

How Jesus Treats the Hard and Heavy-hearted

Matthew 11:20-30

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20 Then he began to denounce the cities where 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 done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

25 At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 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. 28 Come to me, all 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" (Matt 11:20-30).

Last week we launched into a new section in our study of the Book of Matthew. We are calling it "Portraits of Jesus," and it covers chapters 11-12. This section is unique in that it highlights the growing conflict between who Jesus claims to be and what the crowds will believe. Jesus is no longer novel and new. They've heard his teaching (Matt 5-7) and seen his miracles (Mat 8-10), but now the question is whether or not they will believe. However, most will not believe because the problem is that he is not meeting their expectations of what the Messiah would be like.

Chapters 11-12 continually highlight the difference between belief and unbelief, and we see it very clearly in our text this morning. Jesus talks directly to two groups of people: the hard-hearted and the heavy-hearted. He has very different messages for both groups.

Jesus' aim is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. You've probably heard that arrangement of words before because it is an old-school description of the purpose of preaching. "Afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted" recognizes that spiritual truth falls on hearts differently depending on the condition or orientation of the heart. It recognizes that the spiritually comfortable need to be woken up and shocked; they need to be

afflicted. However, the spiritually afflicted need hope and reassurance; they need comfort. Jesus has a different message for the hard-hearted and the heavy-hearted.

The question that each of us need to answer this morning is what message from Jesus is for your heart today? **He aims to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted depending on your response to Him.** He does this for the Father's glory and our good. But it all depends on your response to the portrait that Jesus paints for us.

Hard-Hearted: Afflicting the Comfortable (v 20-24)

The first section is a hard-hitting warning to those who are familiar with spiritual things, know a lot of religious lingo, and have an appearance of righteousness, but they do not take substantial spiritual action. They treat the claims of Jesus passively. Other passages of Scripture describe these kind of people as ones who "have an appearance of godliness but deny it power" (2 Tim 3:5) or those who are "always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim 3:7). They've tasted, shared, and seen the goodness of God (Heb 6:4-5) but it produces no action, no change, and no belief on their part. They are comfortable – damningly so.

Jesus speaks a strong word to those who are in this condition. Verse 20 tells us that Jesus began to "denounce the cities where most of his mighty words had been done..." Jesus was reprimanding them because these cities were spiritual negligent. They had become way too familiar with Jesus' works, but they failed to appropriately respond to them. How had they failed? They failed in their repentance – "because they did not repent."

Now I'm sure you've heard of the word repent before. But do you know what it means? Theologically, repentance is defined as "heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."¹ It literally means to change the mind and the result is a change of conduct. As it relates to Matthew 11, it means that the people had not changed their mind about who Jesus was and they did not change their lives in light of what he said even though they had seen many miraculous things. They had grown too comfortable with Jesus.

What comes next is a series of "Woes" aimed at three different cities. Each "woe" has the same outline: a charge, a reason, and a verdict.

Chorazin and Bethsaida: The problem of familiarity

Chorazin and Bethsaida were fairly close to Capernaum which was where Jesus launched his public ministry (Matt 8:5). Both of these cities had been locations where Jesus had performed miracles, but their response was tepid and nonchalant. Therefore he makes a scathing

¹ Wayne Grudem. Systematic Theology – An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 713.

comparison to two other well-known cities: Tyre and Sidon. These two pagan cities were often the focal point of judgment by the Old Testament prophets (see Ezekiel 28:11-23) because of their pride over their culture, trade, and wealth. These coastal cities were the epitome of secular life with a lucrative purple dye business in Tyre, and the best schools in Sidon. You might think of these cities like New York City or Washington, D.C., a vast commercial and cultural center.

Jesus says that Tyre and Sidon would have surely repented if the works had been done in their midst. He rebukes Chorazin and Behsaida for being familiar with his works but doing nothing about it. Therefore, their judgment will be more severe (v 22). Their problem was simply that Jesus' miracles had become cultural – too familiar, too common or *passé*. And it was their lack of repentance that gave evidence that they were way too casual with Jesus.

Capernaum: The problem of favor

The rebuke of Capernaum is different than the other two cities. Their unbelief is described in verse 23 with a tone that is familiar in other places in the Bible: "will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades" (see Isaiah 14:13-15). This statement is God's judgment upon those people or nations whose pride has gotten the best of them. What was filling their heart with pride?

Most of Jesus' miracles took place in Capernaum, and it is likely that they were proud of the new popularity that they had received because of him. It may have been that they felt that the presence of Jesus, the miracle-worker, was a blessing from God. Remember that Jesus' early miracles were marked by amazement that God had "given such authority to men" (Matt 9:8). Capernaum may have thought that they were special – a place where people encountered God.

Therefore, Jesus' rebuke is devastating. He tells them in verse 24 that it will be "more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." That's shocking! After all, Sodom is the ultimate "sin-city", and the most notorious example of divine judgment. But Capernaum is worse off! They foolishly assumed that if they were near the blessings of God then it meant that they were uniquely blessed. They felt favored. But the goodness of God was meant to lead them to repentance (Rom 2:4), not to make them passive and comfortable.

Are you spiritually comfortable?

Jesus rebukes these cities for their hard-heartedness. He has strong words for them, and we need to be reminded of the same because we live in a land with a treasure-trove of spiritual information, freedom, and comfort. It can be easy to be a Christian in a culture whose moniker is "In God we Trust." So let me ask you a few questions.

1. Do you rely on and talk about your spiritual life as something in the past?

2. Do you justify your disobedience by comparing yourself to others?
3. Do you find it easy to listen to a sermon without taking any action?
4. Do you justify not changing now, believing that you have good excuses?
5. Do you privately think that the blessings of God are connected to your actions or what you deserve?
6. Do you focus on and talk more about what you know as opposed to what you've applied?
7. Are you moved emotionally over your own sin?
8. Would you miss the fellowship of God's people on Sunday?
9. Would anyone notice if you were gone?
10. Does this part of the sermon make you angry?

Jesus wants to afflict the comfortable, and he does it for your own good. Familiarity and favor are dangerous to our souls! Just because we know a truth doesn't mean we've applied the truth. And just because God has given you favor doesn't mean it's because he's satisfied with your life. It is eternally dangerous to presume upon the kindness of God:

4 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom 2:4-5).

There is one right response to an encounter with Jesus: repentance. Anything less results in affliction.

Heavy-Hearted: Comforting the Afflicted (v 25-30)

Jesus aims to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. The next section of Matthew 11 is a beautiful, pastoral, and heart-felt passage designed to offer real and lasting hope. It ends with very familiar and often quoted verses about coming to Jesus and finding rest. However, the real point of this paragraph is **that humility and faith in Jesus are critical to entering into the kingdom.** Those who really understand who Jesus are heavy-hearted, not because of the crushing circumstances of their lives, but because they realize the crushing effects of their own sin. They need comfort and rest because they have come to face-to-face with who Jesus is and who they are. Their affliction is an affliction of the soul.

In the end Jesus gives a promise to the afflicted - "Come to me...I will give you rest." But before he makes that promise, he talks about the basis of his authority and power. His prayer explains the context of what he is offering. It gives the basis of his comfort.

The Basis of Comfort: Sovereignty and Supremacy

It is interesting to note here that Jesus turns from a rebuke to a prayer of thanksgiving. He's coming off a statement of failure regarding the rejection of three cities, and he turns to worship! He thanks the Father for his sovereignty and for the gift of supremacy that he has given to the Son. Sovereignty and supremacy become the solid foundation upon which comfort comes.

Verse 25 begins with a worshipful statement - "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth," and then it highlights a unique contrast - "that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children." Jesus is giving a summary of who is receptive to the kingdom, and he is drawing a sharp distinction between proud people and humble people. It is the humble, simple, and child-like who understand the gospel. But the intelligent, proud, and self-assured are missing it. And Jesus praises the Father that he has designed it to be this way.

In fact you might even ask, "Why did he do it like that?" Jesus answers that question for us in verse 26 - "yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." Now this is really important when you are dealing with the sovereignty of God in life and redemption. Jesus is saying here that "the basis of the Father's concealing and revealing activity is the Father's own desire."² In other words, his gracious will is the only motivator. God does it like that because it glorifies him more.

Paul says the same thing in Romans 9:20-21 - "Who are you to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay?" It is also what God says to Job in Job 38:2-4 - "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...Where were you when I...?" The sovereignty of God allows there to be no answer beyond "because it was your gracious will," and that is enough. There is deep comfort in the unexplainable but gracious will of God. Jesus is saying, "I thank you that your gracious kingdom plan was to reveal your heart to the humble."

Then he takes it one step further in verse 27. He says four things:

- "All things have been handed over to me" - Do you hear the Great Commission here?
- "No one knows the Son except the Father"
- "No one knows the Father except the Son" - Both statements highlight the exclusivity of their relationship.
- "And anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" - It is the Son's mission to reveal the Father, and they cannot know the Father without the Son.

So what do we see here? We see a supremely elevated Christology. We see Jesus who is intimately known by the Father, and who intimately knows the Father. We see Jesus whose

² David Turner, [The Gospel of Matthew](#), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 303.

mission on earth is to make the Father known. And the only way for a person to know the Father is to know him through Jesus. Jesus is in complete control. It is by him, and through him, and to him.

The point of all of this is that the basis of comfort is the supremacy of Jesus. And it was this point that the hard-hearted missed. They refused to acknowledge who he was. They refused to see him as the life-giving son of God. It is the only the humble who say, "I don't fully understand this, some of this doesn't make sense to me, but I believe in You!" You are the Messiah. And that belief in the person of Jesus becomes the basis for all comfort.

The Promise: Come to Jesus for Rest

The reason that the awe-inspiring supremacy of Jesus is so important is because real rest is found in coming to **him**. Jesus doesn't offer a program, a methodology, a structure, or a system; he says, "Come to **me**!"

Notice the invitations and how personal they are:

- Come to **me** (v 28)
- Take **my** yoke upon you
- Learn from **me**

The invitation here is completely wrapped up and conditional upon Jesus. Again this is what the hard-hearted missed, and this is the heart of Christianity. We believe in Jesus. We come to Jesus. We learn from Jesus. The source, focal point, and promise all rest in Him!

Notice how burdened the people are:

- Come...all who labor
- Come...all who are heavy-laden
- Come...I am gentle (don't be scared)
- Come...I am lowly in heart (you'll not be rejected)

Jesus is wooing them from the burden of their afflicted lives. He is calling them out of the heavy-handed, rule-oriented, self-imposed, and man-made righteousness that only made them even more hopeless and helpless. He is calling them away from the heavy and hurtful consequences connected to their sins. He is calling to come, believing that he will be gracious to them.

Finally notice that he calls them to a totally different life – restful action! "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...you will find rest for your souls" (v 29). You see he is not calling his followers to rest and relaxation. Otherwise, why would he use the analogy of a yoke? He could have said, "Take my chair" or "Take my robe," but he chooses a yoke. Why?

Because the rest is found **in** the yoke! “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (v 30). In other words, Jesus is talking about a rest of the soul that comes from 1) coming to him and 2) following him. They are one and the same. He is talking about the kind of soul-rest that comes from knowing that Jesus truly is the Son of God, he alone reveals the Father, and recognizing that it is only through Him that real freedom comes.

Freedom comes not by being free from a yoke, but by being in the right yoke.

Freedom comes to those who have learned the supreme and eternal value of following Jesus. Those who are afflicted by their sins come to him, and they find forgiveness, freedom and a future. And then they keep coming to him over and over so that they can learn from him, know him and be like him. They have learned that there is no rest like the soul-rest that Jesus gives.

Oh how huge the contrast between the hard-hearted and the heavy-hearted! The hard-hearted treat Jesus with contempt because he is so familiar and because they are so proud. The heavy-hearted, however, have come to the end of themselves, realizing that there is no other way.

Jesus aims to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted not just now but for all eternity! Heaven is a place of eternal joy and comfort for those understand the affliction of their sin and have run to Jesus. Hell is a place of eternal affliction for those who were tragically comfortable with their sinful condition.

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