

Chapter 40: “My Yoke is Easy, and My Burden is Light”

Matthew 11:16–30

In the previous passage, we saw the vulnerable concerns of John the Baptist. Unjustly imprisoned in the days leading up to his even more unjust execution, John knew the eternal significance of rightly identifying the Messiah. He knew that Jesus had come from God, but, given that information, he could not make sense of the way that Jesus was using his time. Through this interaction, Jesus not only strengthens John’s faith, but he then turns to bolster our confidence in him. In this passage, Jesus speaks to us some of the most precious promises in the whole Bible as he calls us to *find rest in the revealed Son of God*.

Rejecting Jesus (Matt. 11:16–24)

In the previous verse, Jesus had acknowledged the difficulty of believing what he was teaching: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15). The difficulty of belief, however, is not only—or even primarily—an intellectual challenge. Certainly, there are some passages in Scripture and some doctrines that are difficult to understand intellectually (2 Pet. 3:16); however, Jesus attributes unbelief primarily to the will rather than to the intellect. That is, unbelief arises not because we *cannot* comprehend the claims of the gospel, but because we *will not believe* them.

Jesus makes this point by telling a small parable of children in the marketplace deciding which game they would play together: “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (vv. 16–19).

By this, Jesus is not saying that he and John had “contextualized” their ministry with any kind of strategic desire to reach the “felt needs” or desires of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Rather, John and Jesus came with two different missions, and the people rejected both because they did not want what either held out to them. As Lenski writes, “What they demanded of John they condemned in Jesus; what they condemn in John they demanded in Jesus. In reality, by both actions they condemned themselves.”¹ Or, to put this in a different way, Carson writes that, “If they had understood John, they would have understood Jesus, and vice versa.”² Both John and Jesus faithfully preached the kingdom of heaven, albeit with different demeanors. The demeanor, however, was never a stumbling block; the reason people rejected them was always and only that they rejected

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 443.

² Carson, “Matthew,” 313.

their message. Even in their rejection, however, wisdom has been vindicated, as Hendriksen notes: “has not the designation that was originally intended as a disparaging nickname, ‘friend of tax-collectors and sinners’ become one of the Savior’s most hope-imparting and soul-stirring titles? Is this title not being “justified” by thousands upon thousands of lives that have taken it to heart and acted upon it?”³

Then, Jesus insists that the people’s rejection will carry consequences (vv. 20–24). Matthew draws special attention to Jesus’ particular reason for denouncing the cities in this list. While he had performed “mighty works” in these places, those “miracles had not led them to repent.”⁴ While many had marveled at his deeds (Matt. 9:8, 26, 31, 33), that wasn’t enough: “Jesus was not looking for amazement and admiration, but for repentance.”⁵ Here, Jesus highlights the persistence of these cities in their unbelief. Jesus explains that Chorazin and Bethsaida will be judged more harshly than Tyre and Sidon, which were wicked cities, but which did not have the access to the truth that Chorazin and Bethsaida had (vv. 21–22). Then, in condemning Capernaum, Jesus says that even Sodom would have repented sufficiently to be spared if the people there had seen the kinds of miracles that Capernaum had been privileged to witness (. 23). Again, because Capernaum had more access to the truth, Capernaum’s judgment will be harsher than Sodom’s (v. 24).

Revealing Jesus (Matt. 11:25–27)

The next section deserves our most careful attention. To begin, we should notice that Matthew tells us that, “At that time,” Jesus began thanking and praising his Father. In the Gospel of Luke, the “hour” when Jesus says this is when the 70 had returned from their ministry with great success.⁶ France observes, though, that “Matthew does not make that connection, and so instead here ‘At that time’ links the following declaration with the unresponsiveness of the people of Galilee, who exemplify the ‘wise and intelligent’ from whom the truth is hidden.”⁷

So, Jesus rejoices that the Father has hidden the truthfulness of Jesus’ gospel from these “wise and understanding” and instead revealed them to “little children”—that is, to νηπίοις (*nēpiois*), to “infants.” If we believe that our infants are shut out from the kingdom of heaven because they do not yet have “understanding,” then we cut against our Savior’s explicit teaching. Indeed, this is not dry intellectual fact to Jesus, but a point that leads him to rejoice over the Father’s graciousness: what the wise and understanding trip over, God reveals even to infants. We dare not, then, exclude our infants from membership in the church.

Still, we should also recognize that Jesus is not saying this as though all who are intelligent and educated are automatically excluded from the kingdom, while all infants are automatically included. Rather, Jesus “means that the knowledge of God does not depend on human wisdom and education.”⁸ The “infants” of which Jesus speaks here truly include some infants; however, they also

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 493.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:27.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 287.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 449.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 443.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 292.

include all those who relate to Christ *as* an infant would: “those who humbly confess their own nothingness, their emptiness and helplessness, and who, being thoroughly aware of their absolute dependence upon the might and mercy of the heavenly Father, betake themselves to him, trusting that from him they will receive whatever is necessary so that, enjoying salvation full and free, they may live lives of gratitude to his glory.”⁹ Calvin rightly notes that this constitutes a reversal of the power structures of this world: “We are constantly looking for splendor; and nothing appears to us more incongruous, than that the heavenly kingdom of the Son of God, whose glory is so magnificently celebrated by the prophets, should consist of the dregs and offscourings of the common people.”¹⁰ The least in the kingdom of heaven will be greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11), and, much more, they will be far greater than those who are powerful in this world in rebellion against God.

Furthermore, we must recognize in this section that Jesus speaks about the mystery of God’s election. From before the foundations of the earth, God had predestined his hidden wisdom of salvation, which is for our glory (1 Cor. 2:7). In our sin, we are entirely blind and helpless from discovering God’s gospel of the kingdom, unless God himself reveals that knowledge to us. Ultimately, God’s choice in electing to withhold revelation to some, while revealing his gospel to others, belongs to him alone: “that some arrive at faith, while others remain hardened and obstinate, is accomplished by his free election; for, drawing some, and passing by others, he alone makes a distinction among men, whose condition by nature is alike.”¹¹

Carson, however, makes an important point about God’s grace in election:

Yet we must not think that God’s concealing and revealing are symmetrical activities arbitrarily exercised toward neutral human beings who are both innocent and helpless in the face of the divine decree. God is dealing with a race of sinners (cf. 1:21; 7:11) whom he owes nothing. Thus to conceal “these things” is not an act of injustice but of judgment—the very judgment John the Baptist was looking for and failed to find in Jesus....The astonishing thing about God’s activity is not that God acts in both mercy and judgment but who the recipients of that mercy and judgment are: those who pride themselves in understanding divine things are judged; those who understand nothing are taught. The predestination pattern is the counterpoint of grace.¹²

Thus, when Jesus speaks about God’s election, he ties it directly to God’s grace: “Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (v. 26).

Finally, Jesus goes on to explain that God’s mystery of salvation has to do with our knowledge of the Father through the Son: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (v. 27). Jesus does not call us to esoteric knowledge of gnostic secret

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 499.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:36.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:37.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 318.

knowledge, but to know him *personally*. Calvin offers tender pastoral advice here, when he notes that many who learn about the doctrine of predestination “begin to inquire anxiously how they may be assured of God’s secret purpose, and thus plunge into a labyrinth, from which they will find no escape. Christ enjoins them to come direct to himself, in order to obtain certainty of salvation.”¹³ The secret things of God belong to him alone, but the things that are revealed—namely, the *One* who has been revealed—belongs to us and to our children forever (Deut 29:29). Jesus’ words here do not drive us to despairing speculation, but to a vibrant personal knowledge of him. Come to Jesus and find life! As Hendriksen notes, Jesus both *has* and *knows* what sinners like you and me need.¹⁴

Resting in Jesus (Matt. 11:28–30)

In these final three verses of Matthew 11, Jesus offers words of unspeakable comfort to weary and heavy-laden souls: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (v. 28). While the wise and proud of this world suppress the desperation of their souls, Jesus “turns to the wretched and afflicted....He tells us that the reason why most men despise his grace is, that they are not sensible of their poverty; but that there is no reason why their pride or folly should keep back afflicted souls that long for relief.”¹⁵ What joy and comfort Jesus offers to us! He has not rejoiced that his Father hides the gospel from some because Jesus takes pleasure in withholding from us the desires of our souls. Rather, Jesus takes pleasure only that the Father has withheld the gospel from those who despise it, while making generous provision of the gospel to those who, in their great weariness, embrace it. Jesus *loves* to give comfort to miserable sinners!

So, Jesus calls us to take upon ourselves his “yoke”: “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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (vv. 29–30). In rabbinical teaching, the “yoke” represented “the sum-total of obligations which, according to the *teaching* of the rabbis, a person must take upon himself.”¹⁶ The great difference between the yoke of the law and the yoke of Jesus, then, is that “this is a yoke that rests its bearer.”¹⁷ Jesus is not piling upon us crushing obligations, but freeing us from those burdens through faith. In part, the gospel of Jesus provides sinners freedom from the burden of their sins through forgiveness and receiving Christ’s righteousness, which they receive by faith. Then, the gospel of Jesus also provides sinners with freedom from their slavery to sin so that, “being free in spirit, they may restrain the licentiousness of their flesh.”¹⁸ By taking this yoke of Jesus upon us, we find rest for our souls.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean by the story of the children in the marketplaces, calling to their playmates

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:40.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 501–02.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:42–43.

¹⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 504.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 458.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:44.

(vv. 16–17)? How did the ministries of John and Jesus differ, and how were they similar (vv. 18–19)? Why did the people of Galilee not believe either of them? What role does the intellect play in their unbelief? What role does the will play in their unbelief? What does Jesus mean when he speaks of the greater condemnation of Chorazin and Capernaum (vv. 20–24)?

2. In what sense has the Father “hidden” something (v. 25)? What exactly are the “these things” that the Father has hidden? Why has the Father “hidden these things from the wise and understanding”? Why has he revealed them to infants? In what sense is this concealing and revealing the Father’s “gracious will” (v. 26)? What has been “handed over” to the Son (v. 27)? Why is the Son’s unique knowledge of the Father so important?

3. What does Jesus mean when he refers to those “who labor and are heavy laden” (v. 28)? What kind of rest does he give to them? What is Jesus’ “yoke”? What does Jesus intend for us to learn from him? In what sense is Jesus “gentle and lowly in heart”? How do we “find rest for [our] souls” in Jesus? In what sense is Jesus’ yoke easy, and his burden light? How would you characterize Jesus’ gospel promises here?

4. What about the warnings that Jesus gives most stick out to you? Where do you need to repent? What about these gospel promises most stick out to you? What makes you weary and heavy laden? How does Jesus promise to relieve those burdens from you? What application will you make of this comforting doctrine? How will you lay hold of the promises of the gospel? How will you receive Jesus’ easy yoke and light burden?