

Sermons on Matthew

A Light Burden

Matthew 11:20-30

With Study Questions

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Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: ⁻²¹⁻ “_Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago __in sackcloth and ashes. ⁻²²⁻ But I say to you, __it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. ⁻²³⁻ And you, Capernaum, __who __are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ⁻²⁴⁻ But I say to you __that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.”

⁻²⁵⁻ _At that time Jesus answered and said, “_I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that _You have hidden these things from *the* wise and prudent _and have revealed them to babes. ⁻²⁶⁻ Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ⁻²⁷⁻ __All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. __Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*. ⁻²⁸⁻ Come to __Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ⁻²⁹⁻ Take My yoke upon you _and learn from Me, for I am __gentle and __lowly in heart, _and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ __For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.”
(Matthew 11:20-30)

Repentance

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. . .
(Matthew 11:20)

The Lamb of God had come to seek and save that which was lost, but His own received Him not. His kinsmen, those to whom had been entrusted the true religion of God, would not receive the Light of the world but preferred the darkness because their deeds were evil. But we would err to think this rebuke is due to the depth of their sin. God forgives the sins of sinners no matter how deep and dark.

Just as there is no sin so small that it does not deserve damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.¹

It is not the depth of sin which brings the harsh reprimand of Christ but the unwillingness to genuinely repent. This is also the distinction between the sinner who is excommunicated and the sinner who remains in good standing.

Miracles

The aim of miracles was repentance of those who received and saw them. Miracles revealed the love, grace and goodness of God which the Apostle taught leads to repentance (Romans 2:4). Miracles revealed Christ as the Coming One, the hope of us all (Matthew 11:4-6). Yet miracles were a secondary instrument in man's redemption, for faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17).

The Woes—Worse, Yet Better Off

As those who have ample access to the words, preaching and doctrine of Christ, let us take heart to the "woes" before us.

—“ Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago __in sackcloth and ashes. ⁻²²⁻ But I say to you, __it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. ⁻²³⁻ And you, Capernaum, __who __are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ⁻²⁴⁻ But I say to you __that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.” (Matthew 11:21-24)_

Chorazin and Bethsaida were cities on the Sea of Galilee which were exposed to Christ, His apostles, the miracles of God, and the word of God. Tyre and Sidon were two pagan cities which bordered Galilee and were

¹Westminster Confession: XV, 4

famous for idolatry and wickedness. For Christ's audience, this would be like comparing a Lancaster, Pennsylvania Amish homestead to Las Vegas.

Christ's meaning is clear. If those pagan cities had revealed to them what has been revealed to you, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes.²

Greater Accountability

We derive a principle here found many other places in Scripture—greater knowledge equals greater blessings but also greater accountability. Children, it is a great blessing that your parents love you and seek to raise you in faith. It is a great blessing for you to have open and continual access to the word of God. But such great blessings carry an increased responsibility, and a more dire judgment should the blood of Christ be trampled underfoot by your faithlessness and indifference.

My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother; ⁹ for they will be a graceful ornament on your head, and chains about your neck.
(Proverbs 1:8, 9)

Jesus accentuates His point by referencing Capernaum, the greater city which saw the most of and from Christ. It is compared to the more vile city of Sodom whose judgment day will not be as deep a nightmare. Neither escapes judgment. Both will be judged according to the deeds apart from the atoning blood of Christ. This supposes varying degrees of judgment.

Jesus' point seems to be that the judgment is heaped harder upon those who reject the grace offered in Christ than upon those whose sin is so heinous that the very name of their city is a synonym for depravity. So much for taking comfort that I am not as evil as Hitler.

To Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (exalted to heaven yet brought down to Hades), the presence of Christ, instead of a font, became a guillotine whose blade rose higher with every act of goodness and power. By the grace of God many who heard these words of reprimand repented but the evangelist through his gospel will foretell of this blade falling hard upon that evil and adulterous generation... the ax is at the root (Matthew 2:10).

² Over and against the Molinists' use of these passages, Jesus is speaking hypothetically, not in terms of potential alternative realities.

Repent

Let us all take these words to heart. Let us not hide or justify our sins. Let us not take comfort in our goodness before God. Let us hear the words of Christ and continually repent. Sackcloth and ashes represented a broken and contrite heart. Of course God desires our repentance not merely be outward. The prophet teaches,

So _rend your heart, and not __your garments; return to the Lord your God, for He is __gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness. . . (Joel 2:13a)

Jesus' Prayer

At that time Jesus answered and said, “_I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that _You have hidden these things from *the* wise and prudent _and have revealed them to babes. (Matthew 11:25)

Jesus now engages Himself in a public prayer which, no doubt, had an instructional element to it as public prayers often do. He addresses His Father — not mother, nor genderless higher power. God is Spirit and as such doesn't have those physical attributes which distinguish gender. But God has so commissioned the role of human father as to grant us a concept by which we are to think of Him. Fathers ought to take this comparison to heart.

Lord of Heaven and Earth

The content of Jesus' prayer makes the salutation “Lord of heaven and earth” fitting. The coherence of the following verses requires an acknowledgment of the sovereign lordship of God over all things.

The sovereign choices of God, which are often a source of anger for pagan and those who name Christ alike, inspire Christ to words of praise and adulation. Jesus is thanking the Father for His choices.

Hiding and Revealing

God has hidden these things (which refer to saving knowledge of a redeeming God, v. 27) from those who had the current, worldly status of wisdom (probably in a philosophical sense) and prudence (probably in terms of shrewdness).

We then learn that God chose to unveil His rich blessing to babes, or those otherwise referred to as “the uneducated” (Acts 4:13), those who lack “wisdom”, “might,” and “nobility” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Not to say Christian should remain as babes or remain in a state of ignorance.

**Brethren, _do not be children in understanding; however, in malice __be babes, but in understanding be mature.
(1 Corinthians 14:20)**

But worldly wisdom must be dispensed with in order to know God and the wisdom which comes from above (James 3:17). From our perspective the lesson ought to be clear that “*God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.*” (James 4:6b)

But there is a heavenly perspective which can’t be ignored. For the praise of Jesus continues:

**Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.
(Matthew 11:26)**

The Pleasure of God

Arbitrary, capricious, and random are but a few words to describe that system of doctrine which asserts that the primary reason things happen—the reason some live and others die, the reason some crops grow or others turn to dust, the reason why some are saved and others lost—is the good pleasure of God. But here Jesus praises the Father for both hiding and unveiling the message of redemption, for “it seemed good” in His sight.

Time forbids pursuing the extensions of this conversation but suffice it to say that there is simply nothing less arbitrary, capricious or random than the good pleasure of God. And it is only when men humble themselves before this truth and cease building systems of thought

(theological or otherwise) which inevitably crash in self-refutation that they will be delivered from their madness. As Calvin conveys,

There is nothing which we yield to God with greater difficulty, than that his will shall be regarded by us as the highest reason and justice.³

And as the Psalmist records:

Your righteousness is like the __great mountains; _Your judgments are a great deep. (Psalm 36:6a)

Although the “all” in the next verse can refer to all of creation (Colossians 1:16), the context seems to focus on a saving knowledge of God.

__All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. __Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. (Matthew 11:27)

Knowing Jesus, Knowing God

Since Jesus was surrounded by people who knew Him, the knowledge that the Father singularly had of Him likely refers to the fullness of Christ. This, Christ asserts of His own knowledge of the Father, making this a strong passage for the deity (God-hood) of Christ since no man can come to the ‘end,’ or full knowledge of God.

It is by a verse like this that those who put their faith in Christ can be fully assured that they have put their faith in God. One cannot know God apart from Jesus. In our pluralist, ecumenical society this is not in vogue, and to proclaim as much would certainly find you out of the living and sitting on the porch with the taxi coming. But this is the unambiguous claim of Christ. Speaking to very religious people Jesus taught, “**_If God were your Father, you would love Me” (John 8:42b)**. Only those devoted

³Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

to profligacy would ponder an audience with God dressed in human iniquity.

And once again we learn who is making the choices. But here is it Jesus who “**wills to reveal**”. We see both the sovereignty and unity of Jesus with His Father. The Father wills to reveal (v. 25) ,and the Son wills to reveal (v. 27). And lest we take all this as somehow advocating man’s inactivity or lethargy, Jesus follows with one of the great comforting and compassionate invitations in all of Scripture.

**Come to __Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ⁻²⁹⁻ Take My yoke upon you _and learn from Me, for I am __gentle and __lowly in heart, _and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ __For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light. _”
(Mathew 11:28-30)**

Coming to Jesus

‘Come to Jesus and take His yoke’ is an imperative from the mouth of Christ. Jesus bid men to come to Him and it is the Christian mission to bid men to come to Christ. This does not downplay doctrine but affirms its necessity all the more, for we must make every effort to be sure that it is the Jesus of Scripture that we are pointing men to.

His message is not for the wise, prudent, strong or righteous. Those who labor are those who are working hard, and those with burdens are those who are shouldering undue weights. But again, there must be a context to these words. For those who followed Christ had anything but burdens lifted or labors removed.

The labors and the burdens here mentioned have little if anything to do with worldly labors or even worldly vexations. Christians may find themselves under duress both physically, emotionally, or psychologically. The lifted labors and burdens here I believe are religious. Later in Matthew, Jesus informs us,

. . .saying: __ “ _The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ⁻³⁻ Therefore whatever they tell you __to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for __they say, and do not do. ⁻⁴⁻ __For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men’s shoulders. . . (Matthew 23:2-4a)

To follow the scribes and the Pharisees meant your peace with God was dependent upon a sufficient amount of burden bearing. Jesus will go so far as to say that this approach to God is impossible (Matthew 19:26). Whether you are laboring in or bearing the burden of salvation by works or salvation by religious ritual doesn't matter; we must come to a Savior who bears our burden in our place.

It is when we abandon all hope in human burden bearing and trust in Jesus **“who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24a)** that we will find rest for our souls.

This is not to say that we are inactive in every sense. We are to yoke with Christ, which in the Bible has the connotation of servant (1 Kings 12:10; 1 Timothy 6:1). The light burden of Christ for many was their lives, but this is light compared to bearing the burden of one's own justification before God.

Those who labor and are heavy laden are those who by the grace of God have come to feel in the very being of their souls that turmoil produced by sin and estrangement from God. Jesus offers Himself as the healing eternal Savior to all who call upon His Name.

Questions for Study

1. What brought the harsh reprimand of Christ (pages 2, 3)?
2. What was the aim of miracles (page 3)?
3. What is the primary means by which God saves people (page 3)?
4. Why does Jesus make the comparison between the pagan and holy cities (pages 4, 5)?

5. Why did Jesus use the salutation “Lord of heaven and earth” in His prayer (page 5)?
6. What are some choices that God makes (page 6)?
7. What is the ultimate reason for God’s choices (pages 6, 7)?
8. In what respect do the Father and Jesus know each other? Why do you suppose Jesus mentions this (pages 7, 8)?
9. What burdens does Jesus remove (pages 8, 9)?