

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

26:69-75

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

These verses relate a remarkable and deeply instructive event: the apostle Peter's denial of Christ. It is one of those events which indirectly prove the truth of the Bible. If the Gospel had been a mere invention of man, we should never have been told that one of its principal preachers was once so weak and erring as to deny his Master. The first thing that demands our notice is the full nature of the sin of which Peter was guilty. It was a great sin. We see a man who had followed Christ for three years, and been forward in professing faith and love towards him—a man who had received boundless mercies and loving kindness and had been treated by Christ as a familiar friend. We see this man denying three times that he knows Jesus! This was bad. It was a sin committed under circumstances of great aggravation: Peter had been warned plainly of his danger and had heard the warning; he had just been receiving the bread and wine at our Lord's hands, and declaring loudly that though he died with him, he would not deny him! This also was bad. It was a sin committed under apparently small provocation: two weak women made the remark that he was with Jesus. They that stood nearby say, "Surely thou art one of them!" No threat seems to have been used, no violence seems to have been done, but it was enough to overthrow Peter's faith: he denies before all. He denies with an oath: he curses and swears. Truly it is a humbling picture! Let us mark this history, and store it up in our minds: it teaches us plainly that the best of saints are only men, and men encompassed with many infirmities. A man may be converted to God, have faith, hope and love towards Christ, and yet be overtaken in a fault, and have awful falls. It shows us the necessity of humility: so long as we are in the body, we are in danger. The flesh is weak, and the devil is active. We must never think, "I cannot fall." It points out to us the duty of charity towards erring saints. We must not set down men as graceless reprobates because they occasionally stumble and err; we must remember Peter and restore them in the spirit of meekness. (i.e. Galatians 6:1). The second thing that demands our notice is the series of steps by which Peter was led to deny his Lord. These steps are mercifully recorded for our learning. The Spirit of God has taken care to have them written down for the perpetual benefit of the church of Christ. Let us trace them out one by one. The first step to Peter's fall was self-confidence he said, "Though all men should be offended, yet will I never be offended." The second step was indolence: his Master told him to watch and pray; instead of doing so he slept. The third step was cowardly compromising: instead of keeping close to his Master, he first forsook him, and then followed him afar off. The last step was needless venturing into evil company: he went into the priest's palace and sat with the servants, like one of themselves. And then came the final fall: the cursing, the swearing and the three-fold denial. Startling as it appears, his heart had been preparing it: it was the fruit of seeds which

he himself had sown. He ate the fruit of his own ways. Let us remember this part of Peter's history: it is deeply instructive to all who profess and call themselves Christians. Great illnesses seldom attack the body without a previous train of premonitory symptoms; great falls seldom happen to a saint without a previous course of secret backsliding. The church and the world are sometimes shocked by the sudden misconduct of some great professors of religion; believers are discouraged and stumbled by it; the enemies of God rejoice and blaspheme; but if the truth could be known, the explanation of such cases would generally be found to have been private departure from God. Men fall in private long before they fall in public. The tree falls with a great crash, but the secret decay which accounts for it is often not discovered till it is down on the ground. The last thing which demands our notice is the sorrow which Peter's sin brought upon him. We read at the end of the chapter, "He went out and wept bitterly." These words deserve more attention than they generally receive. Thousands have read the history of Peter's sin, who have thought little of Peter's tears and Peter's repentance. May we have an eye to see, and a heart to understand! We see in Peter's tears the close connection between unhappiness and departure from God. It is a merciful arrangement of God that in one sense holiness always brings its own reward. A heavy heart and an uneasy conscience, a clouded hope and an abundant crop of doubts will always be the consequence of backsliding and inconsistency. The words of Solomon describe the experience of many an inconsistent child of God: "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways." (Proverbs 14:14). Let it be a settled principle in our religion that if we love inward peace we must walk closely with God. We see in Peter's bitter tears the grand mark of difference between the hypocrite and the true believer. When the hypocrite is overtaken by sin, he generally falls to rise no more: he has no principle of life within him to raise him up. When the child of God is overtaken, he rises again by true repentance, and by the grace of God amends his life. Let no man flatter himself that he may sin with impunity because David committed adultery, and because Peter denied his Lord. No doubt these holy men sinned greatly: but they did not continue in their sins. They repented greatly; they mourned over their falls; they loathed and abhorred their own wickedness. Well would it be for many if they would imitate them in their repentance as well as in their sins! Too many are acquainted with their fall but not with their recovery. Like David and Peter, they have sinned, but they have not, like David and Peter, repented. The whole passage is full of lessons that ought never to be forgotten. Do we profess to have a hope in Christ? Let us mark the weakness of a believer and the steps that lead to a fall. Have we unhappily backslidden and left our first love? Let us remember that the Saviour of Peter still lives. There is mercy for us as well as for him: but we must repent and seek that mercy if we would find it. Let us turn unto God and he will turn to us: his compassions fail not. (Lamentations 3:22)

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