

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

16:1-12

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

In these verses we find our Lord assailed by the untiring enmity of the Pharisees and Sadducees. As a general rule these two sects were at enmity between themselves; in persecuting Christ, however, they made common cause. Truly it was an unholy alliance! Yet how often we see the same thing in the present day. Men of the most opposite opinions and habits will agree in disliking the Gospel, and will work together to oppose its progress. "There is no new thing under the sun" (i.e. Ecclesiastes 1:9). The first point in this passage which deserves special notice is the repetition which our Lord makes of words used by him on a former occasion. He says, "a wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it but the sign of the prophet Jonah." If we turn to the twelfth chapter of this gospel and the thirty ninth verse, we shall find that he had said the very same thing once before. This repetition may seem a trifling and unimportant matter in the eyes of some. But it is not so in reality. It throws light on a subject which has perplexed the minds of many sincere lovers of the Bible, and ought therefore to be specially observed. This repetition shows us that our Lord was in the habit of saying the same things over again. He did not content himself with saying a thing once, and afterwards never repeating it. It is evident that it was his custom to bring forward certain truths again and again, and thus to impress them more deeply on the minds of his disciples. He knew the weakness of our memories on spiritual things; he knew that what we hear twice, we remember better than what we hear once. He therefore brought out of his treasury old things as well as new. Now what does all this teach us? It teaches us that we need not be so anxious to harmonize the narratives we read in the four Gospels, as many are disposed to be. It does not follow that the sayings of our Lord which we find the same in St. Matthew and St. Luke, were always used at the same time, or that the events with which they are connected must necessarily be the same. St. Matthew may be describing one event in our Lord's life; St. Luke may be describing another: and yet the words of our Lord, on both occasions, may have been precisely alike. To attempt to make out the two events to be one and the same because of the sameness of the words used has often led Bible students into great difficulties. It is far safer to hold the view here maintained that at different times our Lord often used the same words. The second point which deserves special notice in these verses is the solemn warning which our Lord takes occasion to give to his disciples. His mind was evidently pained with the false doctrines which he saw among the Jews, and the pernicious influence which they exercised. He seizes the opportunity to utter a caution. "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of Sadducees." Let us mark well what those words contain. To whom was this warning addressed? To the twelve apostles, to the first ministers of the church of Christ, to men who had forsaken all for the Gospel's sake! Even they are warned! The best of men are only men, and

at any time may fall into temptation. ¶ Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall! ¶ (1 Corinthians 10:12). If we love life, and would see good days, let us never think that we do not need that hint: ¶ Take heed and beware. ¶ Against what does our Lord warn his apostles? Against the doctrine of the Pharisees and of Sadducees. The Pharisees, we are frequently told in the Gospels, were self-righteous formalists; the Sadducees were skeptics, freethinkers, and half infidels. Yet even Peter, James, and John must beware of their doctrines! Truly the best and holiest of believers may well be on his guard! By what figure does our Lord describe the false doctrines against which he cautions his disciples? He calls them leaven. Like leaven, they might seem a small thing compared to the whole body of truth; like leaven, once admitted they would work secretly and noiselessly; like leaven, they would gradually change the whole character of the religion with which they were mixed. How much is often contained in a single word! It was not merely the open danger of heresy but leaven of which the apostles were to beware. There is much in all this that calls loudly for the close attention of all professing Christians. The caution of our Lord in this passage has been shamefully neglected. It would have been well for the church of Christ if the warnings of the Gospel had been as much studied as its promises. Let us then remember that this saying of our Lord's about the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees was intended for all time. It was not meant only for the generation to which it was spoken; it was meant for the perpetual benefit of the church of Christ. He who spoke it saw with prophetic eye the future history of Christianity. The Great Physician knew well that Pharisaic doctrines and Sadducee doctrines would prove the two great wasting diseases of his church until the end of the world. He would have us know that there will always be Pharisees and Sadducees in the ranks of Christians. Their succession shall never fail; their generation shall never become extinct. Their name may change, but their spirit will always remain. Therefore he cries to us, ¶ Take heed and beware! ¶ Finally, let us make a personal use of this caution, by keeping up a holy jealousy over our own souls. Let us remember that we live in a world where Pharisaism and Sadduceeism are continually striving for the mastery in the church of Christ. Some want to add to the Gospel, and some want to take away from it; some would bury it, and some would pare it down to nothing; some would stifle it by heaping on additions, and some would bleed it to death by subtraction from its truths. Both parties agree only in one respect: both would kill and destroy the life of Christianity if they succeeded in having their own way. Against both errors let us watch and pray, and stand upon guard. Let us not add to the Gospel, to please the Roman catholic Pharisee; let us not subtract from the Gospel, to please the neologian Sadducee. Let our principle be ¶ the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; ¶ nothing added to it, and nothing taken away.

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