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Matthew 11:1-30

When in Doubt, Rest in the Heart of Christ

We all feel the weight of burdens and labors that exhaust our bodies, hearts, and souls, don't we? Aise from the exhausting nature of just trying to live life, we pick up many other *burdens* that weary and weigh us down: worry and anxiety; regret; sinful desires and temptations we can't shake; fear of failure, not be good enough, being rejected; the guilt and shame we bear. Yet another burden we can feel are *waves of doubt* that unsettle our hearts at times.

It's probably true that we will all probably struggle with doubt, to at least *some degree* and at some point in our lives; though it's also true that there are different kinds of doubt, and different people struggle and respond to doubt in very different ways. I think we can generally put doubt into **2 categories**: 1. The *doubt of believers*, and 2. The *doubt of unbelief*. When we think of doubt, we might first think of *doubting GOd, of not having faith in His existence, the truth of the Bible, or believing in the gospel of Christ*. The *doubt of unbelief* is to reject Christianity *unless it's on your terms*, not accepting it unless it corresponds to what you think is right and true; such doubts might lead someone to say, "I'll believe *this*, but I won't accept or believe *that* part of the Bible." Such doubting cannot be tolerated; it is the *enemy* of faith.

Yet it is also possible to *have doubts as believers!* It is possible to want to believe - to have faith - but to *struggle*. This is *faith seeking understanding*; the cry of the heart that says to God, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Maybe you struggle with understanding how to put the Bible together; maybe you trust in God, but you're struggling with truly trusting in His goodness, love, and mercy; maybe you're struggling this morning with doubts of your own salvation, that God *specifically loves you*.

In **Matt. 11:1-30**, Jesus addresses such doubts. In vv.1-15, he gently deals with the doubts of John the Baptist; he tells us to deal with the *doubt of believers* by *firmly trusting in the Word of God, and Christ Himself, as the basis of all truth and understanding*. Next, he *warns us against the doubts of unbelief* by showing us the consequences of unrepentant faith - the eternal judgment of God in Hell that we all deserve. But then, he deals with our struggling doubts of assurance by **revealing His own heart to us: by showing the incredible depths of God's**

compassionate, gracious love to us in Christ Jesus! So let us rest our hearts in the assurance of Christ's truth in these chapters this morning.

I. Our Faith is Grounded in the Sure Truth of God's Word (vv.1-15)

In vv.1-3, John the Baptist, who has been imprisoned by King Herod because of his message of repentance, writes to Jesus. Shockingly, he reveals that he's having *doubts* - he's questioning whether or not Jesus is the true Messiah, or if there is another one who is to come. This is shocking because *John himself* announced to everyone that Jesus truly is the Christ - God's promised savior - in Matt. 3! Of all people, we would assume John the Baptist would have a sure faith, free from any doubts! And yet, he writes to Jesus, asking him for reassurance.

Why would John have any doubts? Because it did not appear as if Jesus was fulfilling all of the Old Testament salvation promises. The **blessing** of Christ's ministry was clear enough; but where was God's promised judgment against His enemies and deliverance for His people?

Jesus reassures John (and his disciples) that he is truly the promised Messiah by pointing to how he fulfills the Old Testament prophecies: he says in **vv.4-6**: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Jesus is quoting various scriptures: for example, **Isaiah 35:5-6** says that when God's promised salvation comes, the "eyes of the blind shall be opened," "ears of the deaf unstopped;" "then shall the lame" walk; **Isaiah 61:1** says the Messiah shall "bring good news to the poor;" and **Isa.26:19** prophecies that *the dead will be raised up*.

The point is clear: Jesus is the "promised one" who was to "come from God." He fulfills God's promises of a savior. As these miracles he mentions make clear, he's *reversing* the effects of sin. such as physical defects, disease, and disability; even death! So then, Jesus reassures John the Baptist by *clearly affirming* that He is indeed God's promised savior by **pointing to the sure truth of God's Word and His infallible promises**.

But then, in **vv.7-15**, Jesus goes further: he even proves that he is the promised savior by *defending John the Baptist's role and ministry*. John the Baptist was truly *a prophet*. "Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." A prophet himself, yet also fulfillment of prophecy. - He is the promised forerunner, preparing the way for the Messiah. This is what Jesus means when he

quotes *Mal. 3:1* - John is the “messenger” of the Lord who comes to prepare the way for Him. Jesus makes the same point in **v.14** when he calls John the Baptist “*Elijah*.” He’s referencing **Mal. 4:5**: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” Again, the point is clear: John is the messenger, preparing the way for Jesus, the Messiah, who is also **GOD Himself**, ushering in the “day of the Lord,” bringing about both **judgment and salvation**.

Thus, this defense of John actually shines the light *back on Christ*: John, and all of the other prophets before him (v.13), *pointed to Jesus!* Indeed, John is the “greatest” of the prophets because his time overlapped with Jesus Himself, and he gets to see the promises being fulfilled! Jesus truly came to *save us from our sins!* And he tells us that if we have any doubts, we can just look to the sure promises of GOD - *for the entirety of the Bible points to Christ and assures us that He is indeed the GOD-Man, the promised One who came to save us from our sins as His people who believe in Him!*

So here’s the application for us today: We deal with doubt as believers by *trusting GOD’s Word as our ultimate authority for truth*. How do we know this is true? *Because God has told us so.*

Now you might say, “Stop it right there; that’s circular reasoning. How can “because God said so” be good enough proof that what the Bible says is right and true?” This is good enough proof because we are appealing to *God Himself* as our ultimate authority for what truth is!

This is not circular logic; it’s **necessary**. Any worldview must make a claim of an ultimate authority for truth. Whatever is appealed to as our ultimate authority is our functional God/god. A secular worldview, for example, may claim that **science** is their ultimate authority of truth. THIS is very common among non-believers in our modern American culture. How do we know something is true or reliable? They answer: *because science says so*. And if science cannot prove it or speak definitively to it, then *it cannot be trusted or accepted as fact*. THIS is why some atheists claim not to believe in GOD: because Christianity cannot be *proven by science*. Science is claimed as their ultimate authority.

But science is just the process of *human beings* making observations of the physical world, hypothesizing theories to explain the observations, and then trying to prove the theories. Science changes; science can be wrong; science cannot explain everything. Why? Because *science is dependent upon us*. We are limited, deficient, finite beings. *We’re wrong all the time!*

And so, science can be wrong! Science is *limited* to what we can observe physically. Science has no authority or capability to address immaterial things - such as emotion, morality, spiritual realities, or *anything not physical!* Now this by no means makes science wrong! Science can be extraordinarily wonderful; its a gift from God to us! But science *makes a terrible ultimate authority of what is true.*

But you may respond, “Ok, that makes sense. But how do we answer the objection that our claim of GOd as our ultimate authority is circular reasoning?” The answer is: *all logic must eventually circle back to whatever our ultimate truth claim is.* If we were to appeal to anything *beyond God* to prove His existence or the truth of what He says, then we would be claiming that *that other thing is our authority*, not God. For example, if we said, “I know God is real because of the way I feel,” or “I know GOd *isn't real* because I can't see him,” then we're claiming that *we* are the ultimate authority, that *we* get to decide what is true or not. But this is patently false! How we feel or what we experience does not affect objective truth. God is the creator of all things; God is the origin standard and standard of all that exists, is good, or is true. Therefore, *we must appeal to God as our ultimate authority* for knowing anything!

And we do this everytime we ground our understanding of truth *in the Word of God.* God is God; therefore, His Word is true and cannot fail. We must accept His Word on His own terms, accepting His truth claims as authoritative. But this is by no means *blind faith.* It is perfectly reasonable; the fact that GOd is the authority of truth make *complete sense* of everything else! As we study GOd's Word, we see that everything is *coherent and consistent*, perfectly true; which proves the claim that *God's Word cannot be wrong!* And so, it explains creation, morality, good, and evil; and even explains *how we can know God, be reconciled to Him, forgiven of our sins and saved from His Wrath, and enter into eternal life with Him!*

So let us wash away our doubts by *firmly grounding our understanding of truth in GOd Himself and His infallible Word - not ourselves.*

[Transition] Next, Jesus encourages us to believe by *reminding us what is at stake;* He warns us against the consequences of the *doubt of unbelief* and rejecting Jesus.

II. All Who Do Not Repent Will Face God's Judgment (vv.16-24)

Despite the fact that the whole Bible points to Christ, as both John and Jesus's ministries made clear, many rejected their message and their ministries; this is what **vv.16-19** make clear. Even though John and Jesus proclaimed the message differently, they both were displaying the divine wisdom of GOD and proclaiming His Word; and they were both rejected by the people of Israel at large.

Jesus makes this point with the analogy of a children's game being played in the marketplace: the children try to play a "wedding game," but the other children to want to dance and act happy; so instead, they try a "funeral game," yet the others still don't join in - they refusing to be both *happy* and *sad*.

Here's the point: John the Baptist lived an "ascetic" life, refusing comforts and luxury. He did not join in dinner parties; he never drank alcohol. However, unbelievers *rejected* John and His message, saying, "He has a demon." He preached **repentance unto salvation**, and they wanted nothing to do with it.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not live an ascetic life. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking," meaning he did attend dinner parties and he did drink alcohol, even in the company of sinners! Even though it was very different than John, they rejected Jesus, too: "they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" Jesus was obviously no more a glutton and drunkard than John was demon-possessed; yes, he feasted and he drank alcohol, but always with moderation. Yes, he associated with sinners; but he himself was not a sinner. Jesus came preaching the *gospel of grace* - good news for sinners like us!

Yet unbelief rejects both **John and Jesus**, for Jesus and John preach the same message: *repent and believe in Christ for the free gift of salvation from sin by grace!* Unbelief **rejects both repentance and grace. Unbelief rejects the demand to live a different life, turning away from sin and to GOD in obedient faith;** at the same time, in an ironic contradiction, **unbelief also rejects the grace of the gospel, that salvation is Christ is wholly by grace, not by our own good works.**

Then, Jesus warns of the consequences for all who *reject* the gospel message and refuse to repent. In **vv.20-24**, he makes it explicitly clear: **all who reject Christ - all who respond to God's Word and the gospel with *unbelief* will face the *wrath of God* on the day of Judgment.**

Jesus pronounces "*woe*" on the cities and towns of Galilee - the area where the majority of his ministry, teachings, and miracles have taken place so far. God's light of redemption was

being specially *revealed* in the person, life, and works of Jesus in these places; some believed and followed Jesus, yet it appears that the *majority of people rejected Jesus in disbelief!* They refused to accept Christ, and His message, in faith. How do we know they didn't believe? Because of **v.20**: "Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, *because they did not repent.*" True faith is **repentant faith**; to truly believe in Christ is to *repent* - to turn to Christ and follow Him with complete faith, resulting in a changed life.

Therefore, Christ *warns them of the consequences of their unrepentant and lack of faith.* He declares the judgment they will receive: it will be worse for them on the day of judgment than "Tyre and Sidon" (**v.21**), pagan, Gentile cities representing enemies of God and Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus declares that such pagan cities would have *repented and believed* if Jesus's ministry had taken place there; he describes them responding in the same way Nineveh responded to Jonah. Even more striking, he declares their judgment will even be worse than "the land of Sodom" (**v.23-24**), whose sin, guilt, and judgment is legendary and infamous; indeed, they received judgment long ago.

Jesus is not excusing the sin and guilt of such wicked cities and people as Sodom and Gammorah. Their guilt and judgment is assumed. Rather, he is making the point that though all wicked people deserve and will receive the judgment of God, *it will by no means be easier for these Jews*, even though they are ethnically part of Israel; *if they reject Jesus and His message of salvation, then not only will they receive eternal judgment, but their fate will be even more severe than those who did not have such hope offered to them!*

Jesus plainly declares what such judgment entails in **v.23**: "You will be brought down to Hades," which means, "Hell." Eternal condemnation in Hell is the fate of all who refuse to repent and believe in Christ.

This is a sobering warning for us today. Though we have not seen Jesus in the flesh, we do *see and hear* the life, person, works, and message of Jesus in the Bible, God's Word. We have this same hope offered to us in the gospel of Christ today! We have just as much reason to believe, and absolutely no reason to reject Jesus. If anyone rejects Christ or refuses to repent and believe, *we are without excuse.*

All deserve the Holy, Just wrath of God; God does not owe mercy to anyone; yet how much more guilt do we bear if we are offered the mercy of Christ and yet reject it! If you're tempted to walk away from Christ and give in to the doubt of unbelief, ask yourself this: what if

you're wrong, and the message of Christ is indeed True? Are you willing to face the consequences?

[Transition] But none of us have to face those consequences - if we will but *repent and rest on the grace of God in Christ Jesus.*

III. We Can Rest in Assurance because Our Salvation Rests Entirely on Christ's Compassionate Grace (vv.25-30)

After giving this sobering warning of the holy judgment of GOD that awaits all sinners who do not repent, Jesus then gives the *beautiful, free offer of salvation for all who turn to Him in faith.* In verses 25-30, Christ reminds us that the wondrous assurance of our salvation is that it rests *not on who we are or anything we do, but purely on the free, sovereign grace of our Lord!*

This is what Jesus tells us in **vv.25-26.** He draws a contrast between the “wise and understanding” - those who trust and rely on themselves as sufficient, being wise in their own eyes - and those he calls “little children” - which means those who have “childlike faith.” He tells us that God reveals Himself and the truth of Christ - that God grants *true, repentant faith* - not to the “wise and understanding” but to those with childlike faith - to those who *truly believe* and are *dependent* on God, like little children fully trusting in their Father's love and provision. *That* is who GOD chooses to reveal Himself to in salvation. And **v.26** tell us: *this is according to God's “gracious will”* - His free, sovereign grace. **V.27** says the same thing, but from a different angle: *“no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.”* In other words, anyone who *truly repents and believes in the gospel, resting on Christ in faith,* does so **purely because GOD has graciously revealed Himself to us, given us faith, and chosen to save us!** And Christ doesn't save us because there's anything special about you or me; not because we're smarter or wiser, or make better decisions; not because we just had better sense than someone else who refused to believe; not because we have more to offer or are morally superior. **NO, it is simply based on God's free grace!**

And this is meant to be a wondrous encouragement to us, giving us assurance of our salvation! Why? *Because our salvation is not dependent upon you or what you do! It's not rooted in your ability, not even in your sincerity! It's rooted wholly in the grace of God and his compassionate love towards you!*

And Christ reveals just how wonderful His grace towards us is as He *reveals His very heart to us!* And that's just what He does in **vv.28-30**: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will *give your rest*. 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.” Here, Christ reveals His heart to us: it is full of *gentle, accessible, compassionate love and grace towards messed up sinners like you and me*, and he invites us to ***rest in Him!***

He invites *all* who are weary to *rest in Him*; to cast our burdens of *sin, guilt, and shame* on Him. He even calls us to cast the burdens of *doubt, self-reliance, and legalism* on Him as well! He calls us to lay aside the impossible, exhausting efforts of trying to rely on ourselves to *just be good enough*. INstead, he tells us to put on His *yoke* - a harness placed on an animal, a beast of burden like a horse or ox, to attach it to a cart so it can pull it. In other words, he calls us to *discipleship* - to “learn from” Jesus, following and obeying Him. But instead of bringing impossible, crushing pressure that weighs us down even further, such obedient discipleship *frees us*; it is ***restful, relieving us from the burdens of sin, legalism, and any other worry or anxiety we bear when we try to depend and rely on ourselves.***

The call of discipleship is to *lay aside the burden of trying to work hard enough so that we will finally be accepted by God and others; to lay aside that constant guilt and shame you feel for your failures; the burden of knowing that you're not good enough*. And to rest instead in the wondrous assurance *that God accepts you just as you are - not because you're good enough, but because Christ is good enough in your place!*

We may say, “That sounds too good to be true!” If God is perfectly good, holy, and just, how could he ever accept a messed up, broken, rebellious failure like me? **Because Jesus is *gentle and lowly in heart!***

But what exactly does this reveal about the heart of Christ? There was a book written recently by Dane Ortlund that focuses entirely on answering this question; the book is called “*Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Suffers*” (and I highly recommend it to anyone who wants to know just how much Christ loves His people). Here is what Ortlund says about this phrase, “*I am gentle and lowly*”:

This means Jesus is “Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger, but open arms. ...he is *accessible*. For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness and otherness, no

human in history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through.”¹

That’s the heart of Christ: *gentle and lowly*. Full of compassionate grace! And we all we have to do is *rest in His grace! Simply open up yourself to His love through faith!*

Maybe your doubts this morning are not about the existence of God or the validity of the Bible; maybe your doubts are about your own salvation; maybe you doubt that GOD truly loves and accepts you. Wash away your doubts *not by looking within*, but by grounding your assurance in the incredible grace of God!

And yet, *Christ does not lavish his heart of grace on everyone; it is only for those who repent and believe; for those who turn away from disbelief and rest on Christ’s grace **by faith and follow Him***. Don’t get me wrong: this invitation *is* for everyone! It goes out to all! If you’re hearing this invitation this morning, the offer of God’s grace and salvation *is for you!* But you will only receive His grace if you *turn and rest in Him!* Take up the yoke and follow Him; submit to the Lord as truly having authority over your entire life! And when you do so, *you will find true rest for your weary soul!* Let the burdens of your sin, guilt, and shame fall away! Let Christ take those burdens from you, as you rest in the sweet embrace of His *unending grace!* Have faith that Christ lived, died, and was raised in your place - rest in Him, and He will take the burden of your sin and guilt away, and give you eternal rest in Him!

If you have any questions about this - about how to become a Christian, about baptism, or even about church membership, I would love to speak with you. YOU can find me after the service, or you can even come down now and wait in the front row.

Let us pray.

¹ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, pp. 19-20.