

Matthew 11:25–30

²⁵ At that time Jesus said in reply, “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. ²⁶ Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him. ²⁸ “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

Context

Our gospel places us near the beginning of what most scholars accept as a new section of The Gospel according to Matthew. Since the middle of chapter 4 we have been witnesses to how Jesus faithfully carries out his commission from the Father in words (chapters 5-7,10) and actions (chapters 8 and 9). It is here in the beginning of Matthew 11 that people are challenged to discern Jesus’ identity from his actions and words – and of responding with commitment or rejection.

Opposition to Jesus

Opposition to the Messiah and his messengers has been increasingly alluded to as Matthew’s story continues (2:16; 3:7; 4:1; 5:10–12; 7:6; 8:20, 34; 9:3, 11, 34; 10:14–39). But as this chapter unfolds, the situation is unmistakably grim. Matthew 11 is comprised of three sections:

- two are focused on doubt and unbelief (11:2–19; 11:20–24)
- the third is focused on belief (11:25–30)

The encounters with doubt and unbelief are not limited to Jewish people unduly swayed by an unbelieving religious leadership (woe to the towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida in v.21; Capernaum in v.23). The doubts are also among those who perhaps know Jesus well. The Messiah’s herald, John the Baptist, is in prison, and even he was beginning to have doubts about Jesus’ ministry (11:1–3). What all share in common is that each of them have been witnesses to the words and actions of Jesus which point to the kingdom of heaven. Nonetheless, the Kingdom was being attacked by people who obstinately refused its authority (11:12, 16–24). Why? Perhaps they considered themselves wise in their own eyes and reject Jesus’ revelation. There are more passages as Matthew’s narrative unfolds: unbelief and doubt (12:1–21; 22–50) and belief passages (12:2, 10, 24; 18:6; 25:45).

The Audience

Our verses begin with “*At that time Jesus said in reply*” – raising questions as to the intended audience. The audience for our text is still the “crowds” from Mt 11:7 (the disciples “disappeared” in v.1 and do not “reappear” until Mt 12:1).

Commentary

Despite the rejection in vv.20-24, some persons accept Jesus’ mission and message – and it is for this that he gives praise to God. In context these words are not a prayer of thanksgiving for a successful mission (*cf.* Lk 10:21-22), but are a prayerful reflection on the failure of the Galilean mission. The prayer highlights another Matthean theme: reversal. Those who are considered *wise and learned* are in fact not – at least in the things of the kingdom of heaven. Yet those who are *childlike* have understood and accepted the revelation of the kingdom in the person of Jesus.

An Opening Prayer

These words are not a prayer of praise for the ignorant, as elsewhere Matthew regards wisdom and understanding as positive attributes of the disciples themselves (7:24-27; 13:51; 23:34; 25:1-13). Rather

Matthew affirms that those who recognize Jesus do not do so on the basis of superior religious status or individual intelligence, but by revelation, as the gift of the God to those who are open and unpretentious. The *childlike* have no real basis for claiming knowledge of God, yet they are the very ones to whom the divine revelation is given as a gift of the Father's *gracious will* (v.26).

In the larger context of Matthew's narrative, one should not fail to grasp that even in the ongoing revelation of God taking place in their midst, there are still those who fail to understand/accept. John the Baptist, who had baptized Jesus, knew his own unworthiness, and (may have) heard the heavenly voice did not understand. There were those whose predetermined criteria (*cf.* 11:16-19) did not accept the revelation. Towns where Jesus had given a testimony of words and actions did not accept the revelation. Nor did the scholars and the wise, who could explain much, but could not explain the revelation in their midst (11:25a). There is a reversal unfolding.

Jesus' Declaration

It is important to note that Jesus is not depicted as a religious genius who has discovered the divine mysteries. Simply put, Jesus is the beloved Son who is on intimate terms with the Father. It is the divine initiative of the Father who has given *all things* (v.27) to the Son. This is not a message or a relationship that Matthew suddenly thrusts upon us as an assertion on the part of Jesus. Matthew's narrative has prepared the reader by means of preceding declarations about Jesus.

- Immanuel, the Son miraculously born to Mary, signifies the unique saving presence of God with his people (1:23).
- Matthew's narrative of Jesus' baptism mentions the pleasure the Father takes in the Son in words echoing Isaiah 42:1 (3:17; *cf.* 17:5).
- Satan was unable to shake the Son from his resolve not to test the Father (4:1–11).
- Jesus did miracles to show that the Father had given the Son of Man authority to forgive sins on the earth (9:6).
- In times of persecution, the disciples must confess the Son if they wish the Son to confess them to the Father (10:32–33, 40).

But one would be hard pressed to speak of the Son in terms more exalted than those used in 11:27, which uncompromisingly yet elegantly says that saving knowledge of God the Father comes only through the selective revelation of Jesus, the exclusive mediator of salvation.

The exclusive communion between Father and Son is of the essence of their relationship. For anyone else to share in this knowledge, however, is a matter of revelation, and as such is not a natural right, but a matter of divine choice. Thus God's sovereign initiative in revelation, set out in vv. 25–26, is applied specifically to our knowledge of God: it does not come naturally (see 1 Cor. 2:6–16 for a spelling out of this theme). It depends on God's choice, or, more specifically, *the Son's* choice. Thus Jesus unequivocally describes himself and his will as the key to humanity's approach to the Father; there is no other.

Jesus' Invitation

The last three verses of the chapter contain many echoes of the invitation of Jesus Ben Sira (Sir 51:23–27; *cf.* also Sir 6:24–31) for men to come and learn from him and take up wisdom's yoke, so that they may find rest. No doubt Jesus and his hearers knew and valued this book, but Jesus' invitation reveals a higher authority: it is his own yoke that he offers, and he himself gives the rest which Ben Sira had to win by his 'little labors'.

In its own way these verse spell out the implication of the unique relationship of the Father and the Son. Just as only God knows Wisdom (Wis 8:4; 9:1-18), so only the Father knows the Son. Just as only Wisdom makes known the divine mysteries (Wis 9:1-18, 10:10), so Jesus is the revealer of God's hidden

truths. As the personified divine Wisdom calls people to take up her yoke and find rest (Sir 51:23-30; Prov 1:20-23; 8:1-36), so Jesus extends the same invitation. For Matthew, Jesus is not the messenger of Wisdom, but is identified with the heavenly Wisdom of God; he speaks not only for Wisdom, but as the divine Wisdom.

The *yoke* was sometimes in the Old Testament a symbol of oppression (Isa. 9:4; 58:6; Jer. 27–28), but was also used in a good sense of the service of God (Jer. 2:20; Lam. 3:27). Later it came to be used commonly in Jewish writings for obedience to the law—the ‘yoke of the law’ is one every Jew should be proud to carry. Such a yoke should not be oppressive, for after all the function of a yoke (the sort worn by humans) is to make a burden easier to carry. But through the seemingly arbitrary demands of Pharisaic legalism and the uncertainties of ever-proliferating rabbinic case law the law had itself become a burden, and a new yoke was needed to lighten the load. Jesus’ yoke is *easy* (*chrēstos* normally means ‘good’, ‘kind’), not because it makes lighter demands, but because it represents entering into a disciple-relationship (*learn from me*) with one who is *meek and humble of heart* (cf. 2 Cor 10:1). The words echo the description of God’s servant in Isaiah 42:2–3; 53:1–2, and specially the words of Zechariah 9:9 which Matthew will pick up again at 21:4–5. It is also the character Jesus expects, and creates, in his disciples (5:3ff.)

You will find rest for your selves is an echo of the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 6:16 (LXX), where it is the offer of God to those who follow his way; Jesus now issues the invitation in his own name!

Notes

Matthew 11:25 *I give you praise*: the verb *exomologeō* can also be translated as “give thanks” or “confess.” ***Father, lord of heaven and earth*:** this is a unique Matthean expression among the gospels which combines a special intimacy with the acknowledgement of God as lord of all creation. In this way the reader is prepared for the revelation of Jesus’ true identity

Matthew 11:25 *revealed*: “reveal” [*apokalypto*] – of the four instances of this verb in Mt (10:26, 11:25, 27; 16:17), the last one is most significant. It is Mt’s addition after Peter’s confession: “And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.’” ***childlike*:** *nēpios* literally meaning “not speaking,” so it refers to infants prior to their learning to speak. The other occurrence of this word is in 21:16 where Mt quotes Psalm 8:3 LXX: “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself.” The context is in comparison to the “wise and learned” and the unrepentant towns (Mt 11:21)

Matthew 11:27 *All things have been handed over*: If “all things” points back to “these things” in v.25 and to the earlier parts of Mt 11, then it includes Jesus’ mighty deeds and his role in the kingdom at present. If it points forward to what follows in v.27, then it has to do with Jesus’ sonship and the authority that flows from it. ***no one knows the Son except the Father...*** : this is not a parable about a father-son relationship. These terms are used absolutely to express the mutual knowledge between God the Father and God the Son.

Matthew 11:28 *labor*: We are accustomed to hearing the word “weary” – *Come to me, all you who are weary*. The word used is *kopiao* which means “to be engaged in hard work, implying difficulties and trouble.” The NAB “labor” is accurate, but passes on the figurative use of *kopiao*: “to become emotionally fatigued and discouraged,” e.g., “to give up, to lose heart” [EDNT 2:307].

***burden*:** The word *phortizo* (v. 30 = *phortion*) come from the word for a ship’s cargo (*phortos*). Generally in the NT, they are used symbolically of the burden of keeping the law. Both words

are used in Mt 23:4/Lk 11:46: *And Jesus said, “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.”* [EDNT 3:437]

rest: *anapauo* (v. 29 *anapausis*) Many scholars think that Jesus’ use of “rest” echoes Jeremiah 6:16 – “*Thus says the LORD: Stand beside the earliest roads, ask the pathways of old - Which is the way to good, and walk it; thus you will find rest for your souls.*” These same motifs of laboring, the yoke, and rest are prefigured in Sir 6:18ff (v. 28); 51:13ff (v. 26) and reveal Jesus as the personified Wisdom. In the OT and Judaism the promise of rest as one of the benefits of salvation is always connected to divine instruction (b. *Šabb.* 152b; 2 *Bar.* 73:1) [EDNT 1:86-7].

Matthew 11:29 meek and humble: One should hear an echo of the “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt 5:5) and as well be prepared for this description as applied to Jesus in 12:15-21 and 21:5.

Matthew 11:30 easy: Jesus’ yoke is described as “easy” (*chrestos*; only one letter different from *christos* = “Christ”). This word does not mean “not strenuous,” but (1) “being superior for a particular purpose or use” – old wine is better than new wine (see Lk 5:39). Jesus may be saying that his yoke is better than any other yoke; (2) “being useful and benevolent, being good” – “*Bad company corrupts good morals*” (1 Cor 15:33). Jesus may be saying that his yoke is more beneficial than others; (3) “being kind” – “Do you not know... that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance? Romans 2:4. Jesus may be saying that his yoke is kinder than any other yoke; (4) “being pleasant or easy, with the implication of suitability” Jesus may be saying that his yoke fits us well – it is suitable for our human condition and abilities.

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