

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

12:38-50

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

The beginning of this passage is one of those places which strikingly illustrate the truth of Old Testament history. Our Lord speaks of the Queen of the South as a real, true person, who had lived and died. He refers to the story of Jonah, and his miraculous preservation in the whale's belly, as undeniable matters of fact. Let us remember this if we hear men professing to believe the writers of the New Testament, and yet sneering at the things recorded in the Old Testament as if they were fables. Such men forget that in so doing they pour contempt upon Christ himself. The authority of the Old Testament and the authority of the New stand or fall together; the same Spirit inspired men to write of Solomon and Jonah who inspired the evangelists to write of Christ. These are not unimportant points in this day: let them be well fixed in our minds. The first practical lesson which demands our attention in these verses is the amazing power of unbelief. We should mark how the scribes and Pharisees call upon our Lord to show them more miracles. "Master, we would see a sign from thee." They pretended that they only wanted more evidence in order to be convinced and become disciples: they shut their eyes to the many wonderful works which Jesus had already done. It was not enough for them that he had healed the sick, and cleansed the lepers, raised the dead, and cast out demons: they were not yet persuaded; they yet demanded more proof. They would not see what our Lord plainly pointed at in his reply "that they had no real will to believe. There was evidence enough to convince them, but they had no wish to be convinced. There are many in the church of Christ who are exactly in the state of these scribes and Pharisees. They flatter themselves that they only require a little more proof to become decided Christians. They fancy that if their reason and intellect could only be met with some additional arguments, they would at once give up all for Christ's sake, take up the cross, and follow him. But in the meantime they wait. Alas, for their blindness! They will not see that there is abundance of evidence on every side of them. The truth is that they do not want to be convinced. May we all be on our guard against the spirit of unbelief: it is a growing evil in these latter days. Want of simple childlike faith is an increasing feature of the times, in every rank of society. The true explanation of a hundred strange things that startle us in the conduct of leading men in churches and states is downright want of faith. Men who do not believe all that God says in the Bible must necessarily take a vacillating and undecided line on moral and religious questions. "If ye will not believe surely ye shall not be established." (i.e. Isaiah 7:9) The second practical lesson which meets us in these verses is the immense danger of a partial and imperfect religious reformation. We should mark what an awful picture our Lord draws of the man to whom the unclean spirit returns after having once left him. How fearful are those words: "I will return into my house from whence I came out." How vivid that description: "It findeth it empty swept and garnished." How

tremendous the conclusion: "He taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and the last state that man is worse than the first." It is a picture most painfully full of meaning. Let us scan it closely, and learn wisdom. It is certain that we have in this picture the history of the Jewish church and nation at the time of our Lord's coming. Called as they were at first out of Egypt to be God's peculiar people, they never seem to have wholly lost the tendency to worship idols. Redeemed as they afterwards were from the captivity of Babylon, they never seem to have rendered to God a due return for his goodness. Aroused as they had been by John the Baptist's preaching, their repentance appears to have been only skin-deep. At the time when our Lord spoke they had become, as a nation, hardy and more perverse than ever. The grossness of idol-worship had given place to the deadness of mere formality: seven other spirits worse than the first had taken possession of them. Their last state was rapidly becoming worse than the first: yet forty years, and their iniquity came to the full. They madly plunged into a war with Rome; Judea became a very Babel of confusion; Jerusalem was taken; the temple was destroyed: the Jews were scattered over the face of the earth. Again it is highly probable that we have in this picture the history of the whole body of Christian churches. Delivered as they were from heathen darkness by the preaching of the Gospel, they have never really lived up to their light. Revived as many of them were at the time of the Protestant Reformation, they have none of them made a right use of their privileges, or gone on to perfection: they have all more or less stopped short and rested on their lees. They have all been too ready to be satisfied with mere external amendments. And now there are painful symptoms in many quarters that the evil spirit has returned to his house, and is preparing an outbreak of infidelity and false doctrine, such as the churches have never yet seen. Between unbelief in some quarters, and formal superstition in others, everything seems ripe for some fearful manifestation of antichrist. It may well be feared that the last state of the professing Christian churches will prove worse than the first. Saddest and worst of all, we have in this picture the history of many an individual's soul. There are men who seemed at one time of their lives to be under the influence of strong religious feelings: they reformed their ways; they laid aside many things that were bad; they took up many things that were good. But they stopped there, and went no further, and by and by gave up religion altogether. The evil spirit returned to their hearts, and found them empty, swept, and garnished. They are now worse than they ever were before. Their consciences seem seared; their sense of religious things appears entirely destroyed—they are like men given over to a reprobate mind. One would say it was impossible to renew them to repentance. None prove so hopelessly wicked as those who after experiencing strong religious convictions have gone back again to sin and the world. If we love life, let us pray that these lessons may be deeply impressed on our minds. Let us never be content with a partial reformation of life, without thorough conversion to God, and mortification of the whole body of sin. It is a good thing to strive to cast sin out of our hearts, but let us take care that we also receive the grace of God in its place. Let us make sure that we not only get rid of the old tenant, the devil, but have also got dwelling in us the Holy ghost. The last practical lesson which meets us in these verses is the tender affection with which the Lord Jesus regards his true disciples. We should mark how he speaks of everyone who does the will of his Father in heaven. He says the same is my brother and sister and mother. What gracious words these are! Who can conceive the depth of our dear Lord's love towards his relatives according to the flesh? It was a pure, unselfish love. It must have been a mighty love, a love that passes man's understanding. Yet here we see that all his believing people are counted as his relatives: he loves them, feels for them, cares for them as members of his family, bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. There is a solemn warning here to all who mock and persecute true Christians on account of their religion. They consider not what they are doing; they are persecuting the near relatives of the King of kings. They will

find at the last day that they have mocked those whom the Judge of all regards as his «brother and sister and mother.» There is rich encouragement here for all believers. They are far more precious in their Lord's eyes than they are in their own. Their faith may be feeble, their repentance weak, their strength small: they may be poor and needy in this world; but there is a glorious «whosoever» in the last verse of this chapter which ought to cheer them. «whosoever» believes is a near relative of Christ: the Elder Brother will provide for him in time and eternity, and never let him be cast away. There is not one «little sister» in the family of the redeemed, whom Jesus does not remember (i Cant. 8:8). Joseph provided richly for all his relatives, and the Lord Jesus will provide for his.

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