

The Gospel According to Matthew

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

MATTHEW 16:1-12

WE are now approaching the end of the second division of the book of Matthew, which deals with the King's propaganda.

- We have heard His Enunciation of Laws;
- We have seen His Exhibition of Benefits;
- We are now approaching the end of the section dealing with His Enforcement of Claims.

In this paragraph we see the last coming of the rulers to Him, before He broke with them, and the nation, and the crowds; and devoted Himself to His own disciples, and to that sacred ministry which led up to, and culminated in, the Passion.

In this paragraph, therefore, we have His last reply to the rulers during their period of probation.

After Caesarea Philippi, His relation to these men was that of judge, and His message that of denunciation. He never dealt with them again, save, directly or indirectly, to emphasize the doom that had fallen upon the nation that had rejected Him.

In this paragraph we have also the final proof of how little His disciples had understood His methods; for when He said to them after the Pharisees had left, "**Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,**" they were so dull of apprehension, that they imagined He was talking to them about a certain kind of leaven, for the Pharisees were very punctilious about leaven.

They did use certain kinds under certain circumstances, but they were particular not to use any contaminated by Gentile use. They thought that He was afraid that they would have some of the Pharisees' bread in which was leaven. He said to them, "**O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? Do ye not yet understand?**"

It is in some senses a pathetic picture of Jesus Christ which this paragraph presents to us. By the rulers of His people His laws were rejected, His benefits contemned, His claims ignored. By His own, that little group of disciples He had gathered about Him, His spiritual meanings were entirely missed.

- It is the story of the failure of His times to know Him.
- It is the story of the failure of His own disciples to appreciate Him.

The revelation that this paragraph gives us is the revelation of the absolute inability of man, unaided, to understand the highest and best things of God. We must be very careful that we do not speak of His failure. There is a danger, there is a peril, there is quite a tendency to imagine that He experimented and tried one method after another, and that when one failed He tried a new one. That is not the story.

It is rather the story of consecutive links in one great chain. The master hand forged them all. He failed at no point, but by His patient persistence toward victory, He brought into view the failure of man.

Thank God there is another chapter, the story of the Passion. Had there been nothing but Propaganda it would have been disastrous in its failure, but because there was a Passion, the Propaganda presently became powerful, and all the great harvest of that patient, suffering, lonely ministry was garnered.

Let us, then, look:

- First of all at the King and the rulers, as they are revealed to us in the first four verses;
- Then at the disciples and the King, as they are revealed to us in verses five to twelve.

In looking at the King and the rulers, the first matter that attracts our attention is the coalition of criticism.

“The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven.”

Some of us have read that so constantly, and have been so accustomed to put all these men in the same list Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes that we think of them as all alike. So they were in one particular, and yet it must have been a startling thing to those who knew them to see these men together at all, and together on a matter of religious principle, and on a mission to a religious teacher.

Who were the Pharisees?

They were the ritualists of their day; or, to use the word that more correctly reveals them, they were the traditionalists of their day. They believed in God, they believed in the work of the Holy Spirit, not exactly as we understand it to-day, but in the fact of the Spirit's operation. They believed in the essential purity and holiness of God. They believed in the fundamental things.

They believed in angels; they believed in resurrection; they held all the spiritual verities; but they hid them from the people whom they were supposed to teach and lead. They hid the spiritualities underneath the grave-clothes of ritualism and tradition. They heaped upon men's shoulders burdens too heavy to be borne, and as Jesus once said, **“will not move them with one of their fingers.”**

Who were the Sadducees?

The rationalists of their day.

- They did not believe in spirits,
- They did not believe in angels,
- They did not believe in resurrection.
- They denied all the supernatural elements in religion.
- They made religion a mere ethical code.
- They declared that a man ought to be true to certain high and noble principles without any aid from an unseen world.

The Pharisee had no dealings with the Sadducee; the Sadducee looked with supreme contempt on the Pharisee. The Sadducee would speak of the Pharisee as the man of fanaticism, as being out of date, not level with his times; that he was still enslaved, not merely by the tradition that characterized his teaching, but by these very obsolete ideas concerning angels, and demons, and resurrection, and spirits.

The Sadducee was the cultured man of the age, and nearly all the wealthy families of the time were Sadducees. The high priest himself, strange and marvelous mockery, in the midst of Hebraism was a Sadducee. It was the correct thing of the hour to be a Sadducee! They had left Jesus alone up to this point. That kind of man always professes to hold in contempt a man who believes in the spiritual and the supernatural.

These were the men who came with one purpose to ask a question, and to puzzle Jesus Christ - the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Men absolutely divided as between themselves were united on this occasion. Some of the old writers got right to the heart of this Scripture in ways that are somewhat rough. Trapp, referring to this passage, says, "Dogs, though they fight never so fierce, and mutually tear one another, yet if a hare run by, give over, and run after her."

That is the whole story of the coalition between Pharisees and Sadducees in their coming to Christ.

- The Pharisees found Him irreligious because He swept away their tradition.
- The Sadducees counted Him irrational because He insisted upon the spiritual.

Now, what was it they wanted? One is inclined to think that the Pharisees framed the request in view of the fact that the Sadducees were with them. They came and asked Him for "**a sign from heaven.**"

The emphasis is to be put on the words "**from heaven.**" The Pharisees taught that demons and false gods could give signs on earth. The feeding of five thousand or four thousand might be done by some false deity or demon: and it was a part of their teaching that signs from heaven were the final proofs of the working of God; and if the sun might be made to stand still, if fire might fall from heaven, if there might come to them some miraculous portent on the sky; then they would believe.

Jesus had been working miracles on earth healing sick, feeding men. As miracles they had the peculiar quality that they had touched the things of earth, and these men would be more impressed by a thunderbolt than by the healing of a man; by some vivid illumination of the sky in an impossible hour on a dark night, than by the fact that Jesus had gathered the hungry crowd of men and women together and fed them.

These men were always seeking the spectacular, and Jesus religiously declined to satisfy their curiosity. He could have given them signs from heaven. **“Thinkest thou,”** He said in the hour of His extremity, **“that I cannot beseech My Father, and He shall even now send Me more than twelve legions of angels?”** One sigh lifted to heaven, and all the armies of heaven would have been let loose through the ambient air!

They asked Him this question **“tempting Him,”** which means to say that they did not at all believe that He could give a sign from heaven. What they wanted to do was to lead Him out into a realm where they thought that a sign of His power could not be manifested. Perhaps in their request there was a revelation of the fact that they still believed what they had suggested so long ago, that He wrought miracles by Beelzebub.

Mark the effect of this coalition.

- The Pharisees would say, This thing can be, there can be signs out of heaven, but He cannot produce them; therefore let us ask Him to do it.
- The Sadducees would say, There could be no sign out of heaven, so you are safe in asking Him to do it.

We have two opposing ideas, but united in their opposition to Him. And so in a common hostility to Him, a common desire to see His defeat, these men came to Him.

Now mark our Lord's answer.

“He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning it will be foul weather to day, for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, Ye can discern the face of the sky: but can ye not discern the signs of the times?”

The more we ponder His method with those men, and the matchless marvel of His wisdom with them, the more we are driven into the place of adoration.

When we see the calm, quiet, satirical dignity of the whole movement; we cannot read the story of Jesus and His teaching without finding a vein of satire, but which was never cruel and brutal. It was the satire of the summer lightning that clears the atmosphere; but it could become a thunderbolt that smote to death if men persisted in hypocritical criticism.

Jesus Christ did not say these men were wrong. They came to criticize Him, but they went away criticized; they came to measure Him, but they went away measured.

He knew the measure of their incapacity as well as the measure of their ability. They were equal to watching precedents and sequences in the realm of the external, but they were not equal to watching precedents and sequences in the realm of the spiritual.

Said Jesus, “You ask Me for a sign out of heaven. The air is full of signs. All about you are the voices of the eternal and infinite speaking to you, but you are blind concerning the things of God.”

And He said much more than this. He accounted for their blindness in His use of the words “**A wicked and adulterous generation.**”

That was their measurement, that lay behind their inability, and was the reason for it.

“**Wicked**,” that described them as evil in themselves and as exerting an influence which was harmful. When Jesus used the word “**adulterous**” He did so in the spiritual realm, in the sense in which the old prophets had used it, as revealing the failure in relation between God and His people.

“**I will betroth thee unto Me forever**,” was the great love-message of God to His people. The most scathing indictment brought by the prophets against the people was that they had played the harlot. Jesus employed the prophetic message of the past and flung it red-hot upon them.

He said, “How can you interpret religion when you are wicked in yourselves, and adulterous in your relationship to God, unfaithful to the covenant with God? And now you come and ask for a sign, such a sign as will satisfy your debased and depraved nature, a sign in the realm which you think you understand.”

“**There shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.**”

That was but a repetition of what our Lord had said to them on another occasion at greater length. The sign of Jonah was not a sign given to Israel but to Nineveh. It was the sign of a man coming into Nineveh who had been flung out to death, and of that man’s preaching in Nineveh. Jesus had amplified the illustration before, when He had said:

“**For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**”

The man who had been in the heart of the fish, flung out to death, came back and preached; and the Lord told these men that the last time they would have this sign, which condemned their whole system, both of traditionalism and rationalism, would be when the voice that had been attempting to interpret the spiritualities to them, and which they would silence in death, would again be heard; and their traditional blunders would perish while His message would live on. He told the Sadducees, who held in contempt the whole story of the supernatural, that the Man whom they attempted to trap in His conversation, would come back to deny their rationalism by the fact of resurrection. That was their sign. They must wait for it.

“And He left them, and departed.” In these words we have a revelation of the hopelessness of their condition, and an account of the act of the saddened and rejected King.

Now let us turn to observe the King and His own.

They crossed over and they came to the other side, and when they got there Jesus said to them, **“Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees;”** take heed of that which is in itself corrupt, and which produces corruption; of that which is in itself disintegrating, and which, communicated to other things, will carry on that process of disintegration. **“Take heed,”** that is, *discern it, know it, be acquainted with it; literally stare at it!* And then **“Beware”** literally, *hold yourself against it.*

These were Christ’s two words concerning the leaven of the Pharisees - the influence of traditionalism; and the leaven of the Sadducees the influence of rationalism. Thus the King was guarding the religion of His own disciples, the religion for which He Himself stood, against His most insidious enemies for all time, for He knew the things that would most harm Christianity would be these two things the addition of tradition, and the subtraction of the supernatural. These repeat themselves in every successive century.

There are no men now wearing phylacteries, but there are a great many Pharisees who are saying, You must do this, which God has not commanded, or else you are not doing what God has commanded. Let us protest against that. Also against the naturalism of the Sadducees which brings Christianity to the level of a cult, of a system of ethics, of an ideal. Let us still believe in the virgin birth; let us still believe in the actual resurrection of the body of Jesus; and that at the right hand of the Majesty on high, is the Man of Nazareth, the great Mystery of spiritual omnipresence, and yet a physical form, existing in oneness with God. But how came the disciples to misinterpret Him? They said, He is warning us against them because we forgot to take bread. Perhaps their misinterpretation was due first to preoccupation of mind. They were worrying about loaves. He reminded them they had seen Him feed four thousand before, and five thousand a little earlier **“O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves?”**; do you not remember what I have done? Preoccupation with loaves was due to lack of faith. We cannot quite understand the lack of faith when we remember that they had seen Him twice over, quite recently, feed the multitudes; when we consider that

“Twas springtime when He blessed the bread,
‘Twas harvest when He brake.”

If they had seen Him feed five thousand with five loaves, surely they need not have been afraid so long as He was present.

Somehow they forgot. Let the failure of these men utter its warning to us. Let us not imagine that victory in the past means that faith will never tremble again. The disciples saw the tongues of fire only once; then they had to work the spiritual fact out in their lives. Do not let us think too much about loaves. God help us to keep our mind upon the Master. Lack of faith, which means preoccupation with loaves, issues in spiritual blindness.

What did He do with them? He chided them for their lack of faith. He revealed to them that He was more occupied with the sustenance of the spiritual than the material. And it is written that at last they understood Him. He Who turned His back in satirical scorn upon the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come for no other purpose than to tempt Him, was very patient with the blundering disciples and waited for them. Oh He is a wonderful Master! He will say it again if we do not understand it the first time. If you are a Pharisee or a Sadducee with your animosity, and your criticism, and your cleverness, He will laugh at you in high heaven, and He will turn His back upon you. But if you are a weak, trembling, foolish, frail child, thinking about loaves when you ought to be thinking about spiritual things, He will say it again. Oh it is these second things that reveal His patience!

Thus ends, as to its apparent failure, the King's enforcement of His claims.

- His laws have been enunciated and rejected;
- His benefits have been exhibited and contemned;
- His claims have been enforced and refused.

Nothing is clearer than the absolute necessity for more than propaganda in this very apparent failure of Jesus. To end here is to end at failure. Take the Gospel of Matthew and take out the last part, the story of the via dolorosa and the Passion, and the Resurrection, and Christ was a failure. But thank God the Passion is also here, and the victory is won. If He had ended here He would have been a failure, not as the Revealer of ideals, for His ideals are high and noble; not as the Teacher of an ethic, for His ethic is unmatched; but as a Helper of souls, as One able to take hold of the incompetent and make him competent. If that were the end, then our Lord was but a great Experimenter. The failure of such methods was due to man's incapacity, until touched with the new light and life to see the Kingdom and to enter in. He had said so at the beginning, "**Except one be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.**" The failure was evident to His own mind from the very beginning; but it must be revealed; and on the way to the Passion He explained it.

This explains a great deal that perplexes us. We often think God is slow in the interests of His eternal throne and universe; but things that lie hidden in human life must be wrought out into manifestation; and that accounts for the slowness of the centuries. But, as to Propaganda He added Passion, so to Passion He will add His Perfect Victory.

~ end of chapter 46 ~

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