EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE.

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MATTHEW VII. 1–11.

1 Judge not, that ye be not judged.

2 For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

3 And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

4 Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam *is* in thine own eye?

5 Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.

6 Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

7 Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

9 Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?

10 Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?

11 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

THE first portion of these verses is one of those passages of Scripture which we must be careful not to strain beyond its proper meaning. It is frequently abused and misapplied by the enemies of true religion. It is possible to press the words of the Bible so far that they yield not medicine, but poison.

When our Lord says, “Judge not,” He does not mean that it is wrong, under any circumstances, to pass an unfavourable judgment on the conduct and opinions of others. We ought to have decided opinions: we are to “prove all things;” we are to “try the spirits.” (1 Thess. v. 21; 1 John iv. 1.)—Nor yet does He mean that it is wrong to reprove the sins and faults of others until we are perfect and faultless ourselves. Such an interpretation would contradict other parts of Scripture. It would make it impossible to condemn error and false doctrine; it would debar any one from attempting the office of a minister or a judge. The earth would be “given into the hands of the wicked” (Job ix. 24): heresy would flourish: wrong-doing would abound.

What our Lord means to condemn is a *censorious and fault-finding spirit.* A readiness to blame others for trifling offences or matters of indifference, a habit of passing rash and hasty judgments, a disposition to magnify the errors and infirmities of our neighbours, and make the worst of them,—this is what our Lord forbids. It was common among the Pharisees: it has always been common from their day down to the present time. We must watch against it. We should “believe all things,” and “hope all things” about others, and be very slow to find fault. This is Christian charity. (1 Cor. xiii. 7.)

The second portion of these verses teaches us *the importance of exercising discretion as to the persons with whom we speak on the subject of religion.* Everything is beautiful in its place and season. Our zeal is to be tempered by a prudent consideration of times, places, and persons. “Reprove not a scorner,” says Solomon, “lest he hate thee.” (Prov. ix. 8.) It is not everybody to whom it is wise to open our minds on spiritual matters. There are many, who from violent tempers, or openly profligate habits, are utterly incapable of valuing the things of the Gospel. They will even fly into a passion, and run into greater excesses of sin, if we try to do good to their souls; to name the name of Christ to such people is truly to “cast pearls before swine.” It does them not good, but harm: it rouses all their corruption, and makes them angry; in short, they are like the Jews at Corinth (Acts xviii. 6), or like Nabal, of whom it is written, that he was “such a son of Belial, that a man could not speak unto him.” (1 Sam. xxv. 17.)

The lesson before us is one which it is peculiarly difficult to use in the proper way. The right application of it needs great wisdom. We are most of us far more likely to err on the side of over-caution than of over-zeal: we are generally far more disposed to remember the “time to be silent,” than the “time to speak.” It is a lesson, however, which ought to stir up a spirit of self-inquiry in all our hearts. Do we ourselves never check our friends from giving us good advice, by our moroseness and irritability of temper? Have we never obliged others to hold their peace and say nothing, by our pride and impatient contempt of counsel? Have we never turned against our kind advisers, and silenced them by our violence and passion? We may well fear that we have often erred in this matter.

The last portion of these verses teaches us *the duty of prayer, and the rich encouragements there are to pray.* There is a beautiful connection between this lesson and that which goes before it. Would we know when to be “silent,” and when to “speak,”—when to bring forward “holy things,” and produce our “pearls”? We must pray.—This is a subject to which the Lord Jesus evidently attaches great importance. The language that He uses is a plain proof of this. He employs three different words to express the idea of prayer: “Ask,”—“Seek,”—“Knock.” He holds out the broadest, fullest promise to those who pray: “Every one that asketh receiveth.” He illustrates God’s readiness to hear our prayers by an argument drawn from the well-known practice of parents on earth: “evil” and selfish as they are by nature, they do not neglect the wants of their children according to the flesh; much more will a God of love and mercy attend to the cries of those who are His children by grace!

Let us take special notice of these words of our Lord about prayer. Few of His sayings, perhaps, are so well known and so often repeated as this. The poorest and most unlearned can generally tell us, that “if we do not seek we shall not find.” But what is the good of knowing it, if we do not use it? Knowledge, not improved and well employed, will only increase our condemnation at the last day.

Do we know anything of this “asking, seeking, and knocking”? Why should we not? There is nothing so simple and plain as praying, if a man really has a will to pray. There is nothing unhappily, which men are so slow to do: they will use many of the forms of religion, attend many ordinances, do many things that are right, before they will do this; and yet without this, no soul can be saved!

Do we ever really pray? If not, we shall at last be without excuse before God, except we repent. We shall not be condemned for not doing what we could not have done, or not knowing what we could not have known; but we shall find that one main reason why we are lost is this,—that we never “asked” that we might be saved.

Do we indeed pray? Then let us pray on, and not faint. It is not lost labour. It is not useless. It will bear fruit after many days. Those words have never yet failed, “Every one that asketh receiveth.”

MATTHEW VII. 12–20.

12 Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

13 Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

14 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

15 Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

19 Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

20 Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

IN this part of the Sermon on the Mount our Lord begins to draw His discourse to a conclusion. The lessons He here enforces on our notice, are broad, general, and full of the deepest wisdom. Let us mark them in succession.

He lays down *a general principle for our guidance* in all doubtful questions between man and man. We are “to do to others as we would have others do to us.” We are not to deal with others as others deal with us: this is mere selfishness and heathenism. We are to deal with others as we would like others to deal with us: this is real Christianity.

This is a golden rule indeed! It does not merely forbid all petty malice and revenge, all cheating and overreaching. It does much more. It settles a hundred difficult points, which in a world like this are continually arising between man and man. It prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases. It sweeps the whole debatable ground with one mighty principle. It shows us a balance and measure, by which every one may see at once what is his duty.—Is there a thing we would not like our neighbour to do to us? Then let us always remember that this is the thing we ought not to do to him. Is there a thing we would like him to do to us? Then this is the very thing we ought to do to him.—How many intricate questions would be decided at once if this rule were honestly used!

In the second place, our Lord gives us *a general caution against the way of the many in religion.* It is not enough to think as others think, and do as others do. It must not satisfy us to follow the fashion, and swim with the stream of those among whom we live. He tells us that the way that leads to everlasting life is “narrow,” and “few” travel in it. He tells us that the way that leads to everlasting destruction is “broad,” and full of travellers: “Many there be that go in thereat.”

These are fearful truths! They ought to raise great searchings of heart in the minds of all who hear them.*—*“Which way am I going? By what road am I travelling?”—In one or other of the two ways here described, every one of us may be found. May God give us an honest, self-inquiring spirit, and show us what we are!

We may well tremble and be afraid, if our religion is that of the multitude. If we can say no more than this, that “we go where others go, and worship were others worship, and hope we shall do as well as others at last,” we are literally pronouncing our own condemnation. What is this but being in the “broad way”? What is this but being in the road whose end is “destruction”? Our religion at present is not saving religion.

We have no reason to be discouraged and cast down if the religion we profess is not popular and few agree with us. We must remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in this passage: “The gate is strait.” Repentance, and faith in Christ, and holiness of life, have never been fashionable. The true flock of Christ has always been small. It must not move us to find that we are reckoned singular, and peculiar, and bigoted, and narrow-minded. This is “the narrow way.” Surely it is better to enter into life eternal with a few, than to go to “destruction” with a great company.

In the last place, the Lord Jesus gives us *a general warning against false teachers in the Church.* We are to “beware of false prophets.” The connection between this passage and the preceding one is striking. Would we keep clear of this “broad way”? We must beware of false prophets. They will arise: they began in the days of the apostles and even then the seeds of error were sown. They have appeared continually ever since. We must be prepared for them, and be on our guard.

This is a warning which is much needed. There are thousands who seem ready to believe anything in religion, if they hear it from an ordained minister. They forget that clergymen may err as much as laymen: they are not infallible. Their teaching must be weighed in the balance of Holy Scripture. They are to be followed and believed, so long as their doctrine agrees with the Bible, but not a minute longer. We are to try them “by their fruits.” Sound doctrine and holy living are the marks of true prophets.—Let us remember this. Our minister’s mistakes will not excuse our own. “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” (Matt. xv. 14.)

What is the best safe-guard against false teaching? Beyond all doubt the regular study of the Word of God, with prayer for the teaching of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was given to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. (Psa. cxix. 105.) The man who reads it aright will never be allowed greatly to err. It is neglect which makes so many a prey to the first false teacher whom they hear. They would fain have us believe that “they are not learned, and do not pretend to have decided opinions:” the plain truth is that they are lazy and idle about reading the Bible, and do not like the trouble of thinking for themselves. Nothing supplies false prophets with followers so much as spiritual sloth under a cloak of humility.

May we all bear in mind our Lord’s warning! The world, the devil, and the flesh, are not the only dangers in the way of the Christian. There remains another yet, and that is the “false prophet:” the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Happy is he who prays over his Bible, and knows the difference between truth and error in religion! There is a difference, and we are meant to know it, and to use our knowledge.

MATTHEW VII. 21–29.

21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

22 Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

23 And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

24 Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

25 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

26 And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

27 And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

28 And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine:

29 For he taught them as *one* having authority, and not as the Scribes.

THE Lord Jesus winds up the Sermon on the Mount by a passage of heart-piercing application. He turns from false prophets to false professors, from unsound teachers to unsound hearers. Here is a word for all. May we have grace to apply it to our own hearts!

The first lesson here is *the uselessness of a mere outward profession of Christianity.* Not every one that saith “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven. Not all that profess and call themselves Christians shall be saved.

Let us take notice of this. It requires far more than most people seem to think necessary, to save a soul. We may be baptized in the name of Christ, and boast confidently of our ecclesiastical privileges; we may possess head knowledge, and be quite satisfied with our own state; we may even be preachers, and teachers of others, and do “many wonderful works” in connection with our Church: but all this time are we practically doing the will of our Father in heaven? Do we truly repent, truly believe on Christ, and live holy and humble lives? If not, in spite of all our privileges and profession, we shall miss heaven at last, and be for ever cast away. We shall hear those awful words, “I never knew you: depart from Me,”

The day of judgment will reveal strange things. The hopes of many, who were thought great Christians while they lived, will be utterly confounded. The rottenness of their religion will be exposed and put to shame before the whole world. It will then be proved that to be saved means something more than “making a profession.” We must make a “practice” of our Christianity as well as a “profession.” Let us often think of that great day: let us often “judge ourselves, that we be not judged,” and condemned by the Lord. Whatever else we are, let us aim at being real, true, and sincere.

The second lesson here is a *striking picture of two classes of Christian hearers.* Those who hear and do nothing,— and those who hear and do as well as hear,—are both placed before us, and their histories traced to their respective ends.

The man who hears Christian teaching, and practices what he hears, is like “a wise man who builds his house upon a rock.” He does not content himself with listening to exhortations to repent, believe in Christ, and live a holy life. He actually repents: he actually believes. He actually ceases to do evil, learns to do well, abhors that which is sinful, and cleaves to that which is good. He is a doer as well as a hearer. (James i. 22.)

And what is the result? In the time of trial his religion does not fail him; the floods of sickness, sorrow, poverty, disappointments, bereavements beat upon him in vain. His soul stands unmoved; his faith does not give way: his comforts do not utterly forsake him. His religion may have cost him trouble in time past; his foundation may have been obtained with much labour and many tears: to discover his own interest in Christ may have required many a day of earnest seeking, and many an hour of wrestling in prayer. But his labour has not been thrown away: he now reaps a rich reward. The religion that can stand trial is the true religion.

The man who hears Christian teaching, and never gets beyond hearing, is like “a foolish man who builds his house upon the sand.” He satisfies himself with listening and approving, but he goes no further. He flatters himself, perhaps, that all is right with his soul, because he has feelings, and convictions, and desires, of a spiritual kind. In these he rests. He never really breaks off from sin, and casts aside the spirit of the world; he never really lays hold on Christ; he never really takes up the cross. He is a hearer of truth, but nothing more.

And what is the end of this man’s religion? It breaks down entirely under the first flood of tribulation; it fails him completely, like a summer-dried fountain, when his need is the sorest. It leaves its possessor high and dry, like a wreck on a sand bank, a scandal to the Church, a by-word to the infidel, and a misery to himself. Most true is it that what costs little is worth little! A religion which costs us nothing, and consists in nothing but hearing sermons, will always prove at last to be a useless thing.

So ends the Sermon on the Mount. Such a sermon never was preached before: such a sermon perhaps has never been preached since. Let us see that it has a lasting influence on our own souls. It is addressed to us as well as to those who first heard it. We are they who shall have to give account of its heart-searching lessons. It is no light matter what we think of them. The word that Jesus has spoken, “the same shall judge us in the last day.” (John xii. 48.)