

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

16:13-20

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

There are words in this passage which have led to painful differences and divisions among Christians. Men have striven and contended about their meaning till they have lost sight of all charity, and yet have failed to carry conviction to one another's minds. Let it suffice us to glance briefly at the controverted words, and then pass on to more practical lessons. What then are we to understand, when we read that remarkable saying of our Lord, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." Does it mean that the apostle Peter himself was to be the foundation on which Christ's church was to be built? Such an interpretation, to say the least, appears exceedingly improbable. To speak of an erring, fallible child of Adam as the foundation of the spiritual temple is very unlike the ordinary language of Scripture. Above all, no reason can be given why our Lord should not have said, "I will build my church upon thee," if such had been his meaning, instead of saying, "I will build my church upon this rock." The true meaning of the "rock" in this passage appears to be the truth of our Lord's messiahship and divinity, which Peter had just confessed. It is as though our Lord had said, "thou art rightly called by the name Peter, or stone, for thou hast confessed that mighty truth on which, as on a rock, I will build my church." [There is nothing modern, or peculiarly Protestant, in the view here maintained. It was held by Chrysostom long ago. It was taught by Ferus, a famous Roman Catholic preacher of the Franciscan order, at Mainz in the sixteenth century, in his homilies on St. Matthew. It may be well to remark in this place, that it is a complete delusion to suppose that the Scriptures can be interpreted according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.] There is no such unanimous consent! It is a mere high-sounding phrase, utterly destitute of any foundation in facts. The Fathers disagree as much in explaining Scripture as Whitby and Gill, or Matthew Henry and D'Oyly and Mant.] But what are we to understand when we read the promise which our Lord makes to Peter: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Do these words mean that the right of admitting souls to heaven was to be placed in Peter's hands? The idea is preposterous. Such an office is the special prerogative of Christ himself (1 Cor. 15:27). Do the words mean that Peter was to have any primacy or superiority over the rest of the apostles? There is not the slightest proof that such a meaning was attached to the words in New Testament times, or that Peter had any rank or dignity above the rest of the twelve. The true meaning of the promise to Peter appears to be that he was to have the special privilege of first opening the door of salvation, both to the Jews and Gentiles. This was fulfilled to the letter when he preached on the day of Pentecost to the Jews, and visited the Gentile Cornelius at his own house. On each occasion he used "the keys," and threw open the door of faith. Of this he seems to have been sensible himself. "God," he

says, "I made choice among us that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15:7). Finally, what are we to understand when we read the words, " whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"? Does this mean that the apostle Peter was to have any power of forgiving sins, and absolving sinners? Such an idea is derogatory to Christ's special office, as our great High Priest. It is a power which we never find Peter, or any of the apostles, once exercising. They always refer men to Christ. The true meaning of this promise appears to be that Peter and his brethren, the apostles, were to be specially commissioned to teach with authority the way of salvation. As the Old Testament priest declared authoritatively whose leprosy was cleansed, so the apostles were appointed to declare and pronounce authoritatively whose sins were forgiven. Beside this, they were to be specially inspired to lay down rules and regulations for the guidance of the church on disputed questions. Some things they were to bind or forbid; others they were to loose or allow. The decision of the Council at Jerusalem that the Gentiles need not be circumcised was one example of the exercise of this power; but it was a commission specially confined to the apostles. In discharging it they had no successors. With them it began, and with them it expired. We will leave these controverted words here: enough perhaps has been said upon them for our personal edification. Let us only remember that, in whatsoever sense men take them, they have nothing to do with the Church of Rome. Let us now turn our attention to points which more immediately concern our own souls. In the first place, let us admire the noble confession which the apostle Peter makes in this passage. He says, in reply to our Lord's question, "Whom say ye that I am?" "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." At first sight, a careless reader may see nothing very remarkable in these words of the apostle: he may be think it extraordinary that they should call forth such strong commendation from our Lord: but such thoughts arise from ignorance and inconsideration. Men forget that it is a widely different thing to believe in Christ's divine mission when we dwell in the midst of professing Christians, and to believe in it when we dwell in the midst of hardened and unbelieving Jews. The glory of Peter's confession lies in this, that he made it when few were with Christ and many against him. He made it when the rulers of his own nation, the scribes, priests and Pharisees, were all opposed to his Master; he made it when our Lord was in the form of a servant, without wealth, without royal dignity, without any visible mark of a King. To make such a confession at such a time, required great faith and great decision of character. The confession itself, as Brentius says, was an epitome of all Christianity, and a compendium of true doctrine about religion. Therefore it was that our Lord said, "Blessed art thou, Simon bar Jonah." We shall do well to copy that hearty zeal and affection which Peter displayed. We are perhaps too much disposed to underrate this holy man, because of his occasional instability, and his thrice repeated denial of his Lord. This is a great mistake. With all his faults, Peter was a true hearted fervent, single-minded servant of Christ; with all his imperfections, he has given us a pattern that many Christians would do wisely to follow. Zeal like his may have its ebbs and flows, and sometimes lacks steadiness of purpose; zeal like his may be ill-directed, and sometimes make sad mistakes: but zeal like his is not to be despised. It awakens up the sleeping; it stirs the sluggish; it provokes others to exertion. Anything is better than sluggishness, luke-warmness and torpor in the church of Christ. Happy would it have been for Christendom had there been more Christians like Simon Peter and Martin Luther. In the next place let us take care that we understand what our Lord means when he speaks of his church. The church which Jesus promises to build upon a rock is the blessed company of all faithful people. It is not the visible church of any one nation, country or place: it is the whole body of believers of every age, and tongue and people. It is a church composed of all who are washed in Christ's blood, clothed in

Christ's righteousness, renewed by Christ's Spirit, joined to Christ by faith, and epistles of Christ in life; it is a church of which every member is baptized with the Holy Ghost, and is really and truly holy; it is a church which is one body. All who belong to it are of one heart and one mind, and hold the same truths, and believe the same doctrines as necessary to salvation. It is a church which has only one head: that head is Jesus Christ himself. "He is the head of the body" (Colossians 1:18). Let us beware of mistakes on this subject. Few words are so much misunderstood as the word "church"; few mistakes have so much injured the cause of pure religion. Ignorance on this point has been a fertile source of bigotry, sectarianism and persecution. Men have wrangled and contended about Episcopal, Presbyterian and Independent churches as if it were necessary to salvation to belong to some particular party, and as if, belonging to that party, we must of course belong to Christ. All this time they have lost sight of the one true church, outside of which there is no salvation at all. It will matter nothing at the last day where we have worshiped, if we are not found members of the true church of God's elect. In the last place, let us mark the glorious promises which our Lord makes to his church. He says: "The gates of Hell will not prevail against it". The meaning of this promise is that the power of Satan shall never destroy the people of Christ. He that brought sin and death into the first creation by tempting Eve shall never bring ruin on the new creation by overthrowing believers. The mystical body of Christ shall never perish or decay. Though often persecuted, afflicted, distressed and brought low, it shall never come to an end: it shall outlive the wrath of Pharaohs and Roman Emperors. Visible churches, like Ephesus, may come to nothing; but the true church never dies. Like the bush that Moses saw, it may burn, but shall not be consumed. Every member of it shall be brought safe to glory. In spite of falls, failures and shortcomings, in spite of the world, the flesh and the devil, no member of the true church shall ever be cast away (John 10:28).

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