s will. They had hoped to make up for disobedience to His will, in personal life, by doing many things for Him in their church, their city, and in the world. Mark well what the King said of the whole of such activity. **“Ye that work iniquity.”**

So that if it should be that we who have prophesied in His name, yet disobey Him in the individual and personal matters of our own life; if we should preach about this Manifesto, and yet not submit to the King in all the details of our life; what then? Our preaching is iniquity, our casting out of demons is a sin. All service is rejected, except the service rendered by such as are themselves doing the will of God.

Christ will say to such; **“I never knew you,”** which does not mean, I did not know about you, I do not know your name, I did not watch your life; but, **“I never knew you;”** there was no intimacy, no comradeship, no fellowship between us. You took My name to make your name; you took My name to work your miracles; you took My name for certain self-centered purposes; but you did not know Me, and I did not know you.

Here is the imperial King, in these last utterances of His Manifesto, standing in the light of **“that day”** which is to be claiming the throne, claiming that His verdict will be the final one, claiming that the final sentences will fall from His own lips.

What shall we do in the presence of these words? We had better betake ourselves to some lonely secret chamber and read them all again. We had better say, Have we ever come through the strait gate? Have we been misled by some false spirit of prophecy, which says the correct thing, and lives the wrong life? Have we been saying, **“Lord, Lord,”** and failing to do the will?

Do you think this is all hard and harsh? It is the hardness and the harshness of the Infinite love. **“Strait is the gate, narrow is the way”** - beware of anything that is false in the prophet, beware of saying, **“Lord, Lord.”** Let the light of **“that day”** flash; and the thunder of it arrest; and the fire of it affright; yet know that He will save us from the things that harm and blight and curse and spoil.

May these words with which He closes the Manifesto come into our life as a new fire, as a new force of purity.

Lastly, notice the second division of the paragraph.

There is an alternative of issues.

We need specially to remember the majesty of these last words of Christ, the marvellous claim He makes. He says, in effect: You must all build character. This is the day of character building.

This is the day in which, in our systems of pedagogy, and of philosophy, we are discussing character building. The King supremely recognizes the importance of it. He says: Every man builds. There is a common quantity in this final illustration the fact of building.

But notice the difference.

It is not in the men who build; or in the materials with which they build; but in the foundation on which they build.

The foundation is everything. We may build with the same materials, and with the same structural correctness upon sand as upon rock; and all through summer days the buildings both appear to be all right. But summer days do not exhaust the days. There are days of pelting rain, of sweeping winds and hurricanes; and those are the days that will test our buildings. Therefore, it is not so much a matter of the man building, not so much a matter of the material, but of the foundation.

Hear, then, the imperial claim of Christ.

He says: Take these sayings of Mine and build on them; and no storm can destroy your building. Hear these sayings of Mine and disobey them and remember that this has nothing to do with the man who has never heard them; he is not here in view at all; this word is not to the heathen, it is to the man who hears and disobeys, the man who has seen a vision and dreamed a dream, the man who has heard the infinite music, and will set his instruments to catch the tune you can go on building, and we may look at the structure and say: What is the use of Christianity? that house is as beautiful as this; this man's character is as beautiful as the other's. But observe it, wait, wait! Presently there will come the storms of sorrow, of bereavement and of temptation, and then presently "**that day**;" and unless there be rock foundation, the fair superstructure will be spoiled by the sweeping storm.

The King stands before all of us as He closes His Manifesto, and says, "**These sayings of Mine**;" build on them; and no storm can wreck your building. We know all this to be true. We are not discussing the Person of Christ. We are not discussing the larger question of the work of Christ.

We pause now where He ended. "**These sayings of Mine.**"

We know perfectly well that if we build on them our character will be such that no storm can wreck it. And if we will not, if we, having heard the sayings, do not obey them, there is no foundation upon which we can build a character that will weather the storm and stand to the very day of destiny.

We thus end our study of the Manifesto, listening first to a sublime claim, that His teaching is such foundation that no storm can disturb it; hearing also a message of hope, that here is stability on which we may build, knowing that our building will abide; and finally impressed by a solemn warning, that mere knowledge is of no value in the day of storm and flood.

When presently men shall rest in perfect peace, it will be within the sacred circle of this unfolding of law.

May God grant that we may be, not hearers only, but doers of the word of the King.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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