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The Son's Easy Yoke and Light Burden:
A Biblical Theology Study of Matthew 11:25-30

By

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Biblical Theology

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Introduction

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard J. Foster writes the following, “In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in “muchness” and “manyness,” he will rest satisfied.” (Foster 15). This quote was written nearly half a century ago; however, it still stands to be true today. Unfortunately, humanity has been in a perpetual state of busyness lacking any margin to slow down. People are deprived of rest and need it now more than ever before.

Despite this tragic reality, there is good news for those who are willing to incline their ears to a generous invitation offered by Jesus Christ. In Matthew 11:25-30, Jesus reveals the intimate relationship He has with His Father and offers those who are weary and burdened to come to Him and find rest for their souls. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine these relevant themes in light of God’s redemptive story throughout all of Scripture while considering the implications this passage has on the life of a disciple.

The Immediate Context

Considering the context of a passage is of paramount importance when considering the meaning of a biblical text. Therefore, the immediate context, which includes the previous and subsequent passages, will be considered briefly.

Just before Jesus praises His Father and invites those who are burdened to come to Him, Jesus cries out and rebukes a collection of cities. The reason for His rebuke is that the ministry and miracles of Jesus have been witnessed in these cities, yet the people remained unrepentant (Matthew 11:20). The three recipients of Jesus’ rebuke are each Jewish cities: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matthew 11:21, 23). In the midst of His rebuke, Jesus contrasts the response of these Jewish cities to His mighty works with the hypothetical responses of three

notorious Gentile cities: Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom (Long 129). Jesus' mention of these cities is significant because it shows His concern for those who are overlooked. This concern is emphasized even more when Jesus highlights the priority of children, who are lowly and needy, in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 11:25). Tragically, the message of Jesus' outcry is that those who experience the Kingdom of God yet choose not to repent are subject to judgement. With this prior context in mind, Jesus' exclamation of praise offered to the Father is better understood as commentary on the previously stated rebuke.

While the preceding rebuke gives clarity as to why Jesus is praising His Father for the nature of His self-revelation to His people (Matthew 11:25-27), the subsequent passage to Jesus' invitation to rest (Matthew 11:28-30) expounds on His relationship to the Sabbath and rest (Matthew 12:1-14). As Jesus and His disciples walk through the grainfields, the Pharisees confront Jesus on the conduct of His disciples during the Sabbath day (Matthew 12:1-2). Jesus, in return, profoundly declares that He is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8).

Now that the surrounding context of Matthew 11:25-30 has been considered, it is now appropriate for the actual passage to be discussed. Prior to our discussion, it is important to note that this passage is divided into two parts. During the first half of the passage Jesus is praising His Father (Matthew 11:25-27), while the remainder of the passage is an invitation to those who are weary to find rest in Jesus (Matthew 11:28-30). Both sections of this passage will be discussed further alongside the respective biblical theological themes that are present within them.

Exposition of Matthew 11:25-27

At the beginning of Matthew 11:25, he writes, "At that time," which suggests a strong connection to the preceding passage in which Jesus rebukes several unrepentant cities. Due to

this strong connection, individuals engaging with this text must understand Jesus' following praise of gratitude as closely related to His rebuke. The praise that Jesus extends to His Father gives us an intimate look into the nature of their relationship and, primarily, the nature of God's revelation to His people. Jesus does not simply just praise the "Lord of heaven and earth," but He also intimately extends praise to His Father. This acknowledgement of His Father foreshadows what is to come regarding the relationship between the Son and the Father (Matthew 11:27).

The cause for Jesus' praise is twofold. The first reason for His praise is that His Father has "hidden these things from the wise and learned" (Matthew 11:25). The referent of "these things" is best understood as the significance of the miracles that were previously mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 11:21 (Turner 303). The significance of these miracles was hidden from those who were considered to be wise. The "wise and learned" is generally assumed to be a reference to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. However, this explanation is not fully sufficient (Longman et al., 318). The religious leaders would have undoubtedly been included within this grouping; however, within the broader context of the passage, it is seen that Jesus is rebuking generations of people (Matthew 11:16) and even whole cities (Matthew 11:20) who have remained unrepentant. Therefore, Jesus is not condemning those who are truly wise. The problem is not about a person's wisdom, but rather it is about their heart condition. The "wise and learned" must be understood as those who are spiritually proud and unwilling to turn towards the Lord.

The second reason for Jesus' praise is that His Father has "revealed [these things] to little children." One must not overlook the stark contrast that is being made here by Jesus. He praises His Father for hiding the significance of His miracles from the spiritually proud and then praises Him for revealing it to "little children." Some might assume that Jesus is contrasting between

intellectuals and children. However, this assumption causes one to miss the point that is being made here. As previously noted, the “wise and learned” are those who are spiritually proud, not necessarily those who have a high intellect. Similarly, “little children” is not meant to solely refer to children. Rather, it is best understood as a reference to those who are spiritually humble and dependent on the Lord. Therefore, the contrast that is being made here is between the spiritually proud who remain self-reliant and the spiritually humble who are God-reliant (Turner 303).

Within His statement of gratitude, Jesus proclaims that it was His Father’s pleasure to hide and reveal His Truth to whom He desired (Matthew 11:26). It is clear that the Son delights in the will of His Father. This statement also reveals to the reader God’s sovereign initiative and His sovereign response (Chamblin 628). His sovereign initiative is shown by the way He has *chosen* to hide Himself to some and disclose Himself to others. It was the initiative of God that made Himself known to humanity, not the initiative of man. Furthermore, the “ground of salvation” lies solely in the will and pleasure of God (Chamblin 628). His sovereign response is shown by the way He has *chosen* to respond to those who are spiritually proud and to those who are spiritually humble.

Moving on from His declaration of praise to a description of His relationship with the Father, Jesus claims that “all things have been committed” to Him by His Father (Matthew 11:27). The things that have been committed to Jesus by the Father likely include His divine wisdom and authority (Longman et al., 320). Jesus continues by making a profound statement regarding the communion between the Son and the Father. Jesus asserts that the Father is the only one who knows the Son and the Son is the only one who knows the Father. While their relationship may be “incomparable” and “incomprehensible,” it is not completely exclusive (Chamblin 632-633). For just as the Father has revealed His Son to those whom He has chosen,

the Son also chooses to reveal the Father to whom He chooses. Thus, the driving point of Matthew 11:25-27 is that through the Son, who is the sole mediator of salvation, the Father has revealed Himself to those who are spiritually humble and dependent on Him.

Biblical Theology of Matthew 11:25-27

The nature of the Father's revelation through the Son is a prominent theme throughout Matthew 11:25-27. However, the theme of revelation is also present throughout the rest of Scripture. Revelation is defined as "the disclosure by God of truths at which people could not arrive without divine initiative and enabling" (Yarbrough *NDBT* 732). In particular, Scripture mainly focuses on God's special revelation, which is the "divine disclosure of verities leading to saving knowledge of God" (Yarbrough *NDBT* 733).

Prior to the incarnation, God revealed Himself in a variety of ways. Throughout the Old Testament, God often used theophanies to reveal Himself to His people. For example, God tested Abraham by telling Him to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22:2). However, just before Abraham was about to slay his son, the angel of the Lord appeared to him and stopped him from doing so. It was through this revelation that God further affirmed His promises to Abraham that he will have many descendants and that through his seed many nations will be blessed. Additionally, God spoke through the prophets (Hebrews 1:1) and even through dreams (Genesis 28:12).

It is clear that God has revealed Himself throughout history in a variety of ways; however, as suggested in Matthew 11:25-27, it is through Jesus that the Father is fully revealed. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being (Hebrews 1:3). The means by which God revealed Himself prior to Jesus were not insufficient; however, God chose to personally reveal Himself through the

incarnation. Putting on flesh, Jesus showed the purest and grandest form of love through His death and resurrection so that the Father could be revealed through Him.

Exposition of Matthew 11:28-30

Following His statement of praise and the description of His relationship with His Father, Jesus graciously extends an invitation to those who are “weary and burdened” to come to Him. This invitation, if accepted, results in Jesus giving them rest (Matthew 11:28). In light of Jesus’ previous statements regarding the nature of God’s revelation to His people, the significance of this invitation is vast. Jesus, who previously asserted that knowledge of the Father only comes through Him, is now personally inviting people to come to Him and find rest. The category of people that are invited to Jesus are those who are weary and burdened. Although physical rest is an important thing given by God through the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11), Jesus is likely referring to spiritual burdens that cause people to become weary. Later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus publicly condemns the religious leaders who “tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders” (Matthew 23:4). The religious leaders felt that they could find rest in the oral traditions by being rigidly obedient to them. However, Jesus is declaring that rest is not found in something, but rather it is found in Him – the one who reveals the Father.

Jesus not only invites those who are overloaded by the spiritual demands of the religious leaders to come to Him, but He also invites them to take His yoke upon them and learn from Him. A yoke was a wooden crosspiece often carried by animals (Keener 75). Throughout Scripture, the term “yoke” was often employed to communicate one of two images. The first image is the image of subjection. A yoke was often placed upon animals in order to subject them to the farmer. The second image is the image of joining. A yoke joined two animals together to allow them to work as unified partners (Ryken et al., 975). While Jesus may relieve the

overbearing yoke from the shoulders of the weary and burdened, He does not leave them without a yoke. As a matter of fact, the yoke of Jesus, which involves the law of God, is weightier than the yoke of the Pharisees (Chamblin 636).

Despite the heaviness of His yoke, Jesus offers a yoke that is different in function and nature. Regarding its function, the yoke that Jesus offers does not bind His followers to the law per se, but it binds them to Himself. Again, it should be said that this does not eliminate obedience to God's law. Rather, as followers of Jesus are bound to Him, their righteous obedience comes through the obedience of Christ Himself (Romans 5:19). Because followers of Jesus are bound to Him, it is appropriate that He describes His character to them. Jesus says that He is "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). For Jesus to be gentle means that He "deals gently and mercifully" with those who are weary. Furthermore, in His humility, Jesus is willing to bear the burdens of His flawed followers (Chamblin 637). Paradoxically, as followers of Jesus obediently take upon His yoke, they ultimately find true rest because He is carrying it with them. Regarding the nature of it, Jesus describes His yoke as being easy and His burden as being light (Matthew 11:30). Through the obedience of Christ and the empowering of the Spirit, followers of Jesus are able to carry His yoke.

Biblical Theology of Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus' invitation to rest was likely liberating in a context where religious leaders were imposing their rigid traditions upon other people. However, this was not the first time the Lord promised and offered divine rest to His people. There are two primary passages that will be used to discuss this theme of rest in the Old Testament: Exodus 33:12-14 and Jeremiah 6:16.

Moses has been called by the Lord to lead His people into the promised land; however, he still seeks to know who God will send with him to lead His people. Moses confronts God on this

matter (Exodus 33:12). In response to Moses, the Lord says, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:16). Prior to this promise, Moses pleads that if the Lord is pleased with him, to teach him His ways so that he could continue to find favor in His sight (Exodus 33:13). The connection to this interaction between Moses and God may be thematically connected to Matthew 11:28-30. Moses seems to desire the yoke of God’s law so that he can know the Lord and receive His favor. God, in response, promises that He will be with Moses and will provide rest for His people.

The idea of obedience and rest being closely related is further established in Jeremiah 6:16. The Lord speaks to the Israelites saying that if they “walk in the good way,” they will find rest for their souls. Unfortunately, the Israelites actively refused to do so and lived in rebellion instead. Due to their inability to be completely obedient, the Lord sent His Son to live a perfectly obedient life. Through His Son, His people are now invited into true spiritual rest (Matthew 11:28-30). This rest is not received through a rigid system of laws; however, through a lowly King riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). This lowly yet perfect King would eventually be led to the cross where He would be crucified on behalf of the world (John 3:16).

Application

Matthew 11:25-30 shows the nature in which God reveals Himself to us and how it is through His Son that we are able to find true spiritual rest. The richness of this passage, however, may be easily missed if believers do not seek to allow it to transform their hearts. Believers must take seriously the admonition of James by living out the Word (James 1:22). As I have reflected on this passage, I believe there are three responses that this passage requires of me, and other followers of Jesus as well. These responses will now be discussed.

My first response is to *worship the Lord for His mercy*. In Matthew 11:25, Jesus praises His Father for revealing Himself to those who are spiritually humble and dependent like little children. Though I am needy and lowly, the Lord has revealed Himself to me through His mercy. Just as Jesus worshipped His Father for this act of revelation, I must also worship Him for I am the object to which He reveals Himself.

Secondly, I must *seek the living Word through the written Word in humility*. In Matthew 11:27, Jesus makes the profound statement that it is only through Him that the Father may be known. In order for me to know my Father, I must seek Jesus. The primary means by which I do this is through the reading of the written Word. However, I must begin by humbly acknowledging that it is up to Jesus to reveal Himself to me. I cannot simply read the Bible in hopes that I will stumble across God. Rather, I must constantly remind myself of my Father's desire for me to be like a little child.

Lastly, I must *rest in Jesus as I follow Him in obedience*. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus has extended an invaluable invitation to me to receive rest through Him. I must remember that Jesus offers me rest before He tells me to take His yoke upon me. The true spiritual rest that Jesus has offers is not earned by my hard work. Rather, it is given to me by my gentle and lowly Savior. However, His yoke still requires that I faithfully follow Him in obedience. Through my humble submission to His will, I will walk in the good way by the aid of Jesus (Jeremiah 6:16).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed Matthew 11:25-30 and the biblical theological themes found within the passage, while considering the implications it has on the life of a disciple. The nature of God's revelation and the spiritual rest that He offers to His people have been discussed. For

those who are deprived of rest, take heart for the Lord is the One who can give you true rest through revealing Himself to you through His Son!

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