

## **What Did Jesus Mean? - Part 1.**

### **Hating father and mother, wife and children.**

Because of interest in them which is always there, I have decided to take up in a new series of talks on this programme some of those problem passages in the Gospels - certain things Jesus said - where the meaning is obscure, has caused distress, and has been widely misunderstood. It is true that clear, straightforward, and to the point, as so much of the teaching of Jesus is, it is not without its difficulties. And people have long puzzled over them. Jesus spoke about riches, for example, and about the obstacles they can be when it comes to entering heaven. "Truly, I say to you" He said, "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19: 23,24). Here again, and one of His most notable sayings, on the subject of non-resistance to evil. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say unto you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5: 38,39). Elsewhere in what we refer to as 'The Sermon on the Mount', Jesus urged His followers "to take no thought for tomorrow" (Matthew 6:34), as if (it might well be thought) we are to leave it all to God to provide for us. Yet again, many people have been troubled about the Lord's words concerning the sin against the Holy Spirit; the sin that is never forgiven. "Whoever says a word against the Son of man", He said, "will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this life or in the life to come". (Matthew 12:32). What is the sin against the Holy Spirit, people ask. Can we know we have committed it? Is it possible that we have in fact already committed it? And that's by no means where it ends. We could go on.

In my talk I am turning to words which we find in Luke's Gospel, chapter 14, verses 25 and 26. Know and recognise them as you may well do, they are an outstanding example of the kind of difficulty which exists. We read there: "Now great multitudes accompanied Jesus; and He turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.'" Surely, it would seem, and especially when we first hear these words, one of the most extraordinary things which Jesus ever said. And, apparently, and certainly on the surface, so inconsistent with everything else He stood for.

"If you love me" He said on another occasion, "keep my commandments". And, as we know, the fourth of these Commandments reads, "Honour you father and your mother". How then, and for what possible reason, we ask, can Jesus have talked of hatred of them as a necessary requirement of discipleship? Elsewhere, and in Mark's Gospel, we read of those who sought to avoid their responsibility towards their parents, and the Lord admonished them for "making the Word of God of none effect" through their traditions (Chapter 7,13). And yet here He speaks as if it is a duty to turn our backs on family ties and to abandon those who are closest to us. "Whosoever he be of you that forsakes not all that he has, he cannot be my disciple". (Luke 14,33).

We could, of course, ignore the statement, "sweep it under the carpet" so to speak, and pretend it isn't there. That is the easy thing to do with all such difficulties. Questions have been raised as to whether Jesus in fact said these things. But there is no basis for doubting this. So what can we do but try to come to terms with them and try to discover what the Lord is teaching us by them? And this is what we are going to do here. Astounded as we are at first, we accept the fact that Jesus made this statement and we want to know what He meant by it.

Clearly, this teaching of Jesus cannot have been meant to be taken literally because, as we noted, it is so contrary to everything else He stood for. We do not believe that He would have urged on us a course of action which runs opposite to the ideals of love and mercifulness, and commitment in marriage, of which He at other times spoke so beautifully. So what did He mean? What was He saying? "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple".

Where in Matthew's Gospel a similar statement of the Lord's is recorded we find these important words also: "And a man's foes shall be they of his own household". (Matthew 10,36). It is what the Lord was implying anyway, but in Matthew the implication is spelt out. And if we think about this a moment, and consider what is meant, we begin to see the solution to the difficulties we earlier spoke about.

Throughout the Bible the human mind is likened, or compared, to a household; a household which is inhabited not by people of course, but by thoughts and ideas and by our affections and desires. "Behold" the Lord said, "I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3,10), and it is obvious that He stands at the door of our minds and knocks there, waiting for us to open it to Him. He also spoke of the need to build our house upon a rock (Matthew 7,24), by which He meant a mind, or character, having its foundations in the truths He teaches us and a life lived according to them.

As we well know, many of the thoughts which come into the household of our minds are not good thoughts. Many of the desires which find lodging in our minds are unworthy and disorderly ones. When we have been put out, hurt, or shown up by someone, the darkest thoughts will sometimes come to mind and we start nursing and harbouring the desire for revenge. And it is these which are meant by the foes of our own household. The fact is that the greatest enemies of our well-being and happiness are within ourselves

Let us look at this then in relation to the words from Luke's Gospel which are those, in particular, we have before us, and where the Lord speaks of the various members of our household whom we are to hate. "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

By "father" and "mother" we are to understand the hereditary tendencies to evil which we all have, and which they represent. By "wife", which we are also to hate, is represented affections for evils to which we can so easily become 'wedded'. By "children" are represented new evils and falsities which are conceived and born in our minds, and live by our own freely-chosen thinking and behaviour. "Brothers" and "sisters" represent various derivations of our fallen hereditary tendencies. And one's "own life" is one's selfhood.

Knowing this we can see why the Lord spoke as He did. It becomes clear what He was getting at; what He is teaching us. His words refer to the evils and falsities which are present in our hearts and minds, both those which come to us hereditarily and those which have entered since. He is speaking of man's inherent selfishness and of his fallen tendencies to love himself and the world above all things. He is speaking of our sense of self-importance and of our delight in things which gratify our ego. He is speaking of the way we incline to twist and falsify truth when it suits us to do so. "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple". The call to turn from these things and to abandon them is the same as the call which went out to Abram centuries beforehand. The Lord said to Abram, as He likewise says to us: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show you; and I will make of you a great nation; and you shall be a blessing". Traumatic as it is, we have to be prepared to make a break; to leave our old ways; to abandon our selfish and unregenerate inclinations. "He that loves his life", the Lord said, "shall lose it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal". (John 12,25).

This is what we are to hate - not people, but inclinations; not relatives, but the fallen and unregenerate tendencies we all have. "Hate" of course, is a strong word, and we may wonder at its suitability in any context connected with the Lord. We can think of it as the dictionary defines it as "strong dislike", "enmity", "ill-will" and "revulsion" and be led to ask whether the Lord might have used a milder word. But He was speaking, as we have seen, of evils and falsities, about which we can at times be too easy going, too tolerant, too inclined to listen to. There is a tendency generally not to want to acknowledge evil for what it is and to want to pass it off by some other name. Adultery becomes, in talk about it, an 'affair', theft becomes 'misappropriation'. And somehow it seems more respectable. But there is nothing respectable about it at all; no room for comfort in its presence. And this is what the Lord meant to convey. He wants us to regard with horror and revulsion the suggestions and promptings to evil which come into our minds. Here is how they are to be regarded. This is the attitude we are to have towards them.

The greatest enemies to our well-being and happiness, I said earlier, are within ourselves. And wonder at this, as you may do, it is not difficult to see how it is so. We can get to think that our enemies are outside of us. People talk in terms of circumstances going against them; of others who have opposed them; of odds stacked against them; of twists of fate, and so on. But in themselves people or circumstances are not our enemies. What are our enemies are the ways we react to these things, to our circumstances and to other people. What really is destructive and against us is the resentment and anger which wells up in response to a difficult situation or trying people. Here is where our problems lie. These are what we are to reject or overcome.

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