

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

17:22-27

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

These verses contain a circumstance in our Lord's history which is not recorded by any of the evangelists excepting St. Matthew. A remarkable miracle is worked in order to provide payment of the tribute money required for the service of the temple. There are three striking points in the narrative which deserve attentive observation. Let us in the first place observe our Lord's perfect knowledge of everything that is said and done in this world. We are told that "those who received tribute money came to Peter and said, 'Does not your master pay tribute?' he sayeth 'yes.' It is evident that our Lord was not present when the question was asked and the answer given; and yet no sooner did Peter come into the house than our Lord asked him, 'What thinkest thou Simon of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute?' He howed that he was as well acquainted with the conversation as if he had been listening or standing by. There is something unspeakably solemn in the thought that the Lord Jesus knows all things. There is an eye that sees all our daily conduct; there is an ear that hears all our daily words. All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. Concealment is impossible; hypocrisy is useless. We may deceive ministers; we may impose upon our relations and neighbors: but the Lord sees us through and through. We cannot deceive Christ. We ought to endeavor to make practical use of this truth. We should strive to live as in the Lord's sight and, like Abraham, to "walk before" him (i.e. Genesis 17:1). Let it be our daily aim to say nothing we would not like Christ to hear, and to do nothing we would not like Christ to see. Let us measure every difficult question as to right and wrong by one simple test: "How would I behave if Jesus were standing by my side?" Such a standard is not extravagant and absurd. It is a standard that interferes with no duty or relation of life; it interferes with nothing but sin. Happy is he that tries to realize his Lord's presence, and to do all and say all as unto Christ. Let us observe in the next place our Lord's almighty power over all creation. He makes a fish his paymaster: he makes a dumb creature bring the tribute money to meet the collector's demand. Well says Jerome, "I know not which to admire most here, our Lord's foreknowledge or his greatness." We see here a literal fulfillment of the Psalmist's words: "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas" (Psalm 8:6-8). Here is one among many proofs of the majesty and greatness of our Lord Jesus Christ. He only who first created could at his will command the obedience of all his creatures. "By him were all things created. - by him all things consist." (Col. 1:16-18) The believer who goes out to do Christ's work among the heathen may safely commit himself to his Master's keeping: he serves one who has all power, even over the beasts of the earth.

How wonderful the thought that such an almighty Lord should condescend to be crucified for our salvation! How comfortable the thought that when he comes again the second time he will gloriously manifest his power over all created things to the whole world: "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock, and but dust shall be the serpent's meat." (Isaiah 65:25). In the last place let us observe in these verses our Lord's willingness to make concessions, rather than give offense. He might justly have claimed exemption from the payment of this tribute money. He, who was Son of God, might fairly have been excused from paying for the maintenance of his Father's house; he who was "greater than the temple" might have shown good cause for declining to contribute to the support of the temple. But our Lord does not do so. He claims no exemption. He desires Peter to pay the money demanded. At the same time he declares his reasons: it was to be done "lest we should offend them." "A miracle is worked," says Bishop Hall, "rather than offend even a tax collector." Our Lord's example in this case deserves the attention of all who profess and call themselves Christians. There is deep wisdom in those five words, "lest we should offend them." They teach us plainly that there are matters in which Christ's people ought to sink their own opinions and submit to requirements which they may not thoroughly approve, rather than give offence and "hinder the gospel of Christ." God's rights, undoubtedly we ought never to give up: but we may sometimes safely give up our own. It may sound very fine and seem very heroic to be always standing out tenaciously for our rights! But it may well be doubted, with such a passage as this, whether such tenacity is always wise, and shows the mind of Christ. There are occasions when it shows more grace in a Christian to submit than to resist. Let us remember this passage as citizens and subjects. We may not like all the political measures of our rulers; we may disapprove of some of the taxes they impose. But the grand question after all is, Will it do any good to the cause of religion to resist the powers that be? Are their measures really injuring our souls? If not, let us hold our peace, "lest we should offend them." "A Christian," says Bullinger, "never ought to disturb the public peace for things of mere temporary importance." Let us remember this passage as members of a church. We may not like every jot and tittle of the forms and ceremonies used in our communion; we may not think that those who rule us in spiritual matters are always wise: but after all, are the points on which we are dissatisfied really of vital importance? Is any great truth of the Gospel at stake? If not, let us be quiet, lest we should offend them. Let us remember this passage as members of society. There may be usages and customs in the circle where our lot is cast, which to us as Christians are tiresome, useless and unprofitable: but are they matters of principle? Do they injure our souls? Will it do any good to the cause of religion if we refuse to comply with them? If not, let us patiently submit, "lest we should offend them." Well would it be for the church and the world if these five words of our Lord had been more studied, pondered and used! Who can tell the damage that has been done to the cause of the Gospel by morbid scrupulosity, and conscientiousness, falsely so called! May we all remember the example of the great apostle of the Gentiles: "we suffer all things lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:12).

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