Matthew - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

The Path Of Life And Separation, Path of Separation., The

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Matt. 13:53: 14:36.

IN this important passage the footsteps of the Lord I lead us into the path of separation from a world that has rejected Christ. Four scenes pass before us—the country, the court, the desert and the stormy sea. Rejected by the world the Lord takes a place outside "His own country," "His own house," the king's court, the peoples' cities, and the disciples' ship (13:57, 14:13, 23). As we trace the Lord's steps we learn the gain and blessedness of following the Lord into this path of separation.

In the first two scenes—the country and the court—we discover the true character of the world around us. In the last two scenes—the desert, and the sea—we discover the fullness of our resources in Christ in the outside place.

1. HIS OWN COUNTRY — Matt. 13:53-58.

IN the fulfillment of His service of love the Lord had taken the lowest place and associated with the common people. He became poor that we through His poverty might be rich. Thus He is found again in "His own country" and among His own people in despised Nazareth. Alas! oven so these simple country folk are marked by the pride of the flesh that refuses to accept One who comes in lowly guise. They listen to His words of wisdom, and gaze with wonder at His works of power, but they say, "Is He not connected with the family of the carpenter? His mother, and brothers, and sisters are they not well known to us?" Social pride refuses to receive divine truths from One whose family is so low in the social scale; who is outside the circle of their religious officials, and comes to them without human credentials. He is rejected by "His own country" and "His own house."

2. THE COURT OF THE KING — Matt. 14:1-12.

THE simple country people have rejected Christ, but what of the higher circles—what of the court of of the king? It is true that Christ personally is not found in the court, but the treatment meeted out to the Forerunner of Christ is a sure indication of the rejection of Christ Himself by the leaders of the people. In the court of Herod we get a true picture of this world, marked by corruption and violence. The lust of the flesh, had led the ruler of the people into an infamous alliance with his brother Philip's wife. Unable to gainsay the rebukes of a godly man, and influenced by a wicked woman, he degrades justice by casting a righteous man into prison; and is only restrained from murder by the fear of the people. Then comes a day when the lust of the eye, finding a passing gratification in the charms of a dancing girl, leads the frivolous king into a rash oath. Finally the pride of life leads him to commit murder to maintain his paltry ideas of honor.

Thus in these two scenes—one in "His own country," the other in King Herod's court—we have a complete picture of this present evil world, marked by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Moreover they present a twofold witness to the rejection of Christ. Neither country nor court will receive Christ, or any witness to Christ. All classes agree in rejecting One whose lowliness wounds their pride, and whose holiness opposes their lusts.

At different times the world may express itself in different forms for the fashions of this world change, but at heart it is ever the same. The Lord was surrounded by the world of corrupt Judaism we are faced with the world of corrupt Christendom. Outwardly there are differences, at heart they are alike marked by lust and pride, violence and corruption.

3. THE DESERT PLACE—Matt. 14:13-21.

THE world depicted in the first two scenes cannot tolerate the presence of Christ, and is entirely unsuited to Christ. It rejects Christ and is rejected by Christ. The Lord accepts the murder of His Forerunner as the sure token of His own rejection, and, leaving country and court, "He departed... into a desert place apart."

In this outside place He becomes the attractive center of the needy. "They followed Him on foot out of the cities." Driven by their need and drawn by His grace, they follow Him into the path of separation. So with ourselves; we have needs as sinners and needs as saints, and no one in all this world can meet one need or the other. As sinners we need a Saviour' to relieve us of our sins and all that lies upon us as of a fallen rase; as believers we need an object to satisfy our hearts. Thus we are drawn to Him outside this world, that has become to us a desert by reason of the spiritual needs that have been awakened in our souls, to find in Jesus One who can make the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose.

Coming to Him in the outside place we discover, like the needy multitudes of old, His deep perfections. We discern, as they did, that He is not One that has to be constrained to bless, but One who is willing and ready to bless, as We read "Jesus went forth" to meet them. The father ran to meet the returning prodigal, and" Jesus went forth" to meet these needy souls (14).

Moreover in His company we find ourselves in the presence of One who fully appreciates our needs, for we read, He "saw a great multitude." We see but little of our need, or the need of others, but His gaze takes in "a great multitude." He sees our need in all its vast extent.

Further, not only has He divine knowledge of our need, but divine compassion for us in our misery. He "was moved with compassion toward them." His heart of love feels for us as no other heart can ever feel.

Moreover with Christ there is power to meet the need, for we read, "He healed their sick." With Christ it is not compassion without power, nor power without compassion, as with others. His heart and His hand are at our disposal; and the hand that heals is moved-by a heart that loves.

How blessed to have found in Christ, in the outside place, One who is willing to bless, who has divine knowledge of our need, who has a heart that can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and a hand that is able to meet our-needs. And we discover these resources in Christ in the place of our need. In the day of glory we shall still enjoy His infinite perfections but in the dark and cloudy day we learn His perfections. We learn them where we need them, like the multitude of old; for the time was evening, the place a desert, and the people hungry.

However Christ is with them, and the disciples take the right course; they "Come to Him." They turn to the One with the perfect knowledge, infinite love, and divine power. Who can turn to Him in vain, though at times, He may have lessons to teach us before He intervenes on our behalf? He would have us to realize our need, and., what is more difficult to learn, our own utter weakness and utter incapacity to meet our need. It was thus with the disciples, To bring home to them their own weakness, the Lord can say "Give ye them to eat." At once they have to confess they have but five loaves and two small fishes. They realize not only that they are a needy people in a darkening scene and a desert place, but that their own resources are utterly insufficient to meet their need. They are shut up to Christ. And this is still where Christ would bring us in all our difficulties, for here He can meet us and act on our behalf.

So at once the Lord, says, "Bring them hither to Me. —ME—the One who knows, who loves, and who has the power to meet the need. And still in all our difficulties, the need. And, our exercises and our failures, tie is saying" bring them hither to Me." He invites us to come in all our weakness to Himself.

How blessed is the result! First all are brought to rest. "Then He takes the very things which were the witness of their weakness, and brings earth's weakness into touch with heaven's fullness, with the result the people were not only fed but filled, and there" remained twelve baskets full." His grave can meet our need, but our need will never exhaust His grave.

4. THE STORMY SEA — Matt. 14:22-36.

NOW the scene changes and we are permitted to see the Lord in an entirely new position, setting forth fresh truths. In the former scene He was in "a desert place apart" (13); here He is in" a mountain apart (23). There We learn in a picture that Christ is entirely outside the course of this world, here we learn that He has entered upon a new world. The mountain position speaks to us of the place He has taken on high. Moreover we learn that though He is on high His heart of love is still occupied with His people who are passing through this world, for we read, "He went up... to pray." In the place of glory He intercedes for His people.

And what of His people for whom He intercedes? They are in a scene of ever increasing darkness, for we read, "the evening was come" (23); they are surrounded by a world that is opposed, tor they are "in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves," and the power of Satan is against them— "the wind was contrary" (24).

They are not left, however, to struggle alone with their difficulties as if sufficient for these things. The Lord comes to His people, as we read, "in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them." In the desert it was the needy people who carne to Him, for as we have seen "they followed Him." To-day His direct dealings with this world are over, and He is concerned with His people alone. Here He not only comes to His people, but He comes in' a way that was new and strange to the disciples. He carne" walking on the sea.' They had known Him as the One who had been with them in the boat and slept upon the sea. And beautiful indeed it was to see Him, as the dependent Man amongst men, in such perfect confidence in the Father's love that He can sleep in the storm on the sea; but this occasioned no fear. Now, however, they see a Man walking on the sea in the storm, and they are troubled and cried out with fear.

"They had known Him as the One who was with them in the storm, now they see Him as beyond weariness and above all storms. Such is His position to-day. Not only is He apart from the world, He is above the world, and beyond the reach of its storms. The storm of Calvary has spent itself. Death hath no more dominion over Him. He walks upon the waves.

If, however, they have to learn Christ in a new way, they will also find that it is the same Jesus. The Jesus who as the lowly One had slept on the sea, is the same Jesus who, as the mighty One, can walk upon the sea. Thus He can say to His disciples, "It is I; be not afraid."

Thus the Lord comes to His own—His Jewish disciples—who had journeyed with Him in His pathway here. Moreover, if He comes, it is to attract them to Himself outside of the Jewish system. They were in the ship, and a ship is a human device to keep people afloat on an element otherwise impossible to them. Such was the Jewish system with which the disciples of the Lord were connected; and such is every human system that man devises after the pattern of the Jewish system—devices to maintain people religiously without intimate contact with Christ.

The Lord thus presents Himself as the One who is interceding for His people— occupied wholly with them; who is above all storms—superior to every power, and as the One who is outside every device to sustain man in this world. Moreover if He presents Himself to His people it is to attract them to Himself in the outside place. If, however we are to be drawn outside the systems of men it can only be as having Christ Himself before our souls as our une Object, and as having Christ's word as our solo authority. This is very blessedly set forth in Peter. He seems to say, "lf I am to leave the slip, if I am to walk un the water, it must be Thyself as my Object, and Thy word as my authority"—"Lord if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water." He has found an Object that attracts his heart, and he receives a word that gives him authority, for the Lord says" Come."

This beautiful picture thus sets forth the truth of the Church, unfolded to believers after the Lord had taken His place on high, by which Christ's Assembly is separated from a worldly religious system to gather to Christ as the new center. This truth is summed up for us in the Epistle to the Hebrews where we are exhorted "to go forth unto Him without the Camp."

How slow we are to realize that Christianity presents a company of believers gathered together with Christ as their center, their bond, their all. "The natural man can understand a company of people bound together by articles of religion, and organized by some central and visible authority, but nature cannot conceive of a company of people held together in unity without any humanly devised articles of religion, without any visible human authority,—held together, guided, and sustained in the face of all opposition by an unseen Head. To the natural man this is as impossible as walking on the water.

The moment Peter stepped upon the water he was in a position in which he no longer had the aid of the ship to sustain him, and in which nature was of no avail. Not all the concentrated energies of man, nor all the wisdom of the ages would enable a man to walk upon the water. The one who takes such a position is wholly and altogether dependent upon Christ. We can float upon the water in a boat, but we cannot walk

upon the water without Christ.

Further we see the motive that led Peter to leave the ship and walk upon the sea. It was, as we read, "to go to Jesus." His object was not simply to get away from the ship, still less to walk on the water, but definitely and only "to go to Jesus." He did not leave the ship because it was "tossed with waves," or because of any troubles in the ship. The Lord was outside the ship, and love would fain be in His company, and faith realized, that if the Lord gave the word to come to Him, the Lord would be able to sustain the one who answered to His word.

How blessedly the principies that mark the path of separation are summed up for us in verse 29. In obedience to Christ's word, "Come," Peter carne down out of the ship. In faith "he walked on the water." In affection "he walked on the water to go to Jesus." If in our day we take a place of separation outside the religious systems formed by sincere men after the pattern of Judaism, we shall find that it is a path that demands unswerving obedience to the Word; that calls for faith in Christ, and affection for Christ.

Moreover there are other lessons for Peter, and for ourselves through Peter, in what follows. Lessons that can only be learned in the outside place. Peter has faith to leave the ship "to go to Jesus," but is Peter's faith sufficient to face a storm? And if Peter fails and begins to sink is the Lord who was able to sustain Peter when walking on the sea, willing to save Peter when sinking in the sea?

Peter has to learn, and we with him, that in the outside place everything depends upon the Lord, and directly the eye is off the Lord we begin to sink in the presence of the storm. Thus it comes to pass Peter is put to the test in order to learn his own weakness and the Lord's sufficiency. To learn these wholesome lesson, Peter has to face the storm. The wind grows "boisterous," the waves run high, and when Peter "saw the wind boisterous" he began to sink. Looking upon Jesus he walked upon the water; looking upon the storm he sinks in the water. Peter has to learn that if Jesus is the One who walks on the water and says "Come," He is the only One who can sustain us when we do come. It was as impossible for Peter to walk on the water in a calm as in a storm. It was as easy for the Lord to sustain Peter in the storm as in the calm.

Thus we learn our weakness; but in doing, so we learn Christ's sufficiency. In sinking, Peter cried to the Lord to save him, and immediately the hand of the Lord is stretched out to save. If the love of the Lord attracts to Himself in the outside place the hand of the Lord can sustain in spite of every storm. Nevertheless if His gracious hand is ready to save us from sinking-. He may have to rebuke our unbelief.

Those in the ship might have thought it enthusiastic madness on the part of Peter to leave the ship and attempt to do what no man had ever done before. They might condemn him for doing something contrary to nature and reason, and congratulate themselves for not sinking like Peter or being rebuked like Peter. Vet be it remembered that if they did not sink in the water like Peter, neither did they walk on the water like Peter; and if they did not suffer the rebuke of the Lord's words, neither did they get the support of the Lord's hand.

The closing verses of the chapter, in which the Lord returns to the ship with Peter, present picture of the day that is yet to come when the Lord will return to earth with His saints, and renew His links with Israel. Then indeed the storms of earth will be over and peace at last will come to the world. Jesus, who was once rejected, will be owned as the Son of God and millennial blessing will be introduced.

The Lord Is My Shepherd and Other Papers, Learn of Me

It will greatly help us to carry out the Apostle's exhortation to "follow His steps" if we heed the Lord's own words, "Learn of Me." To learn of the Lord, we must "Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners."

In the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew we see the Lord in the midst of Israel, on every hand dispensing grace and power in relieving men of every pressure under which they are found. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, delivered from the power of Satan, forgave sins, and raised the dead. In result men fought against Him without a cause, rewarded Him evil for good and hatred for love (Psa. 109:5). They laughed him to scorn; they said, "He casteth out devils through the prince of the devils," and He was "a man gluttonous, and a winebibber" (Matt. 9:24,34; 11:19).

In the presence of the contradiction of sinners, of the hatred that spurned His love, and the evil that scorned His goodness, how did He act? In the presence of all this enmity we read, that He gave Himself unto prayer (Psa. 109:4). Instead of turning upon His opposers and reviling those that reviled Him, He turned to God in prayer and committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously.

Thus in this wonderful scene described in Matthew 11, which sums up the effect of His mighty works in the midst of Israel, we are permitted to see how the Lord acts when He is despised and rejected of men. We see Him turning to the Father in prayer, and we hear Him say, "even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight." He submits entirely to the Father's will and takes everything from His hand. Then, with Himself before us as the perfect Example, we hear Him say to us,

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me."

In Scripture the "yoke" is ever a figure of submission to the will of another. From the beginning to the end of His wonderful path through this world, the Lord, as the perfect Man, was here for the will of the Father. Coming into the world, He could say, "Lo, I come to do thy will, O God." Passing through the world He could say, "I came down from heaven not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me"; and again, He says, "I do always those things that please Him." Going out of the world, He could say, in view of the cross, "Not My will, but Thine, be done" (Heb. 10:9; John 6:38; 8:29; Luke 22:42).

Our little circumstances, however painful and trying at times, are as nothing compared with those the Lord had to face. But whatever they may be we are exhorted to take the Lord's yoke by quietly submitting to what the Father allows.

Moreover, the Lord says, "Learn of Me: for I am meek and lowly in heart." He was not only meek and lowly in manner, but He was "meek and lowly in heart." The right manner that men can see is comparatively easy to put on, but the right condition of heart, that the Lord alone can see, can only result from turning to the Lord in prayer and submitting to the Father's will. Naturally we are neither meek nor lowly. Instead of meekly giving way to others we assert ourselves; instead of having low thoughts of self we are naturally prone to self-importance. To correct all these natural tendencies of the flesh the Lord engages us with Himself, as He says, "Learn of Me." As we gaze upon Him, and admire these

lovely qualities, we insensibly become changed into His image. We become morally like the One we admire. Alas! the fact that oftentimes we are so little like Him tells, only too plainly, how little we have Himself before our souls – how little we learn of Him.

Taking His yoke and learning of Him we shall find rest unto our souls. Dwelling upon the trying circumstances we may have to meet, fretting our souls over the insults that may be flung at us, the betrayal of false friends, the malice of jealous persons, will bring no rest to the soul. Submitting to what the Father allows and catching the beautiful spirit of Christ, in all its meekness and lowliness, as we learn of Him, we shall enjoy the rest of spirit that was ever the portion of the Lord in a world of unrest.

Moreover, if we take His yoke, and thus submit to the Father's will we shall find that His yoke is easy and His burden light. For in following His steps, doing no sin, speaking without guile, keeping silence in the presence of insults, and committing ourselves to God, we shall have His support as yoked with Him in submission to the Father's will. And with His support, and in fellowship with Him, we shall find how true are His words,

"My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”

Thus, as we read these Scriptures, we are made conscious that Peter does not exhort us to take impossible steps; and the Lord does not ask us to learn impossible lessons.

Peter exhorts us,

To do no sin,

To use no guile,

To be silent in the presence of insults, and

To commit ourselves to God.

The Lord asks us to learn of Him, in subjection to the Father's will, in meekness that thinks of others, and lowliness that does not think of self.

The Lord was perfect in all circumstances, and, whatever the circumstances we have to meet, our first care should be to follow His steps, and maintain His character.

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