

# Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

## 20:17-23

by J.C. Ryle

### Transcript

The first thing that we should notice in these verses is the clear announcement which the Lord Jesus Christ makes of his own approaching death. For the third time we find him telling his disciples the astounding truth that he, their wonder-working Master, must soon suffer and die. The Lord Jesus knew from the beginning all that was before him. The treachery of Judas Iscariot, the fierce persecution of chief priests and scribes, the unjust judgment, the delivery to Pontius Pilate, the mocking, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the cross, the hanging between two malefactors, the nails, the spear—all all were spread before his mind like a picture. How great an aggravation of suffering foreknowledge is those know well who have lived in the prospect of some fearful surgical operation! Yet none of these things moved our Lord. He says, “I was not rebellious; neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting” (i.e. Isaiah 50:5-6). He saw Calvary in the distance all his life through, and yet walked calmly up to it without turning to the right hand or to the left. Surely there never was sorrow like unto his sorrow, or love like his love. The Lord Jesus was a voluntary sufferer. When he died on the cross, it was not because he had not power to prevent it. He suffered intentionally, deliberately, and of his own free will (i.e. John 10:18). He knew that without shedding of his blood there could be no remission of man’s sin; he knew that he was the Lamb of God, who must die to take away the sin of the world; he knew that his death was the appointed sacrifice which must be offered up to make reconciliation for iniquity. Knowing all this, he went willingly to the cross: his heart was set on finishing the mighty work he came into the world to do. He was well aware that all hinged on his own death, and that without that death his miracles and preaching would have done comparatively nothing for the world. No wonder that thrice pressed on the attention of his disciples that he must die. Blessed and happy are they who know the real meaning and importance of the sufferings of Christ! The next thing that we should notice in these verses is the mixture of ignorance and faith that may be found even in true-hearted Christians. We see the mother of James and John coming to our Lord with her two sons, and preferring on their behalf a strange petition. She asks that they “may sit one on his right hand and the other on his left, in his kingdom”. She seems to have forgotten all he had just been saying about his suffering. Her eager mind can think of nothing but his glory. His plain warnings about the crucifixion appear to have been thrown away on her sons. Their thoughts were full of nothing but his throne, and the day of his power. There was much of faith in their request, but there was much more of infirmity. There was something to be commended, in that they could see in Jesus of Nazareth a coming king; but there was also much to blame, in that they did not remember that he was to be crucified before he could reign. Truly “the flesh lusted against the Spirit” in all

God's children, and Luther well remarks, "the flesh ever seeks to be glorified before it is crucified." There are many Christians who are very like this woman and her sons. They see in part, and know in part, the things of God; they have faith enough to follow Christ; they have knowledge enough to hate sin, and come out from the world, and yet there are many truths of Christianity about which they are deplorably ignorant. They talk ignorantly, they act ignorantly and commit many sad mistakes. Their acquaintance with the Bible is very scanty: their insight into their own hearts is very small. But we must learn from these verses to deal gently with such people, because the Lord has received them. We must not set them down as graceless and godless because of their ignorance. We must remember that true faith may lay at the bottom of their hearts, though there is much rubbish at the top. We must reflect that the sons of Zebedee, whose knowledge was at one time so imperfect, became at a later period pillars of the church of Christ. Just so a believer may begin his course in much darkness, and yet prove finally a man mighty in the Scriptures, and a worthy follower of James and John. The last thing that we should notice in these verses is the solemn reproof which our Lord gives to the ignorant request of the mother of Zebedee's children and her two sons. He says to them, "Ye know not what ye ask." They had asked to share in their Master's reward, but they had not considered that they must first be partakers in their Master's sufferings (1 Peter 4:13). They had forgotten that those who would stand with Christ in glory must drink of his cup, and be baptized with his baptism; they did not see that those who carry the cross, and those alone, shall receive the crown. Well might our Lord say, "Ye know not what ye ask." But do we never commit the same mistake that the sons of Zebedee committed? Do we never fall into their error, and make thoughtless, inconsiderate requests? Do we not often say things in prayer without counting the cost, and ask for things to be granted to us without reflecting how much our supplications involve? These are heart-searching questions: it may well be feared that many of us cannot give them a satisfactory answer. We ask that our souls may be saved and go to heaven when we die. It is a good request indeed. But are we prepared to take up the cross, and follow Christ? Are we willing to give up the world for his sake? Are we ready to put off the old man and put on the new, to fight, to labor, and to run so as to obtain? Are we ready to withstand a taunting world, and endure hardships for Christ's sake? What shall we say? If we are not so ready, our Lord might say to us also, "Ye know not what ye ask." We ask God to make us holy and good. It is a good request indeed. But are we prepared to be sanctified by any process that God in his wisdom may call on us to pass through? Are we ready to be purified by affliction, weaned from the world by bereavements, drawn nearer to God by losses, sicknesses and sorrow? Alas, these are hard questions! But if we are not, our Lord might well say to us, "Ye know not what ye ask." Let us leave these verses with a solemn resolution to consider well what we are about when we draw nigh to God in prayer. Let us beware of thoughtless, inconsiderate and rash petitions. Well might Solomon say, "be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God" (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

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