

# Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

## Rest \* Matthew 11:20-30

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 11. As you are turning I need to give you the heads up that you might find our passage today both surprisingly shocking and incredibly encouraging. That's because the passage deals with the two great themes of the Bible, judgment and salvation. You do realize that this is what the Bible is about, right? As Paul tells us in Romans 3, the Bible is primarily about God being both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ Jesus. And so let me say that there are going to be times this morning when we are going to be very challenged, but there are also times when we will hopefully be very encouraged. To quote the great church father Augustine, "[God] gives pain, it is true; but he only gives pain, that he may bring the patient on to health."<sup>1</sup> And that's probably how today is going to go. We are likely going to experience a little pain, but God willing it will be a good pain, a pain that leads to greater spiritual health. That said, let's read the passage together. Matthew 11, beginning with verse 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*

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner. Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12 (Kindle Locations 10133-10134). Kindle Edition.

*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.” (Matthew 11:20-30, ESV)*

Now, I assume that for most of us the verse that stands out in this passage is verse 28: *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

And that’s good because it is the focal point of the passage. It’s also good because I assume that most of us here today could use some rest. In fact, help me out a little. Can I have a show of hands for how many of us could use some rest today?

However, we need to be clear that the kind of rest Jesus is talking about is not primarily physical rest. He’s not saying, “If you need a nap come over to my house and I will make sure you get one.” No, when Jesus offers rest here in verse 28, He is offering spiritual rest. Specifically, He is offering rest from the burden of our sin. He is offering to free us from the guilt that weighs us down. He is offering rest from trying to make it through life on our own effort. Let me ask, is there anyone who needs *this* kind of rest today?

You know what, whether we will admit it or not, we all do. We all need the rest that Jesus offers. We all have sin and guilt that are weighing us down and making life a real struggle. What’s more, most of us are trying to make it through life on our own effort, but we are finding that it just doesn’t work. So listen closely – today Jesus is giving us the opportunity to trade in our burden for rest; a true, eternal rest that only He can provide. Does this sound good to you? Do you long for this kind of rest? Well, if so, let’s talk about how to get it. And in one sense, it’s pretty easy. All we have to do is come to Jesus, which on the surface sounds pretty simple.

The problem is that I don’t think we really understand what it means to come to Jesus. As Pastor Don pointed out a couple of weeks ago about

discipleship, we talk about coming to Jesus a lot but I am not so sure that we really know what we are talking about. Well, thankfully Jesus clearly tells us what it means here in our passage today. In its essence, coming to Jesus includes two components, two things that go hand in hand. We come to Jesus through faith and repentance.

## **Faith**

Let's talk about faith first. To be specific, the kind of faith that leads to rest is faith in Jesus alone. Take a look at verse 27 again:

*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.*

Now, Jesus is telling us a whole lot of important stuff here, but the big point is that the only way to God the Father is through God the Son, and He is God the Son. This is the first time in the gospels Jesus is explicit about this truth, and He is bringing it out now to show that He is the only way to salvation. And we just have to get this. Look at me. We can only be saved by believing Jesus' revealed truth about whom He and the Father really are. There is actually a word missing in our English translations that helps to bring this out even better. It's the word *really* and it should be found twice in this verse. The verse should read this way:

*No one really knows the Son except the Father, and no one really knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

This means that the one and only way we can really know God is by placing our faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Here is how Jesus explains this truth in the gospel of John:

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6, ESV)*

Listen, this is the core, foundational truth of the Christian faith. The only way to the Father, the only way of salvation, is through faith in Jesus alone.

Let's be clear about the implications of this truth. It means that despite the fact that lots of people claim to know God, the only ones who actually do are those who have placed their faith in Jesus alone. To put it another way, the only people who really know God are true Christians. Now, there may be no more controversial statement today than this. Did you catch it? I want to make sure that you did. Let me be crystal clear. The only people who really know God and experience the rest He has to offer are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ alone. There is no other way to the Father, and there is no rest to be found through any other means. And I know that it is hard to hold onto this truth today in the midst of a very hostile world, but if we let this truth go, if we compromise it in any way, we lose the only way to the Father and our only way to have rest in this life and in the life to come.

Now, let me also be clear about something else. From ministering with and to lots of believers over the years I have come to realize that while many of us trust in Jesus alone for our justification, we have a real tendency to trust in our own works for our sanctification. In other words, while we recognize that we need Jesus to save us from the penalty of sin – that's what happens in justification – for some reason we think we have to save ourselves from the power of sin. And I am convinced that this is why so many of us struggle to find rest in the day to day of our lives. You see we must trust in Jesus alone not only for our justification but also for our sanctification. Yes, the New Testament does call us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Yes, we are called to train ourselves to be godly. But we have to remember that the ability to do so comes by trusting in Jesus alone to work in and through us.

Listen, way to many of us are trying to follow Jesus on our own effort. This is the primary reason we get frustrated and discouraged and continually struggle. Instead, we need to put our own effort aside and trust in Jesus to

do in us what we cannot do on our own. We will talk more about how to do this in just a minute.

## **Repentance**

So, the first component of coming to Jesus is faith in Him alone. This leads to the second component, which is repentance. Now, before we get into detail about repentance let me point out a couple of important things. First, faith and repentance go hand in hand. In a real sense they are like the two sides of a coin. I have a quarter here. A quarter has two sides to it, right? Heads and tails. They always go together. You never get a quarter that doesn't have both. And the same is true for faith and repentance. You never get one without the other. There are times when the Bible references both together, and there are times where only one is mentioned and the other is simply implied. Either way, faith and repentance always go together.

Second, although we have a tendency to think of faith and repentance as one-time events, they are actually things we must continue to exercise regularly. While there is a moment where we place our faith in Jesus and repent of our sins and are saved, we must also continue to trust in Jesus and regularly repent of our sins on an ongoing basis. Once again this is the distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification is a once-for-all event in which, through faith and repentance, the guilt of our sin is removed and we are declared righteous in God's sight. On the other hand sanctification is an on-going process in which, through faith and repentance, the power of sin in our life is removed and we become more and more like Jesus. Make sense? The big point is that faith and repentance must both be continually present in a believers' life.

All right, so with that said let's talk about what repentance looks like. And this is where things are probably going to get a little rough. Take a look with me at verses 20-24:

*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."*

In order to understand what Jesus is getting at here you need a little background on the six cities that He mentions. Three of the cities – Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom were notoriously pagan and godless. This is especially true of Sodom, which even today is a synonym for moral depravity and perversity.

Conversely, the other three cities, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, were Jewish cities where Jesus spent a great deal of time and did most of His teaching and miracles. In fact, Capernaum was Jesus' hometown and the base for much of His ministry.

So as we consider these cities we would expect that Jesus would condemn the pagan cities and favor the Jewish ones. However, Jesus does just the opposite. And get this, He says that it will actually be worse on the day of judgment for those who have experienced His presence but haven't repented than for those who are notoriously wicked. Let's just be honest with ourselves. Many of us have grown up believing that the darkest recesses of hell are reserved for the people of Sodom and the like. If I were to ask you what the wickedest city in the Bible was most if not all of you would say Sodom. However, Jesus is saying that the people of Sodom are actually better off than those who experience His presence but fail to respond. Do you know what this means? *It means that knowledge without repentance is damning.* It means that it would be better to never hear of Jesus than to be full of knowledge about Him but fail to do anything with that knowledge. Let me be a little more specific. What Jesus is saying is that experience must lead to change. I have shared this with you before but as one of your pastors I am really concerned for the many people who come

week after week, faithfully sit in their pew, tell me, “good message” on the way out, but never seem to grab on to what the Word actually says and do anything with it. They hear what Jesus is saying, they see what Jesus is doing, and they know what Jesus is calling them to do; yet they fail to respond in any significant way. Listen, listen, listen. If this Word never moves you to change, if you can simply read and hear but never repent and change the way you are living – you are better off never hearing it in the first place.

Please don't think that simply calling yourself a Christian and coming to church means that you are good to go. If you believe that, you believe a lie right from the pit of hell itself. Knowledge without repentance is damning. Look again at verse 27:

*Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.*

By the way, these people, at least to this point, had largely received Jesus. Lot's of them were coming out to hear Him teach and watch Him perform miracles. The people in Capernaum in particular even seemed to take pride in the fact that He had chosen their city as His home base. In fact they bragged about it – that's what *exalted to heaven* likely refers to in verse 23. It was their town motto – kind of like America's “In God We Trust.” However, note what Jesus says about their future – where are they going to spend eternity? They are going to spend eternity in hell. And why? Because they failed to repent. They failed to change. They liked the experience of being around the things of Jesus, but they didn't want to make the changes that following Jesus required.

Note how the author of Hebrews addresses this same issue to professing Christians in Rome:

*For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of*

*judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27, ESV)*

Get this; if our experience of Jesus doesn't lead to repentance, we are His enemy. And there is only one thing awaiting Jesus' enemies – a fearful expectation of eternal fiery judgment.

I think Dale Bruner summarizes this well when he writes:

*The sum of the matter is this: Christians should take Jesus seriously. When they do, they escape judgment; when they do not, they invite it.*<sup>2</sup>

And so my friends please take Jesus seriously today. If you do you will you escape judgment but if you do not you will invite it.

Now, I know this is a heavy word, so let me try to move on to some encouragement. Let's talk specifically about how to repent. Our text today points us to two things.

First, repentance begins with humility. Look at verses 25-26:

*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."*

The contrast Jesus is making here is not between adults and children or between the intelligent and unintelligent, but rather between the proud and the humble. It is a contrast between those who think they can save themselves and those who clearly recognize they cannot.

Follow this. In order to come to Jesus, in order to be saved, we have to repent of trusting in ourselves – in our intelligence, in our abilities, in our own effort – and humbly accept that there is no way we can save ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner. Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12 (Kindle Location 10161). Kindle Edition.

We must become, as Jesus says in Matthew 18, like little children. In fact, here is how He explains it there:

*Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3, ESV)*

The word for turn here means repent. In other words, to enter the kingdom of heaven we must repent and become like a little child. Over the last year Eva and I have been given a fresh illustration of this truth. Although we thought we were done with diapers, Sippy cups, car seats, and getting up in the middle of the night, the Lord decided that we didn't learn enough the first time around and so we are right back in it again. Only this time we are a lot older than we were the first time. Or at least I am. Anyways, little children give us a great picture of how we are to respond to our heavenly Father. Just like little children need their parents for everything – we need Him for everything. And so we need to recognize and admit that on our own we can do nothing. That without Him we are completely helpless. That there is no way we can do this thing called life on our own. And friends, until we realize this and turn to Him for help there is no possibility that we find the rest we need.

But here is the great part about this. When we turn to God for help He always gives it. And not begrudgingly but willingly and joyfully. Let me illustrate this with a picture of my son Zane. Pretty much every day when I get home this is how he greets me. He wants me to pick him up, to hold him, and to do for him what he cannot do on his own – usually get him something to eat. Anyways, it's hard for me to explain the joy this gives me. I love to pick him up and hold him close. And even though I'm usually not supposed to, I really want to give him whatever he wants. And this is the way God responds to us; when we come and humbly ask Him to pick us up, He always does – with great joy and delight.

So, repentance begins with humility. However, it doesn't end there. True humility always leads to submission.

Look with me now at verses 28-30:

*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.*

I have something that will help to illustrate what Jesus is saying here. This is a yoke, which is a wooden harness used to keep animals under control so they can do useful work.<sup>3,4</sup> And so hopefully you get what Jesus is trying to point out here. He is using the yoke as a symbol of submission. He is telling us that if we want to have rest, we must submit to His leading. We must take on His yoke and learn from Him what it means to be His disciple. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in verse 29. Learning from Him how to live is exactly what it means to be His disciple.

Now, this all seems so simple here on paper doesn't it? I mean we just have to submit ourselves to Jesus and in return He will give us rest. It seems pretty easy, right? We just take on His yoke, follow Him, and everything will be great. I mean, His yoke is easy, His burden is light, who wouldn't want to submit to that?

Well, the truth is lots of people. And why is this the case? I have become convinced that it's because we don't really believe what Jesus says in verses 29-30. We don't believe He is a gentle master. We don't believe that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. We don't believe the rest He offers is really rest at all. In fact, I think in our hearts we often scoff at what Jesus says here, because in truth we think He is a difficult taskmaster. We think what He asks of us is too hard and unrealistic. We hear Him say rest but what it really seems to us is a lot of hard work.

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkins, Michael J. (2009-05-26). The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (NIV Application Commentary, The) (p. 423). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, John F (2004-01-06). Matthew 1-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Four Volume Set (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Serie) (Kindle Locations 20966-20968). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

But here is the truth. Life is hard no matter which way you come at it. I have said it before and I will say it again, following Jesus does not mean that life is going to be easy. In fact, I have said over and over again that following Jesus is hard. But you know what is harder, much, much harder? It's not following Jesus. Yes, it's hard to lay down our pride and our independence and submit to Jesus, but let me tell you it's a lot harder not too. That's because when we follow Jesus He gives us the strength, and the power, and help we need to make it through this life, and not just to make it through but also to do so with joy!

Let me come at it this way. We often reject following Jesus because we think that it will be too restrictive. That we won't be able to do everything we want to do. That we will have to give up our independence and the ability to do what we want to do. But what we don't understand is that these are the things that are actually killing us. These are the things that are strangling the life out of us. These are things that offer momentary happiness but at the same time lead to long-term pain and destruction.

I want you to look with me for a moment at what 1 John 5:3 tells us:

*For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3, ESV)*

Now, how is this possible? How can God's commands not be burdensome? Because instead of oppressing us they bring us great joy and freedom. You see Jesus knows what is best for us. And He gives us commands and instruction not to hinder our enjoyment but rather to maximize it.

Think of it this way. In the Carr household we have some pretty strict guidelines for the freedoms our kids have on their electronic devices. All of their devices have filtering software on them. They aren't allowed to go search through YouTube on their own. They can't download apps without Eva or I putting in a password for them. And I know that this seems oppressive to them at times and maybe even to you but it's not about restricting their freedom, it's about protecting them. Some of you really

need to get this. As their parents we know there is a lot of enjoyment they can get from the Internet but we also know that there is also a lot of danger and so we put boundaries in place to allow them to maximize their enjoyment by minimizing the danger. And you need to get the subtlety there. Did you catch it? Enjoyment is maximized when danger is minimized. That's what God does for us. He maximizes our joy by protecting us from things that will take it away. He directs us in the way we need to go not to keep us from joy but to point us towards it. I've got one more verse for you today. In John 15:11 Jesus tells His disciples:

*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (John 15:11, ESV)*

Jesus wants us to have the maximum amount of joy that we can have. He is not, despite what you may have been taught, some cosmic joy kill. But guess what? He knows that true joy is only found by resting in Him. Note that it is His joy, His joy in us. And this joy comes only from a humble submission to His leading in our lives.

And so I want to leave you with this today. I have to believe many of us need the rest that Jesus offers. We are a very restless people. We are running all over the place filling our lives with activity after activity and thing after thing, but when we lay our heads on our pillows at night we only grow more anxious and restless. And so I want to encourage you today to simply stop and commit to follow Jesus' leading today. Decide to take on His yoke and to do things His way. Fight against your pride and your determination to do things your way, and give His way a chance. Take Him at His Word and allow Him to lead you in His gentle, tender, humble way. Receive the rest and joy He offers today.

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