

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew 21:33-46

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

The parable contained in these verses was spoken with special reference to the Jews. They are the husbandmen here described: their sins are set before us here as in a picture. Of this there can be no doubt: it is written that *he spake of them.* But we must not flatter ourselves that this parable contains nothing for the Gentiles. There are lessons laid down for us, as well as for the Jew. Let us see what they are. We see in the first place what distinguishing privileges God is pleased to bestow on some nations. He chose Israel to be a people special to himself. He separated them from the other nations of the earth, and bestowed on them countless blessings; he gave them revelations of himself, while all the rest of the earth was in darkness; he gave them the law, and the covenants, and the oracles of God, while all the world beside was left alone. In short, God dealt with the Jews as a man deals with a piece of land which he fences out and cultivates, while all the country around is left untilld and waste. The vineyard of the Lord was the house of Israel (*Isaiah 5:7*). And have we no privileges? Beyond doubt we have many. We have the Bible, and liberty for everyone to read it; we have the Gospel, and permission to everyone to hear it; we have spiritual mercies in abundance of which five hundred millions of our fellow-men know nothing at all. How thankful we ought to be! The poorest man in England may say every morning, *There are five hundred millions of immortal souls worse off than I am. Who am I, that I should differ? Bless the Lord, O my soul.* We see in the next place what a bad use nations sometimes make of their privileges. When the Lord separated the Jews from other people, he had a right to expect that they would serve him, and obey his laws. When a man has taken pains with a vineyard, he has a right to expect fruit. But Israel rendered not a due return for all God's mercies. They mingled with the heathen, and learned their works (*Psalm 106:35*). They hardened themselves in sin and unbelief. They turned aside after idols. They kept not God's ordinances. They despised God's temple. They refused to listen to his prophets; they ill-used those whom he sent to call them to repentance; and finally they brought their wickedness to a height by killing the Son of God himself, even Christ the Lord. And what we are doing ourselves with our privileges? Truly this is a serious question, and one that ought to make us think. It may well be feared that we are not, as a nation, living up to our light, or walking worthy of our many mercies. Must we not confess with shame that millions amongst us seem utterly without God in the world? Must we not acknowledge that in many a town and in many a village Christ seems hardly to have any disciples, and the Bible seems hardly to be believed? It is vain to shut our eyes to these facts. The fruit that the Lord receives from his vineyard in Great Britain, compared with what it ought to be, is disgracefully small. It may well be doubted whether we are not as provoking to him as the Jews. We see in the next place what an awful reckoning God sometimes has with nations and

churches which make a bad use of their privileges. A time came when the long-suffering of God towards the Jews had an end. Forty years after our Lord's death, the cup of their inquiry was at length full, and they received a heavy chastisement for their many sins. Their holy city, Jerusalem, was destroyed; their temple was burned; they themselves were scattered over the face of the earth. The kingdom of God was taken from them and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And will the same thing ever happen to us? Will the judgments of God ever come down on this nation of England because of her unfruitfulness under so many mercies? Who can tell? We may well cry with the prophet, Lord God thou knowest. We only know that judgments have come on many a church and nation in the last 1800 years. The kingdom of God has been taken from the African churches; the Mohametan power has overwhelmed most of the churches of the East. At all events, it becomes all English believers to intercede much on behalf of their country. Nothing offends God so much as neglect of privileges. Much has been given to us, and much will be required. We see in the last place, the power of conscience even in wicked men. The chief priests and elders at last discovered that our Lord's parable was specially meant for themselves: the point of its closing words was too sharp to be escaped. They perceived that he spake of them. There are many hearers of the Gospel in every congregation who are exactly in the condition of these unhappy men. They know that what they hear Sunday after Sunday is all true; they know that they are wrong themselves, and that every sermon condemns them: but they have neither will nor courage to acknowledge this. They are too proud or too fond of the world to confess their past mistakes, and to take up the cross and follow Christ. Let us all beware of this awful state of mind. The last day will prove that there was more going on in the consciences of hearers than was at all known to preachers. Thousands and ten thousands will be found, like the chief priests, to have been convicted by their own consciences, and yet to have died unconverted.

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