

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

21:23-32

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

These verses contain a conversation between our Lord Jesus Christ and the chief priests and elders of the people. Those bitter enemies of all righteousness saw the sensation which the public entry into Jerusalem, and the cleansing of the temple, had produced. At once they came about our Lord, like bees, and endeavored to find occasion for an accusation against him. Let us observe in the first place how ready the enemies of truth are to question the authority of all who do more good than themselves. The chief priests have not a word to say about our Lord's teaching: they make no charge against the lives or conduct of himself or his followers. The point on which they fasten is his commission: "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave thee this authority?" The same charge has often been made against the servants of God when they have striven to check the progress of ecclesiastical corruption. It is the old engine by which the children of this world have often labored to stop the progress of revivals and reformations. It is the weapon which was often brandished in the face of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the Methodists of the last century. It is the poisoned arrow which is often shot at city missionaries and lay agents in the present day. Too many care nothing for the manifest blessing of God on a man's work, so long as he is not sent forth by their own sect or party. It matters nothing to them that some humble laborer in God's harvest can point to numerous conversions of souls through his instrumentality; they still cry, "By what authority doest thou these things?" His success is nothing: they demand his commission. His cures are nothing: they want his diploma. Let us neither be surprised nor moved when we hear such things. It is old charge which was brought against Christ himself. "There is no new thing under the sun" (i.e. Ecclesiastes 1:9). Let us observe in the second place, the consummate wisdom with which our Lord replied to the question put to him. His enemies asked him for his authority for doing what he did. They doubtless intended to make his answer a handle for accusing him. He knew the drift of their inquiry, and said, "I also will ask you one thing which if ye tell me, I in likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John—whence was it? From heaven, or of men?" We must distinctly understand that in this answer of our Lord's there was no evasion: to suppose this is a great mistake. The counter-question which he asked was in reality an answer to his enemies' inquiry. He knew they dared not deny that John the Baptist was "a man sent from God"; he knew that, this being granted, he needed only to remind them of John's testimony to himself—"had not John declared him to be the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world?" Had not John pronounced him to be the Mighty One, who was to baptize with the Holy Ghost? In short, our Lord's question was a home-thrust to the conscience of his enemies. If they once conceded the divine authority of John the Baptist's mission, they must also concede the

divinity of his own; if they acknowledged that John came from heaven, they must acknowledge that he himself was the Christ. Let us pray that in this difficult world, we may be supplied with the same kind of wisdom which was here displayed by our Lord. No doubt we ought to act on the injunction of St. Peter: "Be always ready to give a reason of the hope that is in us with meekness and with fear." (1 Peter 3:15). We ought to shrink from no inquiry into the principles of our holy religion, and to be ready at any time to defend and explain our practice; but for all this we must never forget that wisdom is profitable to direct, and that we should strive to speak wisely in defense of a good cause. The words of Solomon deserve consideration: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him." (Proverbs 26:4). In the last place, let us observe in these verses what immense encouragement our Lord holds out to those who repent. We see this strikingly brought out in the parable of the two sons. Both were told to go and work in their father's vineyard: one son, like the profligate publican, for some time flatly refused obedience, but afterwards repented and went; the other, like the formal Pharisees, pretended willingness to go, but after all went not. Whether of them twain, says our Lord, did the will of his father? Even his enemies were obliged to reply, "The first." Let it be a settled principle in our Christianity that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is infinitely willing to receive penitent sinners. It matters nothing what a man has been in time past. Does he repent, and come to Christ? Then old things are passed away, and all things are become new. It matters nothing how high and self-confident a man's profession of religion may be. Does he really give up his sins? If not, his profession is abominable in God's sight, and he himself is still under the curse. Let us take courage ourselves if we have been great sinners hitherto: only let us repent and believe in Christ, and there is hope. Let us encourage others to repent; let us hold the door wide open to the very chief of sinners. Never will that word fail, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).

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