

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

23:34-39

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

These verses form the conclusion of our Lord Jesus Christ's address on the subject of the scribes and Pharisees. They are the last words which he ever spoke as a public teacher in the hearing of the people. The characteristic tenderness and compassion of our Lord shine forth in a striking manner at the close of his ministry. Though he left his enemies in unbelief, he shows that he loved and pitied them to the last. We learn in the first place from these verses that God often takes great pains with ungodly men. He sent the Jews prophets and wise men and scribes. He gave them repeated warnings; he sent them message after message. He did not allow them to go on sinning without rebuke. They could never say they were not told when they did wrong. This is the way in which God generally deals with unconverted Christians. He does not cut them off in their sins without a call to repentance: he knocks at the door of their hearts by sicknesses and afflictions; he assails their consciences by sermons, or by the advice of friends; he summons them to consider their ways by opening the grave under their eyes, and taking away from them their idols. They often know not what it all means; they are often blind and deaf to all his gracious messages. But they will see his hand at last, though perhaps too late. They will find that God spake once yea twice but they perceive it not. (i Job 33:14). They will discover that they too, like the Jews, had prophets, wise men and scribes sent to them. There was a voice in every providence, Turn ye! Turn ye! Why will you die? (i Ezekiel 33:11). We learn in the second place from these verses that God takes notice of the treatment which his messengers and ministers receive, and will one day reckon for it. The Jews, as a nation, had often given the servants of God most shameful usage: they had often dealt with them as enemies because they told them the truth. Some they had persecuted, some they had scourged and some they had even killed. They thought, perhaps, that no account would be required of their conduct, but our Lord tells them they were mistaken. There was an eye that saw all their doings, there was a hand that registered all the innocent blood they shed, in books of everlasting remembrance. The dying words of Zecharias, who was slain between the temple and the altar, would be found, after 850 years, not to have fallen to the ground. He said, as he died, the Lord looked upon it and require it (i 2 Chronicles 24:22). Yet a few years, and there would be such an inquisition for blood at Jerusalem as the world had never seen. The holy city would be destroyed. The nation which had murdered so many prophets would itself be wasted by famine, pestilence, and the sword; and even those who escaped would be scattered to the four winds and become, like Cain the murderer, fugitives and vagabonds upon earth. We all know how literally these sayings were fulfilled. Well might our Lord say, Verily all these things shall come upon this generation. It is good for us all to mark this lesson well. We are too apt to think that bygones

are by-gones, and that things which to us are past and done and old will never be raked up again. But we forget that with God one day is as a thousand years, and that the events of a thousand years ago are as fresh in his sight as the events of this very hour. God requireth that which is past. (Ecclesiastes) and, above all, God will require an account of the treatment of his saints. The blood of the primitive Christians shed by the Roman Emperors; the blood of the Vallenses and Albigenses, and the sufferers at the massacre; the blood of the martyrs who were burned at the time of the Reformation, and of those who have been put to death by the Inquisition—all, all will yet be accounted for. It is an old saying that the mill-stones of God's justice grind slowly, but they grind very fine. The world will yet see that there is a God that judges in the earth (Psalm 58:11). Let those who persecute God's people in the present day take care what they are doing. Let them know that all who injure, or ridicule, or mock or slander others on account of their religion commit a great sin. Let them know that Christ takes notice of everyone who persecutes his neighbor because he is better than himself or because he prays, reads his Bible, and thinks about his soul. He lives who said, He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of mine eye (Zechariah 2:8). The judgment-day will prove that the King of kings will reckon with all who insult his servants. We learn in the last place from these verses that those who are lost forever are lost through their own fault. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ are very remarkable. He says, I would have gathered thy children together and ye would not. There is something peculiarly deserving of notice in this expression: it throws light on a mysterious subject, and one which is often darkened by human explanations. It shows that Christ has feelings of pity and mercy for many who are not saved, and that the grand secret of man's ruin is his want of will. Impotent as man is by nature, unable to think a good thought of himself, without power to turn himself to faith and calling upon God, he still appears to have a mighty ability to ruin his own soul. Powerless as he is to good, he is still powerful to evil. We say rightly that a man can do nothing of himself, but we must always remember that the seat of impotence is his will. A will to repent and believe, no man can give himself, but a will to reject Christ and have his own way; every man possesses by nature, if not saved at last, that will shall prove to have been his destruction. Ye will not come to me, says Christ, that ye might have life. (John 5:40). Let us leave the subject with the comfortable reflection that with Christ nothing is impossible. The hardest heart can be made willing in the day of his power. Grace beyond doubt is irresistible; but never let us forget that the Bible speaks of man as a responsible being and that it says of some, You do always resist the Holy Ghost! (Acts 7:51). Let us understand that the ruin of those who are lost is not because Christ was not willing to save them, nor yet because they wanted to be saved but could not, but because they would not come to Christ. Let the ground we take up be always that of the passage we are now considering: Christ would gather men, but they will not to be gathered; Christ would save men, but they will not to be saved. Let it be a settled principle in our religion, that man's salvation if saved is wholly of God, and that man's ruin, if lost, is wholly of himself. The evil that is in us is all our own: the good, if we have any, is all of God. The saved in the next world will give God all the glory: the lost in the next world will find that they have destroyed themselves (Hosea 13:9).

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