

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

17:14-21

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Transcript

We read in this passage another of our Lord's great miracles. He heals a young man lunatic and possessed with a devil. The first thing we see in these verses is a lively emblem of the awful influence sometimes exercised by Satan over the young. We are told of a certain man's son, who was lunatic and sore vexed. We are told of the evil spirit pressing him on to the destruction of body and soul: "oftimes he falleth into the fire and oft into the water." It was one of those cases of Satanic possession which, however common in our Lord's times, in our own day is rarely seen; but we can easily imagine that, when they did occur, they must have been peculiarly distressing to the relations of the afflicted. It is painful enough to see the bodies of those we love wracked by disease: how much more painful must it have been to see body and mind completely under the influence of the devil! "Out of hell," says Bishop Hall, "there could not be greater misery." But we must not forget that there are many instances of Satan's spiritual dominion over young people which are quite as painful, in their way, as the case described in this passage. There are thousands of young men who seem to have wholly given themselves up to Satan's temptations, and to be led captive at his will (2 Timothy). They cast off all fear of God, and all respect for his commandments; they serve divers lusts and pleasures; they run wildly into every excess of riot; they refuse to listen to the advice of parents, teachers or ministers; they fling aside all regard for health, character or worldly respectability. They do all that lies in their power to ruin themselves, body and soul, for time and eternity: they are willing bond-slaves of Satan. Who has not seen such young men? They are to be seen in town and in country; they are to be found among rich and among poor. Surely such young men give mournful proof that although Satan nowadays seldom has possession of people's bodies, he still exercises a fearful dominion over some men's souls. Yet even about such young men as these be it remembered we must never despair. We must call to mind the almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Bad as this boy's case was of whom we read in these verses, he was cured from the very hour that he was brought to Christ! Parents, and teachers and ministers should go on praying for young men, even at their worst. Hard as their hearts seem now, they may yet be softened: desperate as their wickedness now appears, they may yet be healed. They may yet repent and be converted, like John Newton, and their last state prove better than their first. Who can tell? Let it be a settled principle with us when we read our Lord's miracles never to despair of the conversion of any soul. In the second place we see in these verses a striking example of the weakening effect of unbelief. The disciples anxiously inquired of our Lord, when they saw the devil yielding to his power, "Why could not we cast him out?" They received an answer full of the deepest instruction: "Because of your unbelief." Would they know the secret of their own sad failure in the

hour of need? It was want of faith. Let us ponder this point well and learn wisdom. Faith is the key to success in the Christian warfare. Unbelief is the sure road to defeat. Once let our faith languish and decay, and all our graces will languish with it. Courage, patience, long-suffering and hope will soon wither and dwindle away: faith is the root on which they all depend. The same Israelites who at one time went through the Red Sea in triumph, at another time shrunk from danger like cowards when they reached the borders of the promised land. Their God was the same who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; their leader was the same Moses who had worked so many wonders before their eyes; but their faith was not the same. They gave way to shameful doubts of God's love and power. "They could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19). In the last place we see in these verses that Satan's kingdom is not to be pulled down without diligence and pains. This seems to be the lesson of the verse which concludes the passage we are now considering: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." A gentle rebuke to the disciples appears to be implied in the words. Perhaps they had been too lifted up by past successes; perhaps they had been less careful in the use of means in their Master's absence than they were under their Master's eye. At any rate they receive a plain hint from our Lord that the warfare against Satan must never be lightly carried on. They are warned that no victories are to be won easily over the prince of this world. Without fervent prayer and diligent self-mortification, they would often meet with failure and defeat. The lesson here laid down is one of deep importance. "I would," says Bullinger, "that this part of the Gospel pleased us as much as those parts which concede liberty." We are all apt to contract a habit of doing religious acts in a thoughtless, perfunctory way. Like Israel, puffed up with the fall of Jericho, we are ready to say to ourselves, "The men of Ai are but few." (Joshua 7:3); "There is no need to put forth all our strength." Like Israel, we often learn by bitter experience that spiritual battles are not to be won without hard fighting. The ark of the Lord must never be handled irreverently; God's work must never be carelessly done. May we all bear in mind our Lord's words to his disciples, and make a practical use of them. In the pulpit and on the platform, in the Sunday school and in the district, in our use of family prayers and in reading our own Bibles, let us diligently watch our own spirit. Whatever we do, let us do it with our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10). It is a fatal mistake to underrate our foes. Greater is he that is for us than he that is against us, but, for all that, he that is against us is not to be despised. He is the "prince of this world" (John); he is a "strong man, armed, keeping his house" keeping his house, who will not "go out" and part with his goods without a struggle. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, (Ephesians 6:12). We have need to take the whole armor of God, and not only to take it, but to use it too. We may be very sure that those who win most victories over the world, the flesh and the devil are those who pray most in private and keep under their bodies and bring them into subjection." (1 Corinthians 9:27).

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