

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B.A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,
VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;
Author of "Home Truths," etc.

ST. MATTHEW.

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MATTHEW XXI. 1–11.

1 And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples,

2 Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose *them*, and bring *them* unto me.

3 And if any *man* say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.

4 All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

5 Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy king cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and *a* colt the foal of an ass.

6 And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them,

7 And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set *him* thereon.

8 And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed *them* in the way.

9 And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed *is* he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

10 And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this?

11 And the multitude said, This is Jesus, the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.

THESE verses contain a very remarkable passage in our Lord Jesus Christ's life. They describe His public entry into Jerusalem, when He came there for the last time, before He was crucified.

There is something peculiarly striking in this incident in our Lord's history. The narrative reads like the account of some royal conqueror's return to his own city: "A very great multitude" accompanies Him in a kind of triumphal procession; loud cries and expressions of praise are heard around Him: "All the city was moved." The whole transaction is singularly at variance with the past tenor of our Lord's life. It is curiously unlike the ways of Him who did not "cry, nor strive, nor let His voice be heard in the streets,"—who withdrew Himself from the multitude on other occasions, and sometimes said to those He healed, "See thou say nothing to any man." (Mark i. 44.) And yet the whole transaction admits of explanation. The reasons of this public entry are not hard to find out.—Let us see what they were.

The plain truth is that our Lord knew well that the time of His earthly ministry was drawing to a close. He knew that the hour was approaching when He must finish the mighty work He came to do, by dying for our sins upon the cross. He knew that His last journey had been accomplished, and that there remained nothing now in His earthly ministry, but to be offered as a sacrifice on Calvary. Knowing all this, He no longer, as in times past, sought secrecy; knowing all this, He thought it good to enter the place where He was to be delivered to death, with peculiar solemnity and publicity. It was not fitting that the Lamb of God should come to be slain on Calvary privately and silently. Before the great sacrifice for the sin of the world was offered up, it was right that every eye

should be fixed on the victim. It was suitable that the crowning act of our Lord's life should be done with as much notoriety as possible. Therefore it was that He made this public entry; therefore it was that He attracted to Himself the eyes of the wondering multitude; therefore it was that "all Jerusalem was moved." The atoning blood of the Lamb of God was about to be shed. This deed was not to be "done in a corner." (Acts xxvi. 26.)

It is good to remember these things. The real meaning of our Lord's conduct at this period of His history is not sufficiently considered by many readers of this passage. It remains for us to consider the practical lessons which these verses appear to point out.

In the first place, let us notice in these verses an *example of our Lord Jesus Christ's perfect knowledge*. He sends His two disciples into a village. He tells them that they will there find the ass on which He was to ride. He provides them with an answer to the inquiry of those to whom the ass belonged. He tells them that on giving that answer the ass will be sent and all happens exactly as He foretells.

There is nothing hid from the Lord's eyes. There are no secrets with Him. Alone or in company, by night or by day, in private or in public, He is acquainted with all our ways. He that saw Nathanael under the fig-tree is unchanged. Go where we will, and retire from the world as we may, we are never out of sight of Christ.

This is a thought that ought to exercise a restraining and sanctifying effect on our souls. We all know the influence which the presence of the rulers of this world has upon their subjects: nature itself teaches us to put a check on our tongues, and demeanour, and behaviour, when we are under the eye of a king. The sense of our Lord Jesus Christ's perfect knowledge of all our ways, ought to have the same effect upon our hearts. Let us do nothing we would not like Christ to see, and say nothing we would not like Christ to hear. Let us seek to live and move and have our being under a continual recollection of Christ's presence. Let us behave as we would have done had we walked beside Him, in the company of James and John, by the sea of Galilee. This is the way to be trained for heaven. In heaven, "we shall ever be *with the Lord*." (1 Thess. iv. 17.)

In the second place, let us notice in these verses an *example of the manner in which prophecies concerning our Lord's first coming were fulfilled*. We are told that His public entry fulfilled the words of Zachariah: "Thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass."

It appears that this prediction was literally and exactly fulfilled. The words which the prophet spake by the Holy Spirit received no figurative accomplishment: as he said, so it came to pass; as he foretold, so it was

done. Five hundred and fifty years had passed away since the prediction was made,—and then, when the appointed time arrived, the long-promised Messiah did literally ride into Zion “on an ass.” No doubt the vast majority of the inhabitants of Jerusalem saw nothing in the circumstance. The veil was upon their hearts, but we are not left in doubt as to the fulfilment of the prophecy. We are told plainly, “All this was done that it might be fulfilled.”

From the fulfilment of God’s word in time past, we are surely intended to gather something as to the manner of its fulfilment in time to come. We have a right to expect that prophecies respecting the *second* advent of Christ will be as literally fulfilled as those respecting His *first* advent. He came to this earth literally in person the first time. He will come to this earth literally in person the second time. He came in humiliation once literally to suffer. He will come again in glory literally to reign. Every prediction respecting things accompanying His first advent was literally accomplished. It will be just the same when He returns. All that is foretold about the restoration of the Jews,—the judgments on the ungodly, the unbelief of the world, the gathering of the elect,—shall be made good to the letter. Let us not forget this. In the study of unfulfilled prophecy, a fixed principle of interpretation is of the first importance.

Finally, let us notice in these verses *a striking example of the worthlessness of man’s favour*. Of all the admiring crowds who thronged round our Lord as He entered Jerusalem, none stood by Him when He was delivered into the hands of wicked men. Many cried, “Hosannah,” who four days after cried, “Away with Him, crucify Him.”

But this is a faithful picture of human nature. This is a proof of the utter folly of thinking more of the praise of man than the praise of God. Nothing in truth is so fickle and uncertain as popularity. It is here to-day and gone to-morrow. It is a sandy foundation, and sure to fail those who build upon it. Let us not care for it. Let us seek the favour of Him who is “the same yesterday, and to-day and for ever.” (Heb. xiii. 8.) Christ never changes. Those whom He loves, He loves to the end. His favour endureth for ever.

MATTHEW XXI. 12–22.

12 And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves

13 And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.

15 And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased,

16 And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?

17 And he left them, and went out of the city into Bethany; and he lodged there.

18 Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he hungered.

19 And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.

20 And when the disciples saw *it* they marvelled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away!

21 Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this *which is done* to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.

22 And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

WE have in these verses an account of two remarkable events in our Lord's history. In both, there was something eminently figurative and typical: each was an emblem of spiritual things. Beneath the surface of each lie lessons of solemn instruction.

The first event that demands our attention is *our Lord's visit to the temple*. He found His Father's house in a state which too truly shadowed forth the general condition of the whole Jewish Church: everything out of order, and out of course. He found the courts of that holy building disgracefully profaned by worldly transactions. Trading, and buying, and selling, were actually going on within its walls; *there* stood dealers ready to supply the Jew who came from distant countries, with any sacrifice he wanted; *there* sat the money-changer, ready to change foreign money for the current coin of the land. Bullocks, and sheep, and goats, and pigeons, were there exposed for sale, as if the place had been a market. The jingling of money might there be heard, as if those holy courts had been a bank or an exchange. Such were the scenes that met our Lord's eyes. He saw it all with holy indignation. "He cast out all them that sold and bought. He "overthrew the tables of the money-changers: "resistance there was none, for men knew that He was right; objection there was none, for all felt that He was only reforming a notorious abuse, which had been basely permitted for the sake of gain. Well might He sound in the ears of the astonished traders, as they fled from the temple, those solemn words of Isaiah, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves."

Let us see in our Lord's conduct on this occasion, a striking type of what He will do when He comes again the second time. He will purify His visible Church as He purified the temple. He will cleanse it from everything that defiles and works iniquity, and cast every worldly professor out of its pale. He will allow no worshipper of money, or lover of gain to have a place in that glorious temple, which He will finally exhibit before the world. May we all strive to live in the daily expectation of that coming! May we judge ourselves that we be not condemned, and cast out in that searching and sifting day! We should often study those words of Malachi: "Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? for He is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap." (Mal. iii. 2.)

The second event that demands our attention in these verses is *our Lord's curse upon the fruitless fig-tree*. We are told, that being hungry, He came to a fig-tree in the way, and "found nothing thereon but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig-tree withered away." This is an instance almost without parallel in all our Lord's ministry. It is almost the only occasion on which we find Him making one of His creatures suffer, in order to teach a spiritual truth. There was a heart-searching lesson in that withered fig-tree. It preaches a sermon we shall do well to hear.

That fig-tree, full of leaves, but barren of fruit, was a striking emblem of the Jewish Church, when our Lord was upon earth. The Jewish Church had everything to make an outward show. It had the temple, the priesthood, the daily service, the yearly feasts, the Old Testament Scriptures, the courses of the Levites, the morning and evening sacrifice. But beneath these goodly leaves, the Jewish Church was utterly destitute of fruit. It had no grace, no faith, no love, no humility, no spirituality, no real holiness, no willingness to receive its Messiah. (John i. 11.) And hence, like the fig-tree, the Jewish Church was soon to wither away. It was to be stripped of all its outward ornaments, and its members scattered over the face of the earth. Jerusalem was to be destroyed. The temple was to be burned. The daily sacrifice was to be taken away. The tree was to wither down to the very ground. And so it came to pass: never was there a type so literally fulfilled. In every wandering Jew we see a branch of the fig-tree that was cursed.

But we may not stop here. We may find even more instruction in the event we are now considering. These things were written for our sakes, as well as for the Jews.

Is not every fruitless branch of Christ's visible Church in awful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? Beyond doubt it is. High ecclesiastical profession, without holiness among a people,—overweening confi-

dence in councils, bishops, liturgies, and ceremonies, while repentance and faith have been neglected,—have ruined many a visible Church in time past, and may yet ruin many more. Where are the once famous Churches of Ephesus, and Sardis, and Carthage, and Hippo? They are all gone. They had leaves, but no fruit. Our Lord's curse came upon them: they became withered fig-trees. The decree went forth, "Hew them down." (Dan. iv. 23.) Let us remember this. Let us beware of church-pride: let us not be high-minded, but fear. (Rom. xi. 20.)

Finally, is not every fruitless professor of Christianity in awful danger of becoming a withered fig-tree? There can be no doubt of it. So long as a man is content with the mere *leaves* of religion,—with a name to live while he is dead, and a form of godliness without the power,—so long his soul is in great peril. So long as he is satisfied with going to church or chapel, or receiving the Lord's Supper, and being called a Christian, while his heart is not changed, and his sins not forsaken,—so long he is daily provoking God to cut him off without remedy. Fruit, fruit,—the fruit of the Spirit is the only sure proof that we are savingly united to Christ, and in the way to heaven. May this sink down into our hearts, and never be forgotten!

MATTHEW XXI 23–32.

23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things, and who gave thee this authority?

24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which, if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

26 But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them,

Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

28 But what think ye? A *certain* man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard.

29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.

30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not.

31 Whether of them twain did the will of *his* father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen *it*, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

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 endeavoured 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 doest thou 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 laboured 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 labourer 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 di-

ploma. Let us neither be surprised nor moved, when we hear such things. It is the old charge which was brought against Christ Himself. “There is no new thing under the sun.” (Eccles. i. 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 like wise 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, “and be always ready to give a reason of the hope that is in us with meekness and with fear.” (1 Peter. iii. 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 defence of a good cause. The words of Solomon deserve consideration: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him.” (Pro. xxvi. 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 publicans, 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 to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John i. 9.)

MATTHEW XXI. 33–46.

33 Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:

34 And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.

35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.

36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.

37 But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.

38 But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.

39 And they caught him, and cast *him* out of the vineyard, and slew *him*.

40 When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?

41 They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out *his* vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?

43 Therefore *say* I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

45 And when the chief priests and pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

46 But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.

THE parable contained in these verses was spoken with special reference to the Jews. They are the husbandmen here described. Their sins are set before us here as in a picture. Of this there can be no doubt. It is written that "He spake of them."

But we must not flatter ourselves that this parable contains nothing for the Gentiles. There are lessons laid down for us, as well as for the Jew. Let us see what they are.

We see, in the first place, *what distinguishing privileges God is pleased to bestow on some nations.*

He chose Israel to be a peculiar people to Himself. He separated them from the other nations of the earth, and bestowed on them countless blessings. He gave them revelations of Himself, while all the rest of the earth was in darkness. He gave them the law, and the covenants, and the oracles of God, while all the world beside was let alone. In short, God dealt with the Jews as a man deals with a piece of land which he fences out and cultivates, while all the country around is left untilled and waste. The vineyard of the Lord was the house of Israel. (Isai. v. 7.)

And have we no privileges? Beyond doubt we have many. We have the Bible, and liberty for everyone to read it. We have the Gospel, and permission to everyone to hear it. We have spiritual mercies in abundance, of which five hundred millions of our fellow men know nothing

at all. How thankful we ought to be! The poorest man in England may say every morning, "There are five hundred millions of immortal souls worse off than I am. Who am I, that I should differ? Bless the Lord, O my soul."

We see, in the next place *what a bad use nations sometimes make of their privileges.*

When the Lord separated the Jews from other people, He had a right to expect that they would serve Him, and obey His laws. When a man has taken pains with a vineyard, he has a right to expect fruit. But Israel rendered not a due return for all God's mercies. They mingled with the heathen, and learned their works (Psalm cvi. 35). They hardened themselves in sin and unbelief. They turned aside after idols. They kept not God's ordinances. They despised God's temple. They refused to listen to His prophets. They ill-used those whom He sent to call them to repentance, and, finally, they brought their wickedness to a height, by killing the Son of God Himself, even Christ the Lord.

And what are we doing ourselves with our privileges? Truly this is a serious question, and one that ought to make us think. It may well be feared that we are not, as a nation, living up to our light, or walking worthy of our many mercies. Must we not confess with shame, that millions amongst us seem utterly without God in the world? Must we not acknowledge, that in many a town, and in many a village, Christ seems hardly to have any disciple, and the Bible seems hardly to be believed? It is vain to shut our eyes to these facts. The fruit that the Lord receives from His vineyard in Great Britain, compared with what it ought to be, is disgracefully small. It may well be doubted whether we are not as provoking to Him as the Jews.

We see, in the next place, *what an awful reckoning God sometimes has with nations and Churches, which make a bad use of their privileges.*

A time came when the longsuffering of God towards the Jews had an end. Forty years after our Lord's death, the cup of their iniquity was at length full, and they received a heavy chastisement for their many sins. Their holy city, Jerusalem, was destroyed; their temple was burned: they themselves were scattered over the face of the earth. "The kingdom of God was taken from them, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

And will the same thing ever happen to us? Will the judgments of God ever come down on this nation of England, because of her unfruitfulness under so many mercies? Who can tell? We may well cry with the prophet, "Lord God, Thou knowest." We only know that judgments have come on many a Church and nation in the last eighteen hundred years. The kingdom of God has been taken from the African Churches: the

Mahometan power has overwhelmed most of the Churches of the East. At all events it becomes all English believers to intercede much on behalf of their country. Nothing offends God so much as neglect of privileges. Much has been given to us, and much will be required.

We see, in the last place, *the power of conscience even in wicked men.*

The chief priests and elders at last discovered that our Lord's parable was specially meant for themselves. The point of its closing words was too sharp to be escaped. "They perceived that He spake of them."

There are many hearers of the Gospel in every congregation who are exactly in the condition of these unhappy men. They know that what they hear Sunday after Sunday is all true. They know that they are wrong themselves, and that every sermon condemns them, but they have neither will nor courage to acknowledge this. They are too proud or too fond of the world to confess their past mistakes, and to take up the cross, and follow Christ. Let us all beware of this awful state of mind. The last day will prove that there was more going on in the consciences of hearers than was at all known to preachers. Thousands and ten thousands will be found, like the chief priests, to have been convicted by their own consciences, and yet to have died unconverted.