

What Did Jesus Mean? - Part 2

Being perfect.

Last week, I began a new series of six talks under the general heading, "What did Jesus mean?". As I said then, familiar though we may be with much of what Jesus taught, it is, at least in a number of cases, not without its problems. And the words of His which I chose last week for my introductory talk bring this home to us. Luke Chapter 24, verses 25 and 26 reads, "Now great multitudes accompanied Him: and He turned and said to them, 'If any one 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.'" How can it be, I asked, that He who spoke of the importance of love should here talk in terms of hate, commending it, even of the members of our own household and of those who should be closest to us? Our problem is resolved, when we realise that Jesus was in fact talking about the household of our minds, and the unregenerate, selfishly-orientated, ways and feelings we are to hate and leave behind. We are to leave our old 'life', with its thoughts and inclinations, for the new life to which the Lord Himself invites and beckons us.

In this second talk on such problem passages I am turning to the Sermon on the Mount and, in particular to the words of the Lord as we find them in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 5, verse 48. They read, "Be you perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Having spoken of our Father in the heavens as being the pattern for men in their attitudes towards one another, which He does in the verses immediately preceding this one, Jesus goes on to urge that we imitate Him even in His perfection. In the same way that God makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and as He sends rain on the just and on the unjust, so likewise we are to love our enemies, to bless them that curse us, to do good to them that hate us, and to pray for them which despitefully use us, and persecute us. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect".

I include this among the problem passages in the Gospels for what are, I believe, obvious reasons. As we commonly use the word today, 'perfect' means something which hasn't a flaw, which is unmarked, and faultless in every way. An object, a vehicle, a piece of furniture, or whatever, which is said to be in perfect order suggests to us all of these things. If there is a fault, a mark, a scratch, or a crack, then it is imperfect.

And here is where our difficulty enters in. How can we be faultless? Ever hope to be perfect? We readily grant that the Lord our heavenly Father is, but to talk of it so far as we are concerned seems to be both unreal and impractical. We are much too conscious of our faults and shortcomings. We know our lack of resolve and bring to mind things from the past which make us very imperfect people. What therefore, we ask, was the Lord getting at? Is it some unrealistic ideal, as at first it seems to be? Something which is fine in theory but which we might just as well ignore in practice? Or is this teaching which needs to be understood in some other way? "Be you perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect".

We do well to pause a moment to consider more carefully the use of the word 'perfect' and the way in which it is used here. Even in English its meaning is not confined to faultlessness, for all that we commonly associate this with it. It can also mean what is complete, entire, or whole. And when we look more closely at what is involved we find that this in fact is the meaning which Jesus intended it to convey. So also, it might be noted, He used the same word later on in Matthew's Gospel where His conversation with the rich young man is recorded. "If you will be perfect" the Lord said to him; or, in other words, "If you will be complete or whole"; "go and sell that you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." (Chapter 19, 21).

But this, quite clearly, raises a further question. In what way, we ask, is the Lord our Father in the heavens, 'complete' or 'whole'? And the answer is that Love and Wisdom are united together in Him. The one is in harmony with the other. Though they can be spoken of separately yet in God they make one. There is not too much Wisdom or too much Love. Each is, in a sense, the other side of the other. From Love, for example, the Lord desires the salvation and eternal happiness of all people everywhere. But He can only achieve that objective through Wisdom; that is, by safeguards for man's spiritual freedom, for instance, and by setting before him the truths which he must himself want to live by if that happiness is to be attained. "The Divine Love" wrote Swedenborg "wills to save all, but it can only save through wisdom". (*The Divine Love and Wisdom*, 37). Both must be present and, indeed, are present, in equal measure. And this is what constitutes the Lord's 'wholeness'. This is what makes Him 'perfect'. What then, was Jesus urging upon us? "Be you perfect (or complete)" He said, "even as your Father in heaven is perfect (or complete)".

He was - and is - urging on us a similar union of love and wisdom, of good and truth, of faith and charity, in our own lives. He is saying that man is incomplete, that he is imperfect, if these exist in unequal measure with him. Knowledge of truth, whilst it is important, yet by itself makes us an incomplete person. It must be united with the sincere endeavour to apply that knowledge, at every opportunity in our day to day living. Equally, good intentions and external good works, by themselves, also make us incomplete. These must be united with the truth which will guide those good intentions and those good works into the best channels of usefulness. And it is the union of the two, each complementing the other, interacting harmoniously together, which is the perfection to which the Lord would have us aspire. It does not mean faultlessness, or a character without blemish. This is not what the Lord was saying. Nothing so impossible is involved.

I stress the point, because it is important, that each - faith and charity, truth and good - have an equal part to play. Just as there are dangers in learning without applying to life what we learn, so there are dangers in doing without learning. We cannot love, or do good, but that we are guided how to love and as to what is good. Unless we have been instructed, and in the absence of that instruction, we can easily do harm when we thought to do good. Truth gives love its power, and love, in turn, enlivens and enriches the knowledges of truth we have.

The relationship between faith and charity, or between truth and good, in a person, is described in many places in the Scriptures. It is described in the parable of the ten virgins, for example, five of whom were wise and five of whom were foolish. Some had lamps and oil and were ready when the Bridegroom called them. Others only had lamps and no oil, and they represent people who have and know truth but not the love of willingness to live according to it. Here again people who know Divine teaching but who do not live according to it are meant where the Lord says, "Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my father which is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21). So also the story of Cain and Abel, understood in the light of its internal, spiritual meaning. Like Cain and Abel faith and charity are blood brothers. One can't exist without the other. Each is his brother's keeper. And the warning of the story is the danger of exalting one over the other.

We are being urged in these words of Jesus to pattern ourselves on God in Whom, as we have seen, there exists a perfect union between His Love and His Wisdom. A person may know very little truth and have only a very general idea of his responsibility towards his neighbour; and yet if he sincerely applies that little which he does know then he has attained the ideal of which the Lord spoke. The perfection lies in the union; not in the amount which is known. Capacity though we all have to become angels of the highest heaven, this is not what the Lord is requiring of us. Little though we know, halting though our efforts may be, mistakes though we may make, yet if we put into practice what it is we do know, perfection comes into being and there in an image, and after His likeness, exists a reflection of the perfection which is in God Himself.

As it has been so rightly said, "Love from God in man's will, and wisdom from God in man's understanding, make man an image of God; and man is a perfect image so far as these principles are united in his mind and in his life... The union of love and wisdom, or of good and truth, of charity and faith, of will and understanding, of doctrine and life - this is perfection; and to this perfection all can attain". (W. Bruce, *Commentary on Matthew*, page 138).

Last week we had before us a statement of the Lord's which, on the surface, seems so out of character with all that He stood for. And that was our difficulty. Tonight it has been teaching which, as it stands, suggests an impractical and out-of-reach ideal. Indeed it can be a source of considerable discouragement because at first it brings to mind something that few, if any, people can possibly attain. But when we see what is involved all this changes and, instead, it becomes a source of great re-assurance and encouragement.

I shall be continuing this series of talks next week, with the third, on The Sin against the Holy Spirit.

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