

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

13:1-23

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

The chapter which these verses begin is remarkable for the number of parables which it contains. Seven striking illustrations of spiritual truth are here drawn by the great head of the church from the book of nature. By so doing he shows us that religious teaching may draw help from everything in creation. Those that would "find out acceptable words" should not forget this. (Eccl 12:10) The parable of the sower, which begins this chapter, is one of those parables which admit of a very wide application. It is being continually verified under our own eyes. Wherever the Word of God is preached or expounded and people are assembled to hear it, the sayings of our Lord in this parable are found to be true. It describes what goes on, as a general rule, in all congregations. Let us learn in the first place, from this parable that the work of the preacher resembles that of the sower. Like the sower, the preacher must sow good seed if he wants to see fruit. He must sow the pure Word of God, and not the traditions of the church or the doctrines of men. Without this, his labor will be vain. He may go to and fro, and seem to say much, and to work much in his weekly round of ministerial duty, but there will be no harvest of souls for heaven, no living results, and no conversions. Like the sower, the preacher must be diligent. He must spare no pains; he must use every possible means to make his work prosper; he must patiently sow beside all waters, and sow in hope. He must "sow instant in season and out of season," he must not be deterred by difficulties and discouragements; "he that observeth the wind shall not sow." No doubt his success does not entirely depend upon his labor and diligence, but without labor and diligence success will not be obtained. (Isa 32:20 2 Tim 4:2 Eccl 11:4) Like the sower, the preacher cannot give life. He can scatter the seed committed to his charge, but he cannot command it to grow: he may offer the word of truth to a people, but he cannot make them receive it and bear fruit. To give life is God's solemn prerogative: "It is the Spirit that quickeneth." God alone can "give the increase." (John 6:63 1 Corinthians 3:7). Let these things sink down into our hearts. It is no light thing to be a real minister of God's Word. To be an idle, formal workman in the church is an easy business; to be a faithful sower is very hard. Preachers ought to be specially remembered in our prayers. In the next place let us learn from this passage that there are various ways of hearing the Word of God without benefit. We may listen to a sermon with a heart like the hard wayside, careless, thoughtless, and unconcerned. Christ crucified may be affectionately set before us, and we may hear of his sufferings with utter indifference, as a subject in which we have no interest. Fast as the words fall on our ears, the devil may pluck them away, and we may go home as if we had not heard a sermon at all. Alas, there are many such hearers! It is as true of them as of the idols of old, "they have eyes, have they but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not" (Psalm 135:16-17). Truth seems to have no more effect on their hearts than water on a

stone. We may listen to a sermon with pleasure, while the impression produced on us is only temporary and short-lived. Our hearts, like the stony ground, may yield a plentiful crop of warm feelings and good resolutions; but all this time there may be no deeply-rooted work in our souls, and the first cold blast of opposition or temptation may cause our seeming religion to wither away. Alas, there are many such hearers! The mere love of sermons is no sign of grace. Thousands of baptized people are like the Jews of Ezekiel's day: Thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words but they do them not. (i» Ezekiel 33:32). We may listen to a sermon and approve of every word it contains, and yet get no good from it in consequence of the absorbing influence of this world. Our hearts, like the thorny ground, may be choked with a rank crop of cares, pleasures and worldly plans. We may really like the Gospel, and wish to obey it, and yet insensibly give it no chance of bearing fruit, by allowing other things to fill a place in our affections, until they occupy our whole hearts. Alas, there are many such hearers! They know the truth well: they hope one day to be decided Christians; but they never come to the point of giving up all for Christ's sake. They never make up their minds to seek first the kingdom of God and so die in their sins. These are points that we ought to weigh well. We should never forget that there are more ways than one of hearing the Word without profit. It is not enough that we come to hear: we may come and be careless. It is not enough that we are not careless hearers: our impressions may be only temporary and ready to perish. It is not enough that our impressions are not merely temporary; but they may be continually yielding no result, in consequence of our obstinate cleaving to the world. Truly the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it? (i» In the last place, let us learn from this parable that there is only one evidence of hearing the Word rightly. That evidence is to bear fruit. The fruit here spoken of is the fruit of the Spirit. Repentance towards God, faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ, holiness of life and character, prayerfulness, humility, charity, spiritual mindedness—these are the only satisfactory proofs that the seed of God's Word is doing its proper work in our souls. Without such proofs our religion is vain, however high our profession: it is no better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Christ has said, I have chosen you and ordained you that ye should go and bring forth fruit. (i» John 15:16). There is no part of the whole parable more important than this. We must never be content with a barren orthodoxy, and a coldly maintenance of correct theological views; we must not be satisfied with clear knowledge, warm feelings, and a decent profession; we must see to it that the Gospel we profess to love produces positive fruit in our hearts and lives. This is real Christianity. These words of St. James should often ring in our ears: Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. (i» James 1:22). Let us not leave these verses without putting to ourselves the important question, How do we hear? We live in a Christian country; we probably go to a place of worship Sunday after Sunday, and hear sermons. In what spirit do we hear them? What effect have they upon our characters? Can we point to anything that deserves the name of fruit? We may rest assured that to reach heaven at last it needs something more than to go to church regularly on Sundays and listen to preachers. The Word of God must be received into our hearts, and become the mainspring of our conduct: it must produce practical impressions on our inward man, that shall appear in our outward behaviour. If it does not do this, it will only add to our condemnation on the day of judgment.

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