

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 11:20-30**  
**“Heavy Judgment, Light Yoke”**

September 13, 2015  
(16<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

IVA2,3: MATTHEW 11:20-30 "HEAVY JUDGEMENT, LIGHT YOKE"

		<b>2) 11:20-24 JUDGMENT ON RESISTANT VILLAGES: FALSE ISRAEL REJECTED.</b>	9:31 Positive Responses, Spotty Knowledge
		<b>v.20 Introduction To Judgment Sayings On Galilean Villages (Mt. Summary).</b>	//Lk. 10:13-15 (Q + M)
20		Then he began to upbraid the cities where most of his <i>mighty works</i> (powers) had been done, because they did not repent.	works (3x), (11:2, 19) 3:2//4:17, Revelation Is Accountability, Turn/ Realign To The Kingdom
			1) Address/Lament, 2) Indictment, 3) Verdict, Not Individuals, Towns/Tribal/Corporate
		<b>A. vv.21-22 Judgment On Chorazin And Bethsaida (2).</b>	Woe = Lamentation Over The <i>Spiritually Dead</i>
21	1	"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Beth-saida!	Surprise Outburst! <i>How Greatly One Will Suffer</i> , To Give Jesus Cold Shoulder Is Death v.16, Business As Usual, Hometown: Philip, Andrew, Peter, Jn. 1:44, 12:21 Jesus, Like Jonah = Conditional Threats; If No Change, Then....
		2	<u>for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon,</u> they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.
			4:23-25, Israel's Pagan Enemies Of Old Response Matters, Ritual Clothing, Jonah 3:6 Miracles Do Not Always Produce Faith, 12:38, 16:1-4
22		3	But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.
			Greater Privilege, More Judgment, To Reject Jesus Is Severe 8:11-12, 13:1ff., Punishments Left To God Alone! Is. 23:1-17, Jer. 25:22, Ezek. 26-28, Zech. 9:1-4, Joel 3:4 Wicked Gentiles Fare Better Than Non-Responsive Jews
		<b>B. vv.23-24 Judgment On Capernaum (1): Jesus' Headquarters (4:12-13,9:1).</b>	M Creates //s
23	1'	And you, Caperna-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades (Sheol)!//	9:18, <i>Own city</i> , Presumption, Because Of Jesus' Presence/Signs? Realm Of Dead, Shock = Taunt Against King Of Babylon, Is. 14:11-20 Smug Faith (We Own Jesus!), Capernaum Like Babylon
		2'	<u>For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom,</u> it would have remained until this day.
			10:15, Gen. 19:29, Jer. 23:4, Jude 7, Ezek. 16:49 10:15, <i>Test. Asher</i> 7:1, "Do not become like Sodom...." Sodom As Neg. Example: Rom 9:29, 2 Pt. 2:6, Jude 7
24		3'	But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."/
			First In Grace = First In Judgment When God Sorts Out History Punishment Of Israel's Enemies Now Visited On Israel

		<b>3) 11:25-30 DIVINE REVELATION: CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP FOR TRUE ISRAEL.</b>	//Lk. 10:21-22 (Q + M), Jn. 3:35, 10:14-15, 17:2, 25
		<b>A) vv.25-27 Jesus Speaks On Divine Revelation To Children From Father And Son.</b>	
		<b>1) v.25-26 Divine Revelation To The Disciples (Babes) Instead Of The Scholars.</b>	Form = 4:2 (4x)
25		At that time Jesus, responding, declared (said),	Critical Moment = Just After Announcing <i>Woes</i> , 12:1, 14:1, Sir. 51:1
Praise	a	"I thank thee,/ Father, Lord of heaven and earth,	Dan. 2:19-23, Assertion, 1Q35, frag. 1 = <b>THANKSGIVING</b>
		b	that thou hast hidden <i>these things</i> from "the wise and understanding" 13:11, Is. 29:14, Scribes/Sages, Skeptics
		b'	and <i>revealed</i> them to babes (infants); 18:3, Accessible To All! Child-like Simplicity, 18:3
26	a'	yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.	1 Cor. 1:18ff., Not Glorify Ignorance (7:24-27), <i>Childlike Not Childish</i> <i>Wise And Understanding</i> Resist Revelation; Issue Is Volition Not Intellect
		<b>2) v.27 Jesus As Unique Source Of Knowledge Of The Father.</b>	Jn. 3:35, 10:14-15, 13:3, Theological
27	a	All things have been delivered to me by my Father;	<i>Abba</i> , 10:3, Deposit Of Tradition, 28:16-20, <b>PRONOUNCEMENT</b>
Mutuality	b	and no one knows the Son except the Father,	1:21, 23, 2:15, 4:3, 3:17, Exclusive/Mutual/ Knowledge,
		b'	and no one knows the Father except the Son
		a'	and any one to whom the Son chooses to <i>reveal</i> him. //
			Jn. 7:27, Personified Wisdom Incarnate, No Independent Access 16:16-17, 1 Jn. 2:23, Assumes Like Is Known By Like Peter (16:17), //Wisdom, Must Receive Revelation, Be Invited In! = Gift
		<b>B. vv.28-30 Two Invitations + Promises, Follow Jesus And Receive Rest, Matthew Only.</b>	//Sir. 6:23-31, Access To Knowing God By Following Jesus (God's Wisdom)
		<b>1) v.28 Invitation To Follow Jesus + Promise.</b>	Call = Enroll In His School, Dedication To Him, For All!
28	a	Come to me,	Jn. 6:35, 7:37, Links: <i>reveal</i> (vv. 25d, 27d), <i>rest</i> (v. 28d, 29c)
		b	all who labor
		b'	and are heavy laden (burdened),
Gift	a'	and I will give you rest (refresh you).	23:4 (Scribes), Outsiders, 9:36, <b>INVITATION 1</b>
			Heb. 3:11, 4:1, Jesus' Wisdom School, Blasphemous If v.27 Is Not True Yoke Image: Work, Submission, Discipline, Obedience, Burden/Life
		<b>2) vv.29-30 Invitation To Learn Of Jesus: Joined To Him, Rest.</b>	Lam. 5:5, All Have Yoke, Which One?
29	a	Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;	No Hammock! <i>Learn/Study</i> Him, //Sir. 51:23-30, <b>INVITATION 2</b>
		b	for I am gentle (meek) and lowly in heart,
Gift	b'	and you will find rest for your souls.	5:5, Key, Not Overburden, Fits, Jesus Is Teacher/Curriculum Rest/Not Ease: Hos. 11:4, Exod. 33:14, Jer. 6:16, 31:25
30	a'	For my yoke is easy (good), and my burden is light."	Lam. 5:5, Paradoxes, Serve God (Jer. 2:20), Law (Acts 5:10)

**A Brief Treatment Of Matthew IVA2-3 11:20-30**

The next two paragraphs (2. vv.20-24, 3. vv.25-30) continue the narrative (11:2-12:50) that precedes the parable discourse (13:1-58). The first is an oracle of judgment on three neighboring towns that received great revelation but did not change. Matthew’s linking phrase, “At that time Jesus, responding, declared...” (v.25a), means Jesus’ subsequent self-revelation (vv.26-27) and invitation (vv.28-30) are an alternative to judgment. Jesus invites the receptive. The more abundant the revelation, the tougher the judgment. Jesus is up against powerful forces of resistance (vv. 16-20).

The first unit consists of an introduction (v.20) followed by two judgment oracles (vv.21-22 // vv.23-24), each with three parts: 1) address (v.21a//v.23), 2) indictment (vv.21b//v.23a), 3) verdict (v.22//v.24). An abundance of miracles (11:4-5, 20) are performed in what’s been called *the evangelical triangle*: three villages on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee (i.e. Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum), but the towns have not turned to God. They’ve not realigned themselves with Jesus and his Father’s kingdom. They’ve taken the gifts and not followed the Giver. This is evidence that *mighty works* (lit. *powers*, repeated thrice for emphasis [vv.20, 21b, 23b]) do not necessarily lead to faith and obedience. Healings and exorcisms were intrinsic to Jesus’ kingdom message of *word and deed*. The source of vv.21-23 is Q (//Lk. 10:13-15). Matthew’s editorial work is to add a generalizing introduction (v.20), adopt the three part form of his source (address + indictment + verdict) for the second oracle (vv.23-24), add *But I tell you* (v.21a // v.24a) to both indictments as an emphasis of authority, add the phrase *on the day* (v.22b) in echo of biblical usage, and add vv.23c-24 to bring the second oracle into parallel form. Like a Hebrew prophet, Jesus pronounces conditional oracles of judgment. As a literary form, a *Woe* is a lament because judgment is enacted, the meaning being, “If nothing changes, this is what you receive,” which is a final call to wake up. Tyre and Sidon, pagan cities up the coast, were enemies of Israel in times of old (e.g. Is. 23, Ezek. 28), but they will do better at the judgment than Chorazin and Bethsaida. Same with Capernaum, Jesus’ base of operations. Even Sodom (legendary for wickedness) would have repented with such a display of divine kindness. Jesus’ invocations using vivid O.T echoes are a call to reconsider! That he claims to know the details of final judgment is an indication of divine authority.

A second introduction, “At that time Jesus, responding, declared...” (v.25a) links what follows with what precedes. As an alternative to judgment, further self-revelation is offered in two sayings linked by *Father/Son, revealed/reveal, these things/all things* (vv.25-26//v.27) and in two invitation sayings linked by *rest* (v.28d//v.29c). The second paragraph (vv.25-30) is a prayer of thanks for revelation to the receptive (vv.25b-26) followed by an oracle of delegation and authority (v.27). These are taken from Q (//Lk. 10:21-22) and lead to two invitations— found only in Matthew— to enroll in Jesus’ school of disciples where the yoke is easy, the burden light, and the rest refreshing (vv.28-30). Jesus crushes no one who responds; he is meek and lowly. The call is not to a system but to a person (*Come to me*) and an ongoing learning relationship. The phrase *these things* (v.25c)//*All things* (v.27a) are comprehensive references to the Father’s kingdom through the Son— and in the Spirit! As eternal Son, Jesus and the Father have full mutual knowledge, and the Father has given the only franchise to the Son, an exclusive claim to divine revelation. In coming among us as Jesus, the Son offers divine revelation to all because it is his choice (v.27d), but not all respond, and all remain accountable. Jesus is our path back into the life of God, with the benefit of rest now.

## HEAVY JUDGMENT, LIGHT YOKE

*“Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”*

The call is always to come to Jesus, not to a philosophy or technique.

### MATTHEW 11:28

**D**r. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City may be America’s best-know preacher. He often hears sophisticates say, "I don't know which religion is true" or "No one can know the truth."

“This often leads to a conversation,” he says, “that goes something like this. I'm talking to someone who does not believe in Christianity or Christ. At some point he or she responds suddenly, ‘Wait a minute, what are you trying to do to me?’”

I respond, "I'm trying to evangelize you."

"You mean you're trying to convert me?"

"Yeah."

"You're trying to get me to adopt your view of spiritual reality?"

"Yeah."

"How narrow! Nobody should say that their view is better than anybody else and try to convert them. Everybody should just leave everybody else alone."

"Wait a minute ..." I say. "You want me to adopt *your* take on spiritual reality; you want me to adopt *your* view of all the various religions.... What you're saying is I'd be better off and the world better off if we adopted *yours*. If you say, 'Don't evangelize anybody,' that is to evangelize me, into your Western, white, individualistic, privatized understanding of religion." Keller then concludes:

“Who's more narrow? It's not narrow to make an exclusive truth claim because everybody makes an exclusive truth claim .... Everybody has a take on reality. Everybody thinks the world would be better if those people over there adopted mine. Narrowness is not the content of a truth claim. Narrowness is our attitude toward the people who don't share our point of view.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, ed., *A Place for Truth* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2010), 63-64.

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Over time, the church has developed convictions about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and his surprising role in God’s grand project to set the world right again, the short name for which is *the kingdom of God*. These convictions we call *doctrines*, from the Latin for *teachings*; they define the things we cannot give up and remain Christian in any meaningful sense.<sup>2</sup> The church is a worldwide community of deep spiritual and intellectual conviction; we claim knowledge of God that came to us as a gift in a particular history, and that is finally all we have to offer; without it we simply don’t make sense, “For God so loved the world, he sent his only Son...”<sup>3</sup>

The broken, compromised, stained and scarred vessel of the church contains the treasures of divine revelation available through all sorts of avenues. The medicine cabinet is old and beaten, but it contains antidotes for the plagues that afflict us all. We are a people spread over time who amidst the ups and downs of the long history of sin continue to believe we know who God is and what are God’s intentions. Our faith and its forms of knowledge are grounded in creation, prepared for in Israel, displayed in a one-of-a-kind Jesus, attested in miracles, recorded in Scripture, summarized in Creeds, celebrated in worship, enacted in sacraments, sung in hymns and songs, sealed by the blood of martyrs, expressed in art, constructed in architecture, explored by theologians, sharpened in dialog, made immediate in testimonies, passed on in teaching, embodied in service, highlighted by saints, and concretely embodied in local churches. What a mouthful! Our confidence is not in ourselves but in what God has shown us of himself in Jesus, a story kept alive by the work of the Holy Spirit. We have been preserved with a message for a purpose; we are to announce the truths of God and live them out so that our life together becomes another evidence of our message. Same seed, many soils.

It is a outrageous claim to assert knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup> Not just to know about

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<sup>2</sup> The formation of canonical doctrine is a deliberately minimalist operation; it states the minimum required in terse, dense language. It is not a substitute for Scripture but a standard of belief below which the church cannot maintain identity; it’s also a record of where the church has been forced into definition by controversy and challenge. On the process, see Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent defense of spiritual knowledge, see Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009).

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God but to know God, and not just as one more of the world’s human attempt to unravel the divine and name the mystery. Our claim is all encompassing and ultimately incompatible with other religions. At our best we have good manners in interfaith dialogs and are happy to rejoice in truth and beauty wherever we find them as signs of God’s common grace, but we cannot give up the conviction that in Jesus we see the face of the only true God so far as it can be revealed within the limits of history.<sup>5</sup> Because if Jesus is who the church claims him to be, and if the Trinity is the truest description of God’s nature,<sup>6</sup> then Judaism is our grounding and all other religious systems are to be measured by the truth of Christ alone. You pass the magnet of Jesus over them and see what sticks and what does not. Polytheism is out; not many gods but one. Animism is out; nothing in nature deserves worship: not streams or rivers, mountains or storms, certainly not our own passions. Secularism is a lie; the world cannot be understood only on its own terms. Atheism is a dead end; it ignores too much evidence. Islam is not the truth; it denies the death and resurrection of Jesus. Buddhism has no personal deity, and Hinduism has millions upon millions. Not to speak of the sheer weirdness of Scientology or the semi-Christian systems of Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Get the idea? Offensive isn’t it? And it gets worse! The bottom line is this: what is not compatible with Jesus is not from God; what is not compatible with the Son is not from the Father. This is an outrageous claim, but it’s stated in our official teachings, however much we seek to soften the sharp edges for the sake of peace and good manners. Where is knowledge of God to be found? In Jesus, because of who he is, because of what the Father said about the Son and how he backed him in life and finally in resurrection. Are there lots of nice folk out there, good citizens and gifted, accomplished people who do not share our convictions? Of course; some of whom put us to shame in certain areas, but that’s not the issue. The question is not who we are but *Who is Jesus?* If he is who he said he is— which is the sole outlet of divine revelation for the God the Father— and if he is who the church claims him to be after long reflection, is it true? Does it correspond with reality at the deepest

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<sup>5</sup> For a simple introduction, see Nicky Gumbel, *What About Other Religions?* (Deerfield, ILL: Alpha North America, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> And, for the same reason, Nicki Gumbel, *Is The Trinity Unbiblical, Unbelievable, & Irrelevant* (Deerfield, ILL: Alpha North America, 2012). For a more developed presentation, see Michael Reeves, *Delighting In The Trinity* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2012)

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level? Is this what God offers the world as the only way out of our colossal mess? And I say *Yes*. So there! I am an intolerant, Christian bigot.

On October 9, 2006 Tiger Woods was at a Nike outing for executives. Thirty people gathered at the Trump Course in L.A. for a "Tee It up with Tiger" event of golf and lunch. During the meal there was Q & A. Most asked golf questions. However, one stood up and asked, "Have you accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior? And if not, prayerfully, would you?" "You could have heard a pin drop," one of the guests later said, "People were mortified." It's a good question, but— in my mind— not to be asked in that setting. Our sincere evangelist had bad manners.

Tiger then said this: "My father was a Christian— of course Christianity was part of my life. But my mother is Asian, and Buddhism was also part of my childhood. So I practice both faiths respectfully."<sup>7</sup>

What a clever, timely answer, a tribute to Mr. Woods' savvy, but finally it will not work. And why? Because Christianity— classically understood, and Buddhism, according to its own teachings, are incompatible and contradictory. We teach a personal God, a deity with all the attributes of personhood and the source of our own, but not Buddhism; it is a non-theistic practice, meaning no God described as personal. The goal of Buddhism is the extinction of the self and its desires, but in our faith the goal of salvation is not the negation of the person but the complete salvation of the entire created self and the fulfillment of all desires in God. We are not dissolved as drops in the ocean; we are rehabbed for an eternal relationship as distinct persons. Tiger was clever and culturally hip with a bit of this and a bit of that, but not consistent because the two faiths are logically incompatible; they contradict one another at the most basic level; both cannot be true in the same way at the same time. Thus Tiger had better manners, but the untimely evangelist had better theology, and to be effective witnesses in our day we need to bring the two together.

At some point you have to move beyond asking pragmatic questions like, Is this faith personally helpful or socially useful? and ask tougher questions like, Is it true? Does it deserve my full allegiance? We believe that at the end of every life everyone faces Jesus Christ, "He shall come again to judge the living and the dead,

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<sup>7</sup> Elliot Harris, "Woods Takes Evangelicals to Sunday School," Chicago Sun-Times (10-19-06).

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**Matthew 11:20-30** ..... 8

and his kingdom shall have no end” is the way the Nicene Creed puts it.<sup>8</sup> All have an appointment, not before Mohammed, not before Buddha or Confucius. Not before the Church or Pastor Phil or the Pope or your Mother, but the One to whom Church and Bible pointed, the living one we worshiped and proclaimed and served and sang to and painted pictures of and at whose table we communed. At history’s end stands Jesus the Son into whose hands the God the Father has entrusted all things and on whose life the Holy Spirit shines the only spotlight that matters.

No one sat down one day and said, “Well guys, I’m tired of fishing for a living. How about you, Matthew? Tired of collecting taxes and getting rich at the expense of your fellow Jews? Let’s create a new faith and all be preachers and end up martyred for a great lie. It’ll be great fun while it lasts. Let’s complicate Judaism beyond recognition and make Jesus into God the Son. We can then add the Holy Spirit and make it a trio. What an adventure! A sucker born every minute. Who says you can’t fool all the people all the time?”

No, it wasn’t a conspiracy. All the church said and did in the earliest days it understood to be *in response* to the revelation God put in front of them. God interrupted first century Judaism by showing up in person as Jesus of Nazareth, and since then we’ve been working to figure out what it means and how to respond to what God did in our midst. This is why the church has strong convictions about Jesus, and why we can’t stop saying what we say about him, however offensive it might be. We’re convinced it’s true and can be verified in experience because he’s not dead but fully alive. Those who accept the invitation to come and learn find he shows them who God is; the Son introduces them to the Father and the Spirit. They get immersed in the Triune life of the one God. In Jesus we cross the threshold of divine revelation and see everything in a new light from inside a new world.<sup>9</sup> To accept his invitation has consequences; to reject his invitation to reboot life with him at the center also has consequences, as Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida were warned when they took the benefits but did not turn to God in their hearts. Each village was essentially an extended kinship network or tribe, and while there may have been isolated positive responses— since we know that Peter and Andrew and Philip came from Bethsaida— the response of the larger network was not good.

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<sup>8</sup> “The Nicene Creed,” *U.M. Hymnal*: 880.

<sup>9</sup> See William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006) for this threshold concept.

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**Matthew 11:20-30** ..... 9

Friends, you will wear a yoke, either his or some else's. None of us are free in the absolute sense. You will serve something, give your life to something, even if something as small and petty as your own appetites and desires. Some are yoked in addiction to cocaine or alcohol, others to sex, many to money, others to the idea of family or a career or country, even a hobby or a sport. But Jesus says his yoke is a better deal than all the others; to plow through life with him at your side is to have one who shares the load and keep us on track. "Try mine on for size," he says, "see how it fits. Come and learn of me."

Jesus is not trivial. He is God's final challenge to the way life is organized and run in this world under current management. What we say about him is based on what he said about himself, which is that he had the perfect right to announce God's judgment ahead of time on non-responsive villages and to claim the exclusive rights to divine revelation so that to come to him was to receive benefits that only come from God. Both are included under his comprehensive claim that, "All things have been delivered *to me* by *my Father...*" *All things*, every single thing, every single atom, every single person, all that ever has been or ever will be, *all things* have been entrusted to the Son by the Father for disposition depending on how they respond to him. Abraham Kuyper, the famous Dutch theologian, said this, that "... there is not a square inch in the whole domain our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not say, 'Mine!'"<sup>10</sup>

You may choose to reject the faith of the church, but make sure you reject it for the right, not the wrong reasons. Not because some pastor had a moral problem or because someone offended you or because the church has hypocrites. If for any of these, you are simply morally naive. If you wish, reject this faith because you do not believe what Jesus said of himself or what the church says about him. Then find your way into some other yoke and into some other way of life and see where it leads.

Our mainline Protestant churches are weak because we've lost the courage of our doctrinal convictions. And if you've been one- as I have all my life- you've heard the drivel: "Jesus is just one more revealer alongside the other great founders of world religions. Male and female are not firm categories of creation but socially malleable. Hell is not real and therefore no threat to anyone, just a scare tactic for angry preachers. Missions is not really necessary; why mess with other people's religion since all roads lead to the top of the same mountain? Turning from sin is not

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<sup>10</sup> Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 88.

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required, only acceptance of your limited humanity. Prayer is a higher form talking to yourself. Church is optional. Let's all be nice and polite and not offend anyone and find a feel-good project to show what great folk we all are." You know the routine, and our children sometimes wise up and say, "If that's all it is, why bother and waste my Sundays on something trivial?" In the long run, our current efforts to create good people capable of compassion and social justice is insufficient if not rooted in convictions about who we believe God is as demonstrated in Jesus Christ. Our situation as Methodists is unstable. We have been long on ethics and short on theology, thick on the *what* and thin on the *why* and the *who*. Keeping people busy is not the same as making disciples who understand and live the faith.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**2) vv.20-24 Judgment On Resistant Villages.**

In moments of daydreaming I sometimes wonder what would happen if God was to visit the churches of Greenwood with an outpouring of divine power, not just one or two miracles, but a flood. I read credible reports about such happening elsewhere, particularly on the mission field where the faith is face to face with radical Islam and indigenous religions.<sup>11</sup> How about a little water into wine to save a wedding party, three or four dead folk raised at the emergency room, a few blind given sight, x-rays with cancers present and then gone printed in the paper for all to see; how about a few lunatics delivered of demons; you know, the kind of stuff Jesus did regularly in the villages around the northern rim of the Sea of Galilee? Maybe that would lead to an awakening and a wave of repentance here in Greenwood. If God put on a show, maybe people would start living right.

How naive of me! God is able, and such still happens— of that I have no doubt— but anyone who believes all we need is a little more fireworks has not read very far into the gospels where we soon learn that displays of divine mercy as power don't guarantee the response Jesus is looking for, which is repentance: a whole-hearted turning towards and realignment with the God who has drawn near in Jesus. The church still receives visitations at times, but we do not control their timing, number,

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<sup>11</sup> For reports from a trained theologian, see Guy Chevreau, *Turnings: The Kingdom of God and the Western World* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 2004), and by the same author *Our Eyes Fixed On Jesus: A Sideways Look at Spiritual Warfare* (Chichester, England: 2006).

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**Matthew 11:20-30** ..... **11**

or distribution. They're always surprises and serve as reminders of the hidden possibilities in even the most hopeless situations. I ask, and occasionally things happen that defy normal explanatory categories. I am very comfortable asking God to act, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *right here!*" Then I wait and watch.

If we had recordings of Jesus' tone, there would be a noticeable shift in verse 20. Harder, more insistent, frighteningly clear. The one who described himself a few verses later as *gentle and lowly in heart* was capable of scalding ridicule. And where Jesus issues correction, it's deserved. First the action, verse 20: "Then he began to upbraid the cities where most of his mighty works had been done," then the reason, "because they did not repent." In the face of the words of the kingdom and the accompanying deeds, they did not change at a heart level. God did not get what he wanted from his own people. Such is the resistance of which religious people are capable. Already know it all. Seen it all. Jesus is our neighbor, just down the shoreline at Capernaum. Visit him any time we choose. Kind of nice have a miracle worker close by; wonder what he could do with grandmother's bunion and uncle's Abe's chronic halitosis next time they come to visit? Ho-humm.

A *Woe* is a final warning, a picture of what is ahead unless things change. Its goal is to pierce the heart and wake people up. When we cry over a grave we call it *grief*, and when we look ahead to disaster and announce it ahead of time, it's a *Woe* or a *Lament*. When the U.S. Forest Service warned residents near Mount Saint Helens to evacuate it was a *Woe*, and when they went back for the bodies it was *grief*.

Now because of who Jesus is, the Son who has access- if needed- to all that the Father knows (which is everything). It's not that they wounded his pride; they have rejected the personal agent of God the Father in the person of God the Son, and when you tell a U.S. Ambassador to take a hike, you're telling the President who stands behind him to do the same, and that not safe since he's Commander in Chief. By divine revelation Jesus stands at the end of history and speaks back judgments into the present. This is where you are headed! It will go easier with the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon than for the Jewish villages of Chorazin and Bethsaida. Tyre and Sidon had the warnings of Isaiah and Ezekiel- which are substantial- but their accountability was not as high as these two towns Jesus personally visited. To pray for the presence of Jesus to increase in a church is to pray for disruption. When people in these villages were healed and delivered, heaven opened over them, but when they said no to widespread reformation, it closed, and you do not want to live in a church or town or country which languishes under a closed heaven.

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**Matthew 11:20-30** ..... **12**

“And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to death.” This was Jesus’ center of operations after he left Nazareth. Did they see themselves as beyond the need for change because he was so often in their streets, just down the hill at Peter’s house? Jesus could not have been more confrontive. When compared with Sodom, they were worse off than that great evil city on which God reigned down fire. Sodom would get off lighter on the day of judgment than Capernaum. Apparently there are degrees of judgment, but whatever the details— and we don’t know them precisely— what is clear is that the more abundant the revelation, the more exacting the judgment.

Is it possible not only for individuals but whole towns to be blind to what God is doing? Apparently so. What is the present verdict on our beloved Greenwood? I see signs of new life, and so I have hope. But I also sense the deep resistances and the easy casualness that goes with prosperity and pride of place for many. Much religiosity, little repentance. Much tradition, little sense of the fear of God. And if a preacher says anything hard about immorality or racism or poverty or greed, people seethe. How can so many churches have so little effect? It scares me.

Friends, we do not own Jesus, he’s not our national or church mascot. Capernaum didn’t, Chorazin didn’t, Bethsaida didn’t, and we don’t. Each day we are piling up a greater and greater degrees of judgment. If God was to visit us for one day with the same disdain for life that we’ve shown for the child in the womb since 1973, we would not survive. It is hanging over us like a sword, maybe a curette.

Why is no one talking about the stuff that matters? I’ll tell you why, because we’re sitting at home in front of flat screen TVs on ever-widening posteriors with a bag of Cheetos watching American Idol and Dancing With The Stars while the culture rots around them and our grandparents spin in their graves, Did we go through the Depression for this? Did we go to war against the Nazis and the Japanese for this? This country is a historical miracle, and it would surprise you how quickly our fortunes could be reversed. What will it take? Was September 11 not enough? It’s time for repentance. Time to wake up. Time for preachers to quit being cowards and ring the bell. Time to get on our knees and on our faces and to draw ever more deeply on the grace of God that is still found in local churches. Time to be the people of God and to cry for mercy for ourselves and for the people around us who have not a clue.

But a Woe is not yet a judgment, only a warning of such if nothing changes. A woe is a last chance and therefore a reminder of God’s mercy. As you skate

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towards thin ice, *Woe* is the last word you hear before a cracking sound. But forecasted futures change when people respond to God. Jesus was tough. Can we just admit that? Gentle and lowly but no wimp and not a bit cowardly about speaking his mind. The higher the access to divine revelation, the greater the accountability, and these three villages were at the top of the list in both categories. I wonder where we stand on the list?

**3) vv.25-30 The Call To Discipleship.**

It was precisely *at that time*, Matthew notes, that Jesus struck an entirely different cord, not of judgment and wrath but of open invitation for any who would respond.

Jesus began in verse 25 with a prayer of thanksgiving in which he praises God the Father for the receptive ones who did not let their learning and piety get in the way of doing business with God. It is not intelligence and learning itself that makes people resistant, only trusting in them instead of in God. The design of God is that knowledge of God comes to those who know they need it and will stoop low enough to receive it. Even to say quietly, “I know that I need you, God,” is all the opening required. Into that opening of humility light will find a way to shine. Jesus’ warning is not against intelligence or study but against pride, that hard thing in the heart that says it can do quite fine on its own. Humility and receptivity are openings for divine revelation, which means that character and virtue are in some sense prior to insight. So if you want what God has to offer, humble yourself and wait. I find that fasting and silence are great helps in preparing to receive from God. Other means of grace may prepare you. It is when I get full of myself that God goes silent, not because God has quit speaking but because I have quit listening.

In only a few places in the Gospels are we given a glimpse of Jesus’ self-understanding. Ancient biographies were not psychological and introspective; they focused primarily on outward actions and public teachings.<sup>12</sup> But in verse 27 we have Jesus referring to himself in absolute terms as *the Son* and to *the Father* in absolute terms. Jesus makes a claim to exclusive access to God the Father from inside the divine circle. There is a reciprocal and mutual knowledge between the Father and the Son to which no outsiders are privy. In effect, Jesus says knowledge of the Father is available only through himself, which if it is not true is blasphemy of the most

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<sup>12</sup> See Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel Of The Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

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flagrant form. And Jesus makes the claim without any sense of embarrassment or self-consciousness, as if it's the most natural thing in the world, "This is who I am, and this is how it operates." No one knows the Father unless Jesus reveals it to them. There is no independent access to the Father except through the Son. And it is in the activity of revealing that the hidden role of the third person inside the divine circle, the Holy Spirit, is also revealed. All true knowledge of God is by divine revelation, and if something I have said today brings change in your life, it is because the Son through the Spirit revealed something of the Father to you. Jesus is the only way to know God the way God wishes to be known. Those who claim to know God apart from Jesus are in contradiction to the central claim of Christian revelation, and so you have to choose. Jesus does not just point us to God; he comes to us and speaks to us from within the center of the divine circle. You either see that, or you don't. Reasoning can remove some of the misperceptions, but only Jesus Christ can show us the Father and welcome us into the circle of divine light and new sight. And once inside, everything looks different, as if you've been *born again* into a new world.

It is for this reason that Jesus is able to issue such a compelling invitation as that found in verses 28 through 30. Life has a way of adding its loads piece by piece until we find ourselves carrying a heavy burden and are weighed down with cares and worries. And when human religion piles on more and more and more, it's no help at all. It's one reason the presence of happy children is such a necessity for any culture. At their best they reinfect us with a sense of wonder and immediate response to life. They laugh and are curious; they ask and expect to receive. They show us how it's meant to be between us and God.

This side of Eden there is not only work but toil. Blood and tears and pain to earn our bread by the sweat of our brows. In that world animals were beasts of burden. Oxen with heavy yokes plowing side by side. Donkeys weighed down with heavy loads. Jesus knew all about yokes; he built them in the carpenter's shop. Judaism took up the image of the yoke to symbolize the discipline and submission that was required of those who would follow the law of God. And to that the scribes and Pharisees added extra burdens of regulations for those who were serious about Judaism. Jesus saw the effects of this overbearing system and offered an alternative. Not no yoke, but his yoke. Not an artificial yoke, but one custom fitted. A light load, and one yoked with you who knew the way to go. To come to Jesus to learn of God; to willingly place oneself under his discipline is what the image of the yoke is all about. We face life together; he takes the lead; I follow. In his company there is strength equal to the task. So whenever Christian faith become a heavy burden

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instead of a sustaining relationship, something's wrong. Our companion is gentle, lowly in heart, and in his strength we find encouragement to keep on keeping on. How light it feels to focus on following Jesus rather than keeping long lists of regulations. He made us; he knows how we operate best. The yoke is an image of *twoness*, and each of us is called into that kind of relationship with Jesus. Someone else to lead the way while we join in. This is what it means to be his follower.

### CONCLUSION

Pastor Clifford S. Stewart of Louisville sent his parents a microwave one Christmas. Here's how he recalls the experience:

"They were excited that now they, too, could be a part of the instant generation. When Dad unpacked the microwave and plugged it in, literally within seconds, the microwave transformed two smiles into frowns! Even after reading the directions, they couldn't make it work. Two days later, my mother was playing bridge with a friend and confessed her inability to get the microwave oven even to boil water. 'To get this darn thing to work,' she exclaimed, 'I really don't need better directions; I just needed my son to come along with the gift!'"<sup>13</sup>

When God gave the gift, he didn't send a booklet of complicated instructions for us to figure out; he sent his Son, the one to whom all things and all revelation has been committed. There's much to learn and real work to enter into, but it only makes sense in the context of a yoked relationship with Christ. It's not so much about me getting it right as about me following his lead. Each morning I ask, "What are we doing today?" And each morning he replies, "Follow me and find out." It's just the way it is. If you have a heavy burden today, ask Jesus to put his big, strong shoulder under it with you. Invite him to be your companion, your teacher, your Master, your friend. His ways are life. Don't miss the deepest meaning of your own life.

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<sup>13</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 11:25-30.

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