EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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ST. MATTHEW.

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MATTHEW XVI. 1–12.

1 The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven.

2 He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, *It will be* fair weather: for the sky is red.

3 And in the morning, *It will be* foul weather to-day: for the sky is red and lowring. O *ye* hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not *discern* the signs of the times?

4 A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.

5 And when his disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread.

6 Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread.

8 *Which* when Jesus perceived, he said unto them, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among your selves, because ye have brought no bread?

9 Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up?

10 Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up?

11 How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees?

12 Then understood they how that he bade *them* not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.

IN these verses we find our Lord assailed by the untiring enmity of the Pharisees and Sadducees. As a general rule these two sects were at enmity between themselves; in persecuting Christ, however, they made common cause. Truly it was an unholy alliance! Yet how often we see the same thing in the present day. Men of the most opposite opinions and habits will agree in disliking the Gospel, and will work together to oppose its progress. “There is no new thing under the sun.” (Eccles. i. 9.)

The first point in this passage which deserves special notice is *the repetition which our Lord makes of words used by Him on a former occasion*. He says, “a wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas.” If we turn to the twelfth chapter of this Gospel and the 39th verse, we shall find that He had said the very same thing once before.

This repetition may seem a trifling and unimportant matter in the eyes of some. But it is not so in reality. It throws light on a subject, which has perplexed the minds of many sincere lovers of the Bible, and ought therefore to be specially observed.

This repetition shows us that our Lord was in the habit of *saying the same things over again.* He did not content Himself with saying a thing once, and afterwards never repeating it. It is evident that it was His custom to bring forward certain truths again and again, and thus to impress them more deeply on the minds of His disciples. He knew the weakness of our memories on spiritual things; He knew that what we hear twice, we remember better than what we hear once. He therefore brought out of His treasury old things as well as new.

Now what does all this teach us? It teaches us that we need not be so anxious to *harmonize* the narratives we read in the four Gospels, as many are disposed to be. It does not follow that the sayings of our Lord, which we find the same in St. Matthew and St. Luke, were always used at the same time, or that the events with which they are connected must necessarily be the same.—St. Matthew may be describing one event in our Lord’s life; St. Luke may be describing another: and yet the words of our Lord, on both occasions, may have been precisely alike.—To attempt to make out the two events to be one and the same, because of the sameness of the words used, has often led Bible students into great difficulties. It is far safer to hold the view here maintained, that at different times our Lord often used the same words.

The second point which deserves special notice in these verses is *the solemn warning which our Lord takes occasion to give to His disciples.* His mind was evidently pained with the false doctrines which He saw among the Jews, and the pernicious influence which they exercised. He seizes the opportunity to utter a caution. “Take heed, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” Let us mark well what those words contain.

To whom was this warning addressed? To the twelve apostles,—to the first ministers of the Church of Christ,—to men who had forsaken all for the Gospel’s sake! Even they are warned! The best of men are only men, and at any time may fall into temptation. “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” (1 Cor. x. 12.) If we love life, and would see good days, let us never think that we do not need that hint: “Take heed, and beware.”

Against what does our Lord warn His apostles? Against the “doctrine” of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. The Pharisees, we are frequently told in the Gospels, were self-righteous formalists; the Sadducees were sceptics, freethinkers, and half infidels. Yet even Peter, James, and John must beware of their doctrines! Truly the best and holiest of believers may well be on his guard!

By what figure does our Lord describe the false doctrines against which He cautions His disciples? He calls them *leaven*. Like leaven, they might seem a small thing compared to the whole body of truth; like leaven, once admitted, they would work secretly and noiselessly; like leaven, they would gradually change the whole character of the religion with which they were mixed. How much is often contained in a single word! It was not merely the open danger of heresy, but “leaven,” of which the apostles were to beware.

There is much in all this that calls loudly for the close attention of all professing Christians. The caution of our Lord in this passage has been shamefully neglected. It would have been well for the Church of Christ if the warnings of the Gospel had been as much studied as its promises.

Let us then remember that this saying of our Lord’s about the “leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” was intended for all time. It was not meant only for the generation to which it was spoken. It was meant for the perpetual benefit of the Church of Christ. He who spoke it saw with prophetical eye the future history of Christianity. The Great Physician knew well that Pharisee-doctrines and Sadducee-doctrines would prove the two great wasting diseases of His Church, until the end of the world. He would have us know that there will always be Pharisees and Sadducees in the ranks of Christians. Their succession shall never fail. Their generation shall never become extinct. Their name may change, but their spirit will always remain. Therefore He cries to us, “Take heed, and beware.”

Finally, let us make a personal use of this caution, by keeping up a holy jealousy over our own souls. Let us remember that we live in a world where Pharisaism and Sadduceeism are continually striving for the mastery in the Church of Christ. Some want to add to the Gospel, and some want to take away from it; some would bury it, and some would pare it down to nothing; some would stifle it by heaping on additions, and some would bleed it to death by subtraction from its truths. Both parties agree only in one respect: both would kill and destroy the life of Christianity, if they succeeded in having their own way. Against both errors let us watch and pray, and stand upon our guard. Let us not add to the Gospel, to please the Roman Catholic Pharisee; let us not subtract from the Gospel, to please the Neologian Sadducee. Let our principle be “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth:” nothing added to it, and nothing taken away.

MATTHEW XVI. 13–20.

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Cæsarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

14 And they said, Some *say that thou art* John the Baptist: some Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

20 Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

THEREare words in this passage which have led to painful differences and divisions among Christians. Men have striven and contended about their meaning, till they have lost sight of all charity, and yet have failed to carry conviction to one another’s minds. Let it suffice us to glance briefly at the controverted words, and then pass on to more practical lessons.

What then are we to understand, when we read that remarkable saying of our Lord’s, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church”? Does it mean that the apostle Peter himself was to be the foundation on which Christ’s Church was to be built? Such an interpretation, to say the least, appears exceedingly improbable. To speak of an erring, fallible child of Adam as the foundation of the spiritual temple, is very unlike the ordinary language of Scripture. Above all, no reason can be given why our Lord should not have said, “I will build my Church upon *thee*” if such had been His meaning, instead of saying, “I will build my Church upon *this rock.*”

The true meaning of “the Rock,” in this passage, appears to be the truth of our Lord’s Messiahship and Divinity, which Peter had just confessed. It is as though our Lord had said, “Thou art rightly called by the name Peter, or stone, for thou hast confessed that mighty *truth*, on which, as on a rock, I will build my Church.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what are we to understand when we read the promise which our Lord makes to Peter: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven”? Do these words mean that the right of admitting souls to heaven was to be placed in Peter’s hands? The idea is preposterous. Such an office is the special prerogative of Christ Himself. (Rev. i. 18.) Do the words mean that Peter was to have any primacy or superiority over the rest of the Apostles? There is not the slightest proof that such a meaning was attached to the words in the New Testament times, or that Peter had any rank or dignity above the rest of the twelve.

The true meaning of the promise to Peter appears to be, that he was to have the special privilege of first opening the door of salvation, both to the Jews and Gentiles. This was fulfilled to the letter, when he preached on the day of Pentecost to the Jews, and visited the Gentile Cornelius at his own house. On each occasion he used “the keys,” and threw open the door of faith. And of this he seems to have been sensible himself: “God,” he says, “made choice among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel, and believe.” (Acts xv. 7.)

Finally, what are we to understand when we read the words, “Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”? Does this mean that the apostle Peter was to have any power of forgiving sins, and absolving sinners? Such an idea is derogatory to Christ’s special office, as our Great High Priest. It is a power which we never find Peter, or any of the apostles, once exercising. They always refer men to Christ.

The true meaning of this promise appears to be, that Peter and his brethren, the apostles, were to be specially commissioned to teach with authority the way of salvation. As the Old Testament priest declared authoritatively whose leprosy was cleansed, so the apostles were appointed to “declare and pronounce” authoritatively, whose sins were forgiven. Beside this, they were to be specially inspired to lay down rules and regulations for the guidance of the Church on disputed questions. Some things they were to “bind” or forbid; others they were to “loose” or allow. The decision of the Council at Jerusalem, that the Gentiles need not be circumcised, was one example of the exercise of this power (Acts xvi. 19); but it was a commission specially confined to the apostles. In discharging it they had no successors. With them it began, and with them it expired.

We will leave these controverted words here: enough perhaps has been said upon them for our personal edification. Let us only remember that, in whatever sense men take them, they have nothing to do with the Church of Rome. Let us now turn our attention to points which more immediately concern our own souls.

In the first place, let us admire *the noble confession which the apostle Peter makes in this passage.* He says, in reply to our Lord’s question, “Whom say ye that I am?”—“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

At first sight, a careless reader may see nothing very remarkable in these words of the apostle; he may think it extraordinary that they should call forth such strong commendation from our Lord: but such thoughts arise from ignorance and inconsideration. Men forget that it is a widely different thing to believe in Christ’s divine mission when we dwell in the midst of professing Christians, and to believe in it when we dwell in the midst of hardened and unbelieving Jews. The glory of Peter’s confession lies in this,—that he made it when few were with Christ and many against Him. He made it when the rulers of his own nation, the Scribes, and Priests, and Pharisees, were all opposed to his Master; he made it when our Lord was in the “form of a servant,” without wealth, without royal dignity, without any visible mark of a King. To make such a confession at such a time, required great faith and great decision of character. The confession itself, as Brentius says, “was an epitome of all Christianity, and a compendium of true doctrine about religion.” Therefore it was that our Lord said, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona.”

We shall do well to copy that hearty zeal and affection which Peter here displayed. We are perhaps too much disposed to underrate this holy man, because of his occasional instability, and his thrice-repeated denial of his Lord. This is a great mistake. With all his faults, Peter was a true-hearted, fervent, single-minded servant of Christ; with all his imperfections, he has given us a pattern that many Christians would do wisely to follow. Zeal like his may have its ebbs and flows, and sometimes lack steadiness of purpose; zeal like his may be ill-directed, and sometimes make sad mistakes: but zeal like his is not to be despised. It awakens the sleeping; it stirs the sluggish; it provokes others to exertion. Anything is better than sluggishness, lukewarmness, and torpor, in the Church of Christ. Happy would it have been for Christendom had there been more Christians like Simon Peter and Martin Luther.

In the next place, let us take care that *we understand what our Lord means when He speaks of His Church.*

The Church which Jesus promises to build upon a rock is the “blessed company of all faithful people.” It is not the visible Church of any one nation, or country, or place: it is the whole body of believers of every age, and tongue, and people. It is a Church composed of all who are washed in Christ’s blood, clothed in Christ’s righteousness, renewed by Christ’s Spirit, joined to Christ by faith, and epistles of Christ in life; it is a Church of which every member is baptized with the Holy Ghost, and is really and truly holy; it is a Church which is one body. All who belong to it are of one heart and one mind, hold the same truths, and believe the same doctrines as necessary to salvation. It is a Church which has only one Head: that Head is Jesus Christ Himself. “He is the head of the body.” (Col. i. 18.)

Let us beware of mistakes on this subject. Few words are so much misunderstood as the word “Church;” few mistakes have so much injured the cause of pure religion. Ignorance on this point has been a fertile source of bigotry, sectarianism, and persecution. Men have wrangled and contended about Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Independent Churches, as if it were needful to salvation to belong to some particular party, and as if, belonging to that party, we must of course belong to Christ. All this time they have lost sight of the one true Church, outside of which there is no salvation at all. It will matter nothing at the last day where we have worshipped, if we are not found members of the true Church of God’s elect.

In the last place, let us mark *the glorious promises which our Lord makes to His Church:* He says, “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

The meaning of this promise is, that the power of Satan shall never destroy the people of Christ. He that brought sin and death into the first creation by tempting Eve, shall never bring ruin on the new creation by overthrowing believers. The mystical body of Christ shall never perish or decay. Though often persecuted, afflicted, distressed, and brought low, it shall never come to an end. It shall outlive the wrath of Pharaohs and Roman Emperors. Visible churches, like Ephesus, may come to nothing; but the true Church never dies. Like the bush that Moses saw, it may burn, but shall not be consumed. *Every* member of it shall be brought safe to glory. In spite of falls, failures, and short-comings,—in spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil,—no member of the true Church shall ever be cast away. (John x. 28.)

MATTHEW XVI. 21–23.

21 From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

22 Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.

23 But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

IN the beginning of these verses we find our Lord revealing to His disciples a great and startling truth. That truth was His approaching death upon the cross. For the first time He places before their minds the astounding announcement that “he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer,—and be killed.” He had not come on earth to take a kingdom, but to die. He had not come to reign, and be ministered to, but to shed His blood as a sacrifice, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

It is almost impossible for us to conceive how strange and incomprehensible these tidings must have seemed to His disciples. Like most of the Jews, they could form no idea of a suffering Messiah. They did not understand that the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah must be literally fulfilled. They did not see that the sacrifices of the law were all meant to point them to the death of the true Lamb of God. They thought of nothing but the second glorious coming of Messiah, which is yet to take place at the end of the world. They thought so much of Messiah’s crown, that they lost sight of His cross. We shall do well to remember this. A right understanding of this matter throws strong light on the lessons which this passage contains.

We learn, in the first place, from these verses, that *there may be much spiritual ignorance even in a true disciple of Christ.*

We cannot have a clearer proof of this than the conduct of the apostle Peter in this passage. He tries to dissuade our Lord from suffering on the cross. “Be it far from thee,” he says: “this shall not be unto thee.” He did not see the full purpose of our Lord’s coming into the world. His eyes were blinded to the necessity of our Lord’s death. He actually did what he could to prevent that death taking place at all! And yet we know that Peter was a converted man. He really believed that Jesus was the Messiah. His heart was right in the sight of God.

These things are meant to teach us that we must neither regard good men as infallible, because they are good men, nor yet suppose they have no grace, because their grace is weak and small. One brother may possess singular gifts, and be a bright and shining light in the Church of Christ; but let us not forget that he is a man, and as a man liable to commit great mistakes. Another brother’s knowledge may be scanty: he may fail to judge rightly on many points of doctrine; he may err both in word and deed. But has he faith and love towards Christ? Does he hold the Head? If so, let us deal patiently with him. What he sees not now, he may see hereafter. Like Peter, he may now be in the dark, and yet, like Peter, enjoy one day the full light of the Gospel.

Let us learn, in the second place, from these verses, that *there is no doctrine of Scripture so deeply important as the doctrine of Christ's atoning death*.

We cannot have clearer proof of this than the language used by our Lord in rebuking Peter. He addresses him by the awful name of “Satan,” as if he was an adversary, and doing the devil’s work, in trying to prevent His death. He says to him, whom He had so lately called “blessed,” “Get thee behind me, thou art an offence unto me.” He tells the man whose noble confession He had just commended so highly, “Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.” Stronger words than these never fell from our Lords lips. The error that drew from such a loving Saviour such a stern rebuke to such a true disciple, must have been a mighty error indeed.

The truth is that our Lord would have us regard the crucifixion as the central truth of Christianity. Right views of His vicarious death, and the benefits resulting from it, lie at the very foundation of Bible-religion. Never let us forget this. On matters of church-government, and the form of worship, men may differ from us, and yet reach heaven in safety. On the matter of Christ’s atoning death, as the way of peace, truth is only one. If we are wrong here, we are ruined for ever. Error on many points is only a skin disease; error about Christ’s death is a disease at the heart. Here let us take our stand: let nothing move us from this ground. The sum of all our hopes must be, that “Christ has died for us.” (1 Thess. v. 10.) Give up that doctrine, and we have no solid hope at all.

MATTHEW XVI. 24–28.

24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

26 For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

28 Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

IN order to see the connection of these verses we must remember the mistaken impressions of our Lord’s disciples as to the purpose of His coming into the world. Like Peter they could not bear the idea of the crucifixion: they thought that Jesus had come to set up an earthly kingdom. They did not see that He must needs suffer and die. They dreamed of worldly honours and temporal rewards in their Master’s service. They did not understand that true Christians, like Christ, must be “made perfect through sufferings.” Our Lord corrects these misapprehensions in words of peculiar solemnity, which we shall do well to lay up in our hearts.

Let us learn, in the first place, from these verses, *that men must make up their minds to trouble and self-denial*, *if they follow Christ.*

Our Lord dispels the fond dreams of His disciples, by telling them that His followers must “take up the cross.” The glorious kingdom they were expecting was not about to be set up immediately. They must make up their minds to persecution and affliction, if they intended to be His servants. They must be content to “lose their lives,” if they would have their souls saved.

It is good for us all to see this point clearly. We must not conceal from ourselves that true Christianity brings with it a daily cross in this life, while it offers us a crown of glory in the life to come. The flesh must be daily crucified; the devil must be daily resisted; the world must be daily overcome. There is a warfare to be waged, and a battle to be fought. All this is the inseparable accompaniment of true religion. Heaven is not to be won without it. Never was there a truer word than the old saying, “No cross, no crown!” If we never found this out by experience, our souls are in a poor condition.

Let us learn, in the second place, from these verses, *that there is nothing so precious as a man's soul.*

Our Lord teaches this lesson by asking one of the most solemn questions that the New Testament contains. It is a question so well known, and so often repeated, that people often lose sight of its searching character; but it is a question that ought to sound in our ears like a trumpet, whenever we are tempted to neglect our eternal interests: “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

There can only be one answer to this question. There is nothing on earth, or under the earth, that can make amends to us for the loss of our souls. There is nothing that money can buy, or man can give, to be named in comparison with our souls. The world and all that it contains, is temporal. It is all fading, perishing, and passing away. The soul is *eternal:* that one single word is the key to the whole question. Let it sink down deeply into our hearts. Are we wavering in our religion? Do we fear the cross? Does the way seem too narrow? Let our Master’s words ring in our ears: “What shall it profit a man?” and let us doubt no more.

Let us learn, in the last place, *that the second coming of Christ is the time when His people shall receive their rewards.* “The Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father, and then shall He reward every man according to his works.”

There is deep wisdom in this saying of our Lord’s, when viewed in connection with the preceding verses. He knows the heart of a man. He knows how soon we are ready to be cast down, and, like Israel of old, to be “discouraged because of the way.” (Num. xxi. 4.) He therefore holds out to us a gracious promise. He reminds us that He has yet to come a second time, as surely as He came the first time. He tells us that this is the time when His disciples shall receive their good things. There will be glory, honour, and reward in abundance one day for all who have served and loved Jesus, but it is to be in the dispensation of the second advent, and not of the first. The bitter must come before the sweet, the cross before the crown. The first advent is the dispensation of the crucifixion. The second advent is the dispensation of the kingdom. We must submit to take part with our Lord in His humiliation, if we desire to share in His glory.

And now let us not leave these verses without serious self-inquiry as to the matters which they contain. We have heard of the necessity of taking up the cross, and denying ourselves: have we taken it up, and are we carrying it daily? We have heard of the value of the soul: do we live as if we believed it? We have heard of Christ’s second advent: do we look forward to it with hope and joy?—Happy is that man who can give a satisfactory answer to these questions!

1. There is nothing modern, or peculiarly Protestant, in the view here maintained. It was held by Chrysostom long ago. It was taught by Ferus, a famous Roman Catholic preacher, of the Franciscan Order, at Mayence, in the sixteenth century, in his Homilies on St. Matthew.

It may be well to remark, in this place, that it is a complete delusion to suppose that the Scriptures can be interpreted according to the “unanimous consent of the Fathers.” *There is no such unanimous consent!* It is a mere high-sounding phrase, utterly destitute of any foundation in facts. The Fathers disagree as much in explaining Scripture, as Whitby and Gill, or Matthew Henry and D’Oyly and Mant. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)