

Condemnation Versus Comfort
Matthew 11:20-30
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Following the many miraculous deeds by Jesus in Matthew 9-10, Jesus sent His disciples out to conduct similar miracles. He informed these disciples of their coming persecution, for those who opposed Christ would also oppose them (Matthew 10:16-26). Yet the Father knows all and they will be rewarded for their faithful service (Matthew 10:26-42).

This led to the teaching of Jesus about John the Baptist. After Jesus' affirmation to the disciples of John the Baptist, who were sent to confirm that Jesus was the Expected One, Christ revealed the greatness of John. John was more than a great prophet, he was the herald for the coming Messiah (Matthew 11:7-15). But like Jesus, John would fail to meet the expectations and desires of the Jewish people. Like Jesus, they would associate John with demons (Matthew 11:19).

This set the stage for Christ's denunciation of three cities in Galilee. This specific rebuke of these cities follows the general description of rejection of the Messiah by the contemporaries of John the Baptist and Jesus. This condemnation of these cities in Galilee is a precursor to the judgment of the nation as a whole for their rejection of Christ.

Yet in spite of the national opposition to the Messiah, salvation remains available for individual members of the nation. Matthew 11:25-30 teaches that the Father is well-pleased to reveal the truth of Christ to some and those who come to Jesus will receive rest. People of Jesus' day were not resigned to the destiny of their nation or their leaders. This judgment was upon the nation of Israel, yet the Jews had a personal opportunity and responsibility to hear the words of the kingdom of heaven and to repent.

The condemnation of cities (11:20-24)

The opposition to Jesus and John in 11:16-19 is followed by the indifference to the miracles of Jesus. Christ had been teaching and preaching in the cities of Galilee (4:23; 9:35; 11:1), and the description of His miracles were recorded in Matthew 8-9. These miracles were numerous, diverse, public and so substantive that they were undeniable. They were also prophesied in the Old Testament to validate the Messiah. Jesus used the nature of these miracles as proof to John the Baptist that He was the Expected One (Matthew 11:4-5). One's verdict on Christ's miracles corresponds to their verdict on Christ Himself.

1. The rebuke of Chorazin and Bethsaida (11:20-22)

The judgment upon the cities begins with Chorazin and Bethsaida. Both are mentioned only here in Matthew's Gospel. Unlike Chorazin, we have additional information about Bethsaida from the other Gospels. We know that Peter, Andrew and Philip were from Bethsaida (John 1:44; 12:21). Mark 8:22-26 describes the healing of a blind man by Jesus in the area of Bethsaida. There were obviously miracles done in these two cities that were not recorded for us in the Gospels. The Gospel of John informs us that many acts of Jesus have not been recorded for us, *"And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written"* (John 21:25).

There is some debate on the actual location of these cities. It is generally understood that Chorazin was a village on the Korazim plateau, about two miles northwest of Capernaum. Some have conjectured that it was the site of the Sermon on the Mount. While there was a Bethsaida on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee by the Jordan River, it seems best to view this Bethsaida as the one referred to Mark 6:45, on the west side of the Sea.

These cities were "denounced" because they did not repent. This is a word used to mean deep indignation (cf. Matthew 5:11; 27:44). This was a reproach that also included the words *"woe to you,"* referring to the impending doom. This looks toward the *"day of judgment"* in verse 22.

There is no mention of an active opposition to Jesus, but only a lack of responsiveness. The miracles that had been performed in Chorazin and Bethsaida did not bring the appropriate repentance by the people of these cities. The indifference to Christ's miracles and the resultant condemnation shows the impossibility of remaining neutral in the light of Christ's revelation. *"Whoever is not with me is against me"* (Matthew 12:30).

Tyre and Sidon were two Phoenician cities on the coast of the Mediterranean. They were ancient enemies of Israel and often condemned by Old Testament prophets for their worship of Baal (Isaiah 23; Ezekiel 26-28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9-10; Zechariah 9:2-4). They would have repented with sackcloth, a rough garment of camel hair expressing grief, and ashes, used to express deep emotional distress. Tyre and Sidon are used as examples, as they were Gentile territories that did not enjoy the revelation that the Jews had from God. Jesus would later visit Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 15:21).

2. The rebuke of Capernaum (11:23-24)

There is a clear parallel between the condemnation of Chorazin and Bethsaida and the condemnation of Capernaum. Both denouncements begin with a charge against the cities, followed by the reason for the charge, which both are compared to cities without the revelation that the Jews enjoyed, and ending with the verdict that punishment will be harsher for these cities. Sodom was particularly associated with wickedness, yet judgment would be more tolerable.

Capernaum was the town where Jesus chose to reside (Matthew 4:13; 9:1). Furthermore, half of the ten miracles recorded in eighth and ninth chapters of Matthew were performed in Capernaum. Jesus said that if the city had repented, *"it would have remained to this day."* This statement is true as unlike some neighboring towns (like Tiberius), Capernaum lies in complete ruins today.

Clearly, our Lord knows what will occur on the day of judgment, for He will be the judge, *"I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead"* (2 Timothy 4:1). Jesus even knew what Sodom, Tyre and Sidon would have done under different circumstances. Also, God does not owe Sodom, Tyre and Sidon, or anyone else, revelation. He is not unjust by providing more revelation to some than He does to others.

Finally, it is clear that the contemporaries of Jesus who witnessed His miracles would be judged more harshly than those without such evidence of the Messiah. With greater revelation comes greater accountability. Later Jesus said the same thing about the men of Nineveh as He did about Sodom, Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 12:41). In the final judgment, the unsaved will be judged *"according to their deeds"* (Revelation 20:12-14). While those with less revelation from God will be judged, they will not suffer the same judgment, as it will be more tolerable for them.

Jesus also taught this same truth in the Parable of the Faithful Steward, *"And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more"* (Luke 12:47-48). While this ought not deter us from spreading the revelation of God to those in need of salvation, we can know that God will deal justly with mankind according to both their deeds and the knowledge of God that they reject.

The comfort of Christ (11:25-30)

Where in Matthew 11:20-24 Jesus addressed the condemned nation, in Matthew 11:25-30, He addressed the accepted individuals within the condemned nation. Those who were invited to come to Jesus are the spiritual remnant of the unbelieving nation. There will always be some who are drawn to the Lord in every generation.

1. The Father's revelation (11:25-26)

Matthew 11:25-26 is filled with the doctrine of God. The opening phrase, "*at that time,*" connects this passage to Matthew 11:20-24. It refers to the same occasion that Jesus spoke in condemnation of the cities. This points the reader to God's work of salvation within a wicked, unbelieving generation.

Unlike the rest of this section, Matthew 11:25-26 is a prayer by Jesus addressing the Father. In this prayer we find titles of (1) Father and (2) Lord of heaven and earth. This depicts the Sonship of Christ as well as the authority of the Father. The Father is sovereign over all and bestowed upon the Son this authority (25:27). "*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth'*" (Matthew 28:18).

The Son praises the Father for hiding "*these things from the wise and intelligent*" and because He "*revealed them to infants.*" These things refer to all the revelation of the kingdom of heaven, which was at hand. This includes the words and the works of Jesus. The revelation was more than just observing the miracles of Jesus, it is the insight to grasp the significance of those miracles. The validation of Jesus as the Messiah is spiritually discerned, "*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised*" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The wise and intelligent are the self-confident Jewish people who saw no need for their Savior and were unresponsive to Christ's miraculous revelation. On the other hand it is the infants who are humble, who see themselves as needy. They are like the tax collector in the parable of Luke 18:9-14, "*But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'*" This places the Father in the role of the one who either gives revelation to the humble or hides it from the exalted, "*for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Luke 18:14).

The reason the truth of the kingdom of heaven was hidden from them was because of the hardness of their heart. John 12:37-40 informs us that this was to fulfill prophecy, *“But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?” For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, “HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM.”*

The sovereign role of the Father is praised by Jesus because He was willing to reveal Himself to the needy. Jesus says, *“for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight”* to show the pleasure of the Father in extending mercy to the humble. God’s justice is seen in His judgment of hiding revelation from fallen mankind and His grace is seen in His merciful revelation to fallen mankind. God’s sovereignty in electing some unto salvation is for His good pleasure and is the basis for the Son giving praise to the Lord of heaven and earth.

2. The Father’s revelation through the Son (11:27)

Jesus repeated His reference to His Father, but He added His specific title as God’s Son. The authority of the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth, has been handed to the Son. Furthermore, this authority provided the Son with the exclusive right to bring the revelation about the Father and the Son.

This special relationship between the Father and the Son is unlike any other for no one can know the Father except the Son alone. Just as there is no ability for anyone to independently know God the Father, there is no ability for anyone to allow anyone else to know God the Father other than through the will of the Son of God.

If the only way that anyone can know the Father is through the Son, then apart from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, no one knows God. Certainly this is true of any religion that does not honor Jesus as the Son of God. But this is specifically true of the religious leaders of the day. The chief priests were to represent the people to God and the scribes and Pharisees were to represent God to the people. Not only did they fail, this task is impossible apart from Jesus Christ. He alone knows the Father and can reveal Him as He wills. By their rejection of the Son of God, the nation of Israel condemned themselves to separation from God the Father, since He handed all things over to the Son.

3. The Father's revelation through the Son brings rest (11:28-30)

The invitation by Jesus to come includes a parallelism for emphasis. Verse 28 is restated in verse 29 with an appeal, a description and a promise of rest. The initial appeal of *"Come to Me"* in 11:28 is expanded upon by *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me"* in 11:29. Therefore, coming to Jesus in faith includes taking His yoke and learning from Him. This pictures a complete commitment to Jesus as His disciple. This equals the words of Jesus to His disciples in Matthew 10:38, *"And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."*

The description of those invited is seen in 11:28, where the description of the One inviting is seen in 11:29. Those who are requested to come are *"weary and heavy-laden."* He who is requesting is *"gentle and humble in heart."* This provides the motive for a positive response, for Israel is burdened and Jesus is gentle. This description of Jesus is counter to their religious leaders who were strict and proud. The New Testament repeatedly refers to the system of external obedience to the Law as taught by the Pharisees as a yoke of bondage:

- *"They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger"* (Matthew 23:4).
- *"Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are"* (Acts 15:10-11).
- *"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1).

Thus, there is a good reason why the people of Israel were weary and heavy-laden. The Law brings an understanding of sin, *"because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin"* (Romans 3:20). But the traditions of men beyond the Law put people under a yoke of slavery. People teaching legalistic religious systems beyond the Scripture put their followers under the same yoke of slavery today.

The conclusion of both verse 28 and 29 includes a promise of rest. In Matthew 11:28 this rest is described as being given by Jesus, and in 11:29 it is described as being a rest for our souls, with an allusion to Jeremiah 6:16.

The context of Jeremiah 6:16 shows that it is not the Law that is making people heavy-laden. *"Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.'"* The ancient ways are good and if the people walked in it they would find rest. But the Pharisees had *"invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition"* (Matthew 15:6).

Jesus was the true revelation from God and by fulfilling the Law in perfect obedience, His righteousness was imputed to us through His sacrifice and our faith, *"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). This rest from God comes ultimately in being perfected in the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 4:1 teaches that the *"promise remains of entering His rest."*

There is also a present sense that we enjoy rest by being at peace with God. *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 5:1). Being reconciled to God is rest for our souls, *"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life"* (Romans 5:10).

Jesus concludes His promise of rest with an oxymoron, *"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* The idea of an easy yoke or a light burden is placed in contrast to the heavy burdens of Pharisaical legalism. The teaching of Jesus is certainly a higher standard than the teaching of the Pharisees, as seen in Matthew 5. But His teachings were the fulfillment of the Law and thus were easy and light. *"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome"* (1 John 5:2-3).

The reason that the commandments of God are not burdensome is because the grace of God that brings salvation includes the power of the Holy Spirit that brings obedience. The Holy Spirit empowers us to love and *"love is the fulfillment of the law"* (Romans 13:10). Through the revelation of God, we know Christ and through faith in Christ, we have the Spirit, and through the Spirit, we desire to love God and keep His commandments. *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law"* (Galatians 5:16-18).

Because we can be led by the Spirit, we will find ourselves eager to do the will of God as we are filled with the Spirit (cf. Ephesians 5:18). This will be our heart's desire, rather than our obligatory burden. Commitment to follow Jesus, that is in the words of Jesus, *"take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,"* will bring an easy obedience for *"we love, because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19).

Conclusion

The Christian life is therefore entirely by the grace of God. God the Father chose, by His sovereignty, to reveal the kingdom of heaven to us. We only know the Father because the Son has chosen to reveal Him to us. Any teaching that in any way diminishes the honor due to the Lord by replacing the grace of God with human effort should be rejected.

The Christian life is a commitment to learn from Jesus, who is gentle and humble in heart. Those who are strict and harsh, who are proud and self-aggrandizing, with a fake external projection of humility, should also be rejected. The rest that Jesus promises is a rest from these burdens of the scribes and Pharisees.

The rest Jesus promises is also a rest from the works of the Law, for *"by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight"* (Romans 3:20). The human efforts of religious systems do not bring true sanctification and are not pleasing to God, for they honor the work of man, rather than the work of God.

"If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence" (Colossians 2:20-23).