

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

20:1-16

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

There are undeniable difficulties in the parable contained in these verses. The key to the right explanation of them must be sought in the passage which concludes the last chapter. There we find the apostle Peter asking our Lord a remarkable question: "We have forsaken all and followed thee! What shall we have therefore?" There we find Jesus giving a remarkable answer. He makes a special promise to Peter and his fellow disciples: they should one day sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. He makes a general promise to all who suffer loss for his sake: they should receive a hundred fold and inherit everlasting life. Now we must bear in mind that Peter was a Jew, and like most Jews he had probably been brought up in much ignorance as to God's purposes respecting the salvation of the Gentiles. In fact we know from the Acts that it required a vision from heaven to take that ignorance away (Acts 10:28). Furthermore, we must bear in mind that Peter and his fellow-disciples were weak in faith and knowledge. They were probably apt to attach a great importance to their own sacrifices for Christ's sake, and inclined to self-righteousness and self conceit. Both these points our Lord knew well. He therefore speaks this parable for the special benefit of Peter and his companions. He read their hearts. He saw what spiritual medicine those hearts required, and supplied it without delay. In a word, he checked their rising pride, and taught them humility. In expounding this parable, we need not inquire closely into the meaning of the penny, the marketplace, the steward, or the hours. Such inquiries often darken counsel by words without knowledge. Well says a great divine, the theology of parables is not argumentative. The hint of Chrysostom deserves notice. He says, "It is not right to search curiously, and word by word, into all things in a parable; but when we have learned the object for which it was composed, we are to reap this, and not to busy ourselves about anything further." Two main lessons appear to stand out on the face of the parable, and to embrace the general scope of its meaning. Let us content ourselves with these two. We learn in the first place that in the calling of nations to the professed knowledge of himself, God exercises free, sovereign and unconditional grace. He calls the families of the earth into the visible church at his own time, and in his own way. We see this truth wonderfully brought out in the history of God's dealings with the world. We see the children of Israel called and chosen to be God's people in the very beginning of the day. We see some of the Gentiles called at a later period, by the preaching of the apostles; we see others being called in the present age, by the labors of missionaries; we see others, like the millions of Chinese and Hindus, still standing idle, because no man hath hired them. And why is all this? We cannot tell. We only know that God loves to hide pride from churches, and to take away all occasions of boasting. He will never allow the older

branches of his church to look contemptuously on the younger. His Gospel holds out pardon and peace with God through Christ to the heathen of our own times, as fully as it did to St. Paul. The converted inhabitants of Tinnevelly and New Zealand shall be as fully admitted to heaven as the holiest patriarch who died 3500 years ago. The old wall between Jews and Gentiles is removed. There is nothing to prevent the believing heathen being «œi» ȷ a fellow-heir and partaker of the same hopei» ȷ «œ■ with the believing Israelite. The Gentiles converted at «œi» ȷ the eleventh houri» ȷ «œ■ of the world shall be as really and truly heirs of glory as the Jews; they shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while many of the children of the kingdom are forever cast out. «œi» ȷ The last shall«œ■ indeed «œi» ȷ be first.i» ȷ «œ■ We learn in the second place that in the saving of individuals, as well as in the calling of nations, God acts as a sovereign, and gives no account of his matters. He has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and that too at his own time (i» ȷ Romans 9:15). This is a truth which we see illustrated on every side in the church of Christ, as a matter of experience. We see one man called to repentance and faith in the beginning of his days like Timothy, and labouring in the Lord«œ™s vineyard for forty or fifty years; we see another man called «œi» ȷ at the eleventh hour,i» ȷ «œ■ like the thief on the cross, and plucked like a brand out of the fire«œ™ one day a hardened impenitent sinner, and the next day in paradise. And yet the whole tenor of the Gospel leads us to believe that both are equally forgiven before God. Both are equally washed in Christ«œ™s blood, and clothed in Christ«œ™s righteousness; both are equally justified, both accepted, and both will be found at Christ«œ™s right hand at the last day. There can be no doubt that this doctrine sounds strange to the ignorant and inexperienced Christian. It confounds the pride of human nature; it leaves the self-righteous no room to boast; it is a leveling, humbling doctrine, and gives occasion to many a murmer: but it is impossible to reject it, unless we reject the whole Bible. True faith in Christ, though it be but a day old, justifies a man before God as completely as the faith of him who has followed Christ for fifty years. The righteousness in which Timothy will stand at the day of judgment is the same as that of the penitent thief. Both will be saved by grace alone; both will owe all to Christ. We may not like this, but it is the doctrine of this parable, and not of this parable only, but of the whole New Testament. Happy is he who can receive the doctrine with humility! Well says Bishop Hall, «œi» ȷ If some have cause to magnify God«œ™s bounty, none have cause to complain.i» ȷ «œ■ Before we leave this parable let us arm our minds with some necessary cautions. It is a portion of Scripture that is frequently perverted and misapplied. Men have often drawn from it not milk, but poison. Let us beware of supposing from anything in this parable that salvation is in the slightest degree to be obtained by works. This is to overthrow the whole teaching of the Bible. Whatever a believer receives in the next world is a matter of grace, and not of debt. God is never a debtor to us in any sense whatever; when we have done all, we are unprofitable servants (i» ȷ Luke 17:10). Let us beware of supposing from this parable that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles is entirely done away by the Gospel. To suppose this is to contradict many plain prophecies, both of the Old Testament and New. In the matter of justification, there is no distinction between the believing Jew and the Greek; but in the matter of national privileges, Israel is still a special people and not numbered among the nations. God has many purposes concerning the Jews which are yet to be fulfilled. Let us beware of supposing from this parable that all saved souls will have the same degree of glory. To suppose this is to contradict many plain texts of Scripture. The title of all believers no doubt is the same, the righteousness of Christ«œ™ but all will not have the same place in heaven. «œi» ȷ Everyman shall receive his own reward according to his own labori» ȷ «œ■ (i» ȷ 1 Corinthians 3:8). Finally, let us beware of supposing from this parable that it is safe for anyone to put off repentance until the end of his days. To suppose this is a most dangerous delusion. The longer men refuse to obey Christ«œ™s voice, the less likely they are to be saved. «œi» ȷ Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvationi» ȷ «œ■ (i» ȷ 2 Corinthians 6:2). Few are ever saved on their death-beds. One thief on the cross was saved, that

none should despair; but only one, that no one should presume. A false confidence in those words, "at the eleventh hour," has ruined thousands of souls.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/expository-thoughts-on-matthew-matthew-201-16/>

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