

ST. STEPHEN'S DAY;

Matthew 23:34-39

Contents: The teaching concerning reason and our natural light; four questions; and the teaching concerning faith.

Matthew 23:34-39.

Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: some of them shall ye kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous unto the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

I. THE TEACHING CONCERNING REASON AND NATURAL LIGHT

1. This Gospel is severe against the persecutors of faith. Yet, the severer it is against them, the more comforting it is to the believers who are persecuted. It teaches how obstinate the natural light, our own fancy and reason is; for when it falls into works and commands, it no longer listens to any one, as is set forth in the following Gospel. But the work and fancy of reason claim to be in the right, and it does not matter how much is preached, how many prophets God sends to her; all must be persecuted and put to death, that oppose the great red murderess, as she is pictured in Revelation of St. John 17:4. Here she is called Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots, arrayed in purple and scarlet, sitting upon a beast, that was also red, and having in her hand a golden cup full of the abominations and the unclean things of her fornications, that is, the teachings of men, by which she leads pure believing souls from faith and puts them to shame and strangles every one that tries to restrain her.

2. Such stiff-necked murderous obstinacy is set forth in this Gospel; first, in that God tries to convert her in every way possible, sends to her all kinds of preachers, who are mentioned by three names; prophets, wise men, and scribes.

3. The prophets are those who preach, being moved only by the Holy Spirit, who have not taken their sermon from the Scriptures or from human reason, as were Moses and Amos. And these men are the highest and the best, they are wise, and they make others wise, write Scriptures, and

explain them. Such were nearly all the fathers before and at the time of Moses, and also many after him, especially the apostles, who were laymen and common uneducated people, as Luke says in Acts 4:13: They were unlearned in the Scriptures.

4. The wise men are those who have received their message not only from God but also through the Scriptures and of men, and they are the disciples and followers of the prophets, but they themselves also preach and teach with their mouth and in living words. Such an one was Aaron, who spoke everything that Moses told him as we read in Exodus 4:15-16, that God says to Moses: "Thou shalt put my words in his mouth; and he shall be thy spokesman unto the people, and thou shalt be to him as God." So also all the priests are to be wise men, as we read in the eleventh chapter of Zechariah.

5. The writers or scribes are those who teach by means of writings and books, when they cannot teach in person or by the word of their mouth. Such men were also the apostles, and before them the Evangelists and their followers, and also the holy fathers; however, they do not write about or treat of their own imaginations, but of God's Word, which they have learned from the wise men and out of the Scriptures. These now are the three ways by which the truth may be revealed: by writing, by word, by thought; by the writing in books, by the words of their mouth, by thoughts of the heart. One can not in any other way grasp instruction save with the heart, the mouth, and writings.

6. Now all this is of no avail with obstinate reason; she listens neither to words, writings, nor to enlightenment, with which God tries to convert her. The writings and books she suppresses and burns as the King Jehudi did with the books of Jeremiah, Jeremiah 36:23. Reason forbids, silences and condemns words; enlightenment she banishes and slays together with the prophets. And it is remarkable that no prophet has been slain, banished, or persecuted, because he reproveth the coarse sins of the people except John the Baptist, whom Herodias permitted to be put to death, because he had reproveth the sin of her adultery. Such a great man had to die for the most disgraceful reason. Still the Jews also did not hate him because of this one fact, but because he had reproveth their sins also, and therefore they said that he had a devil.

7. In like manner there has ever been numberless disputes about true and false worship. Abel was slain by Cain in order that his worship might not be acknowledged by God. In like manner have all the prophets, the wise and the educated, reproveth that worship of God as idolatry, which springs from reason and human works, being without any faith; natural reason came and said that this worship was done for the honor of God and was right. Therefore the prophets had to die as such who prohibited and reproveth the service and honor of God and good works; as Christ says in John 16:2, "Yea, the hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God." In like manner all the idolatry of the Old Testament was started by them not because they wished to bow down to wood and stones, but because they thereby wished to worship the true God. Since, however, God had forbidden this, and since this had been a creation of their own fancy, independent of faith, it was certainly of Satan and not of God. Therefore the prophet said that this was not a service of God but one of idols. This, however, they would not suffer nor listen to, and so, according to God's command, the prophets did not dare to be silent, hence they therefore had to die, be banished, and persecuted.

8. Therefore the whole dispute consists in this, that the false saints quarrelled with the true saints about the worship of God and good works, the former saying this is divine worship; the latter saying no, it is idolatry and unbelief. Thus it has been from the beginning, and it will also continue unto the end.

9. This same thing we see even in our day; the Papists themselves have devised good works and divine worship with their outward deeds and laws, all of which, however, are faithless things, founded only upon works and without God's command, mere human prattle. So we say, they do not serve God, but themselves and Satan, as is the case with all idolatry; and they only mislead the people from their Christian faith and common brother love; but they will not suffer us to say that, and thus begins the misery that reigns now. Both agree that they are to serve God and do good works; but as to the definition, what is the service of God and good works, they will never agree. For these say, faith is nothing, nature with her works is good and right. Moreover, they also agreed that the open coarse sins, as murder, adultery, and robbery are not right; but in the principal works that pertain to divine worship, there they separate as far from one another as winter is from summer. The first hold to God and his mercy, and fear him; the others run to wood and stones, food and clothing, days and seasons and wish to win the favor of God by building, by bequests, by fastings, by their blaring voices and by their shaven heads. They fear nothing, are impudent and full of every kind of presumption. Oh! what a holy, wise, learned people, for whom God himself is neither sufficiently holy, wise nor learned, with all his prophets, wise men and scribes.

II. FOUR QUESTIONS

10. There are several questions which arise in this Gospel that we must examine. The first is, Why does Christ say that all the righteous blood from Abel on shall come upon the Jews, since they have not shed it all?

11. The answer is, that the words of Christ are directed to the whole multitude and to the whole generation of all those who from the beginning on have persecuted the prophets. This is proved by the fact that he addressed not only those of his own time but entire Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together," etc. This applies not only to the present, but also to the previous inhabitants of Jerusalem. Likewise, when he says, ye slew Zachariah between the sanctuary and the altar, yet, this Zachariah was slain by the King Joash (2 Chronicles 24:21) over 800 years before Christ's birth, and still he says, you have slain him. Likewise, they have also put to death Abel and will put to death the prophets and the wise men. As if he would say they are one people, one class, one generation; as the fathers so also the children. For the stiffneckedness that contended against God and his prophets in the time of the fathers, also contends in their children; the mouse is like its mother. And when the Lord says that all the righteous blood shall come upon them, he means to say as much as, the people must shed all righteous blood, it is their nature to do so, they cannot do otherwise. All blood that is shed, they shed, therefore will all blood come upon them.

12. But why does he cite only these two, Abel and Zachariah? Zachariah was not the last whose blood was shed, but after him Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Uriah, and Micah, and nearly all those

who received a divine call in the Scriptures. And indeed, Zachariah is the first among the prophets whose martyrdom is mentioned by name in the Scriptures. However, Christ does not speak here only of the prophets, but of the blood of all the righteous, of whom there were many under King Saul; likewise many prophets, whose names are not mentioned, were put to death under King Ahab.

13. In answer to this question I can say nothing except that Christ here holds to the usage of Scripture and places before us an example how we ought not to speak, hold, or mention what is not founded in the Scriptures. For although Isaiah and other prophets have been put to death, yet we find no mention in the Scriptures of the manner of death of any one after Zachariah. And thus, though he was not the last whose blood was shed, yet he is the last who is described by name how he preached in his days and suffered death. Thus Christ cites the first and the last righteous person, mentioned in the Scriptures, and thereby other righteous blood that was not mentioned, yet was shed before and after them. It has indeed been written of Uriah the prophet in Jeremiah 26:23, that he was slain by King Jehoiakim long after Zachariah, but this is told by others as a story which occurred long ago. But at his time the Scriptures say nothing about him, they do not even mention that he ever lived, although they describe the time and history of the same king in the history of 2 Chronicles 36:4ff; 2 Kings 24:1ff. Therefore the Lord does not speak of him.

14. It is also asked: Why does Christ mention the son of Barachiah, since the Scriptures call him the son of Jehoiada; for thus the text reads in Chronicles 24:20-21, “And the Spirit of God came upon Zachariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people, and said unto them. Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of Jehovah, so that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken Jehovah, he hath also forsaken you, And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of Jehovah.” When he died he said, “Jehovah, look upon it, and require it.” He also was killed, because he reproveth the worship they had established.

15. St. Jerome thinks he was called the son of Zachariah for spiritual reasons, because Zachariah means in Latin benedictus, the blessed. But others speak more lightly and say, that his father Jehoiada received the additional name of Barachiah because he did great good to the King and the people. Therefore they called him the blessed and after his death, out of gratitude, put his son to death; as is the way of the world according to the saying: Whoever helps another off the gallows him the other will help on again. Thus it happened to the Son of God. After God had done nothing but good for the whole world, they crucified his dear beloved Son, as is typified in this story.

16. Finally it is asked: No one can withstand God’s will, why then does he say: “How often would I have gathered thy children together, and ye would not?” This passage has been interpreted in various ways. Some have founded it upon the free will and its ability, so that it really appears that not free will but obstinate will is reproveth, and that it is base liberty that is only contrary to God, and is so severely condemned and reproveth.

17. St. Augustine forces the words to apply to reason, as if the Lord means to say very much, thus: “As many of thy children as I have gathered I have gathered against thy will. But such an interpretation of this simple passage is too forced. It could be much more easily understood, if

one said: Christ speaks here as a man, who has taken all human care upon himself. He did very much as to his human nature that did not become his divinity; for example, that he had to eat, drink, sleep, walk, weep, suffer, and die. So one could say here that he spoke after the manner of our human nature and its emotions: I would, but ye would not.

18. For, as I have often said, we must give special attention to the words of Christ, some of which refer to his divine, others only to his human nature. But here he introduces himself to us as God, since he says, "I send unto you prophets" etc.; for the sending of prophets is a work that belongs to God alone. And Luke 11:49 says he spoke thus: "Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send unto them prophets" etc. Moreover, his words read as if he not only wished to gather his children at the present time, but had also often wished to do so in the past, so that this is to be understood as referring to the divine will. Therefore we shall answer thus: These words are to be understood in the plainest and simplest manner as referring to the divine will, according to the usage of Scripture, which speaks of God as of a man for the sake of the simple minded; as we read in Genesis 6:6 that it repented Jehovah that he had made man on the earth, and yet there is no repentance in God. Also, that he was angry, yet in God there is no human anger. Likewise Genesis 11:5, that he came down from heaven and saw the building of the tower at Babylon, yet he remains ever sitting on his throne. And in Psalm 59:5-6, the prophet often says: "Awake, why sleepest thou so long?" Again: Arise, come to me, and similar passages; and yet he sleeps not, lies not down, is not far away. Again, Psalm 1:6: "Jehovah knoweth not the way of the unrighteous," yet he knows all things. All these passages are uttered in harmony with our feelings and fancy, and not according to the real state of the divine nature. Therefore they are not to be perverted by lofty speculation as utterances of the divine nature; but should be understood as spoken to common people here upon earth according to our human understanding. For we are to feel that he does just as the words read; and this is a beautiful and comforting way to think of God, one which is neither terrifying nor difficult to understand. Thus also: "How often would I," is also to be understood as meaning that he acted so that no one could think or feel otherwise than that he would gladly gather them, did gather them, as a man might do who eagerly wished to do such a thing. Therefore dismiss high things and remain by the milk and simple meaning of the Scriptures

III. THE TEACHING CONCERNING FAITH

19. In order, however, that we may all take our doctrine out of the Gospel, the Lord has given us here a lovely picture and parable of what he does for the sake of faith and believers so that I do not know of a more beautiful passage in all the Scriptures. He spoke in his anger and indignation very severe words to the Jews in this chapter, and pronounced his terrible woe upon their unbelief; therefore he does, as angry men are accustomed to do, and speaks to those ungrateful of his good acts and good will in the strongest terms possible; namely thus: I would gladly have imparted the heart in my body to them etc. Thus also the Lord here, in the most hearty way possible, emphasizes his good will and favor to the Jews, and says he would have gladly been their mother hen had they wished to be his little chickens.

20. Oh man! note well these words and this parable, how he pours it forth with great earnestness and with his whole soul. In this picture you will see, how you are to conduct your self towards

Christ and to what end he is of benefit to you, how you should make use of him and enjoy him. Behold the hen and her chickens, and there you see Christ and yourself painted and portrayed better than any painter can portray them.

21. In the first place, it is certain that our souls are the chickens; and Satan and wicked spirits are the buzzards in the air; with only this exception that we are not as wise as the chickens to flee under our hen. The spirits of Satan are more subtle to rob us of our souls than the buzzards are to steal the chickens. Now it was said before in an Epistle how it is not sufficient that we are pious, do good works, and live in grace. For our righteousness cannot stand before God's eyes and judgment, much less our unrighteousness. Therefore I have said: Faith, if it is true faith, is of such a nature that it does not rely upon itself nor upon the faith; but holds to Christ, and takes refuge under his righteousness; and he lets this righteousness be its shield and protection just like the little chicken never trusts in its own life and efforts, but takes refuge under the body and wings of the hen.

22. It is not sufficient for one who is to stand before the judgment of God, to say, I believe and have grace; for all that is within him is not able to protect him; but he proffers to this judgment Christ's own righteousness which he permits to plead for him at the judgment seat of God. This stands in all honor before him forever, as Psalm 111:3, and Psalm 112:3, say: "His righteousness endureth forever." Under this righteousness he creeps, crouches, and stoops, he confides in Christ's righteousness and believes without the least doubt that it will sustain him and so it really comes to pass that he will be sustained by the same faith, not for his sake nor for the sake of such faith, but for the sake of Christ and his righteousness under which he takes refuge. Moreover faith that does not this, is not true faith. See that is the meaning of the Scriptures when they say in Psalm 91:1-7, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of Jehovah, he is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust. For he will deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover thee with his pinions, and under his wings shalt thou take refuge; his truth is a shield and a buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day; for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee."

23. Behold all this is spoken concerning faith in Christ, how it alone will stand and protect us from all danger and ruin, false doctrine, bodily and spiritual temptations of Satan, on the right hand and on the left, so that all others must fall and perish, because they do not take refuge under the wing and shoulders of Christ and there find shelter and anchor their trust. In like manner Malachi 4:2, says: "But unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings;" therefore St. Paul calls him in Romans 13:25, our propitiation, the throne of grace, and teaches everywhere how we must be sustained through him and under him. If then believers and saints are in need of such a great shield, what will become of those who go ahead with their own free will and their own good works, independent of Christ? Oh! we must remain in Christ, upon Christ and under Christ, never stray from our mother hen, or all is lost. St. Peter says in his first Epistle 4:8: "The righteous is scarcely saved;" so hard it is to abide under this hen. For many different temptations, temporal and spiritual, tear us from her; as the Psalm above points out.

24. Now notice how the natural clucking hen acts; hardly any other creature is so anxious about her young. She changes her natural voice and takes a pitiable and complaining voice; she seeks, scratches, and calls her little chickens; when she finds anything, she does not eat it herself, she leaves it for her little ones; with all earnestness she battles and cries against the buzzard, and spreads her wings out so willingly and lets her chicks crawl under and upon her, and gladly suffers them to stay there. This is indeed a lovely picture. So it is also with Christ. He has changed his voice to a pitiable tone, has sighed for us and preached repentance, pointed out to everyone their sins and misery, he scratches in the Scriptures and calls us unto them and permits us to eat; he spreads his wings with all his righteousness, merit and grace over us, and takes us so lovingly under his protection, warms us with his own natural heat, that is, with his Holy Spirit, who alone comes through him, and fights for us against the devil in the air.

25. Where and how does he do this? Without doubt he does it not bodily, but spiritually. His two wings are the two Testaments of the holy Scriptures; they spread over us his righteousness and bring us under his protection. This takes place in that the Scriptures teach this and nothing else, how Christ is such a mother hen, how we are to be sustained in faith under him and through his righteousness. Therefore the Psalm mentioned above, explains the wings and shoulders, and says; “his faithfulness or truth”, that is, the Scriptures embraced by faith “are a shield and a buckler” against all fear and danger. For we must lay hold of Christ in his Word and in the preaching of it and cleave to the same with a firm faith that he is just as is spoken now of him; then we are certainly in him, under his wings and truth, and shall be also well sustained under him

26. This Gospel therefore is also his wings or truth as well as all other Gospels; for they all teach Christ in this manner, yet in some places clearer than in others. Heretofore he was called a light and life; also a Lord and helper, now he is called a mother hen, and the emphasis is continually laid upon faith. Thus his body is himself, or the Christian church; his warmth, his grace and the Holy Spirit.

27. Behold, the church is the most loving hen, who is always anxious to gather us under her protection; she spreads her wings out and calls, that is, she preaches and lets both Testaments be preached, sends out prophets, wise men, and scribes to Jerusalem, yea into all the world. But what happens? We will not be her chickens; above all, the proud saints, who contended against her especially with their good works, who had no desire to know anything about faith, that it is so greatly needed and so blessed; and who neither know anything of their danger nor admit their doings to be unrighteous; yea, they themselves therefore become buzzards and swine, they devour and persecute the chickens along with their mother, tear their wings and body, slay the prophets, and stone those who are sent unto them. But what will be their reward? Listen, terrible things: “*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*”

28. Oh! a terrible visitation! which is also illustrated in the instance of the Jews. They killed the prophets so long that God sent them no more; he suffered them to be without any preaching, without any prophets 1,500 years, he took his Word from them and his wings he drew to himself. And thus their house is left desolate and no one builds up their souls, God no longer dwells among them. It has happened to them as they wished; as Psalm 109:17 says concerning

them: “Yea, he loved cursing, and it came unto him; and he delighted not in blessing, and it was far from him.” Here all the righteous blood shed upon the earth is come upon them, and this Gospel is fulfilled in them.

29. In like manner also Isaiah 5:5-6, speaks of them: “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; I will break the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned nor hoed; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.” Terrible words! What can it mean that no rain shall come upon them, except that they should not hear the Gospel and learn of faith? They shall be neither pruned nor cultivated. What can this mean, except that no one shall punish them in their error and make manifest their transgressions? Therefore the vineyard is left to the doctrines of men, these tear and trample it under foot so that it must remain desolate, brings forth nothing but briars and thorns, that is, workrighteous people, who are without faith. They bear no fruit of the Spirit, but they grow and are prepared only for eternal fire.

30. However, all this we Gentiles may also take well to heart. We have also persecuted our mother hen and have not continued in faith. Therefore it has also happened to us that God has left our house lie desolate and our vineyard is forsaken. There is no longer any rain in all the world, the Gospel and faith are put to silence; here there is neither pruning nor grubbing; no one preaches against false works and the doctrines of men, and prunes off such unnecessary things; but he permits us to be torn and trodden under foot by the pope, bishops, priests and monks of whom the whole world is full, full, full; and yet they do no more than trample down and tear to pieces the vineyard. One who teaches this, another that, one treads down this place and another that; everyone wishes to establish his own sect, his own order, his own calling, his own doctrine, his own point, his own works. By these we are so trodden under foot that there is no longer any knowledge of faith, no Christian life, no love, no fruit of the Spirit; but mere firefuel, briars, and thorns, that is dissemblers, who by virtue of their vigils, masses, endowments, bells, churches, psalms, rosaries, saint-worship, celebrations, hoods, shaven-heads, clothing, fastings, pilgrimages and numberless other foolish works, presume to be Christians.

31. O, Lord God, we are too greatly torn to atoms, too sorely crushed; O, Christ, our Lord, we poor miserable people are too desert-like and too forsaken in these last days of thy wrath. Our shepherds are wolves, our watchmen traitors, our protectors enemies, our fathers murderers, and our teachers mislead us, Oh! Oh! Oh! When, when, when will thy severe wrath have an end? Finally comfort is spoken here to the Jews, when the Evangelist adds:

“Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord”.

32. Christ spake these words on Tuesday, after Palm Sunday, and they form the conclusion and the last words of his preaching upon earth; hence they are not yet fulfilled but they must be fulfilled. True they did once receive him on Palm Sunday, but these words were not fulfilled on that occasion. “Ye shall not see me henceforth” is not to be understood in the sense that they never saw him afterwards in the body, because they did, in that they afterwards crucified him. He means, they shall not see him again as a preacher and as Christ, to which end he was sent; his office and he in his office were never seen again by them. In this he gave them his last, his farewell, sermon, and his office, for which he came, was now closed.

33. Thus it is certain, that the Jews must yet say to Christ, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” This very truth Moses proclaimed in Deuteronomy 4:30-31: “In the latter days thou shalt return to Jehovah thy God, and hearken unto his voice; for Jehovah thy God is a merciful God; he will not fail thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he sware unto them.” It was also preached in Hosea 3:4-5: “The children of Israel shall abide many days without king, and without prince, and without sacrifice, and without pillar, and without ephod or teraphim: afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek Jehovah their God, and David their king, and shall come with fear unto Jehovah and to his goodness in the latter days.” Likewise Azariah declared this truth in 2 Chronicles 15:2-5 thus: “If ye forsake Jehovah, he will forsake you. Now for a long season Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law: but when in their distress they turned unto Jehovah, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found of them.” This passage cannot be understood as referring to the Jews of the present time: They were never before without princes, without prophets, without priests, and without teachers and the law, St. Paul in Romans 11:25-26 agrees with this thought and says: “A hardening in part hath befallen Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in; and so all Israel shall be saved.” God grant that this time may be near at hand, as we hope it is. Amen.

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