

God Is at Work in the Gospel

Matthew 11:25-30

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: "From All Thy Saints in Warfare," *ELH* #558

Let us pray: Dearest Jesus, we praise you that you have taken our burden, so that now whatever burden we bear, yoked to you, is not too heavy. Continue to strengthen and carry us throughout our lives. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ. Amen.

The Text: From the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the 11th chapter, beginning with the 25th verse:

At that time, Jesus continued, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from clever and learned people and have revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, because this was pleasing to you. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father

except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

These are your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth.

Amen.

I'm sure you all feel this way: you look around and see empty seats in the pews. Many of you can probably remember a time when those seats were crammed full, when the voice of the congregation boomed, when the Sunday School was almost unmanageable for all the children involved. Now, it seems, we no longer have these

blessings. So what's wrong? What happened? Did we mess up somewhere along the lines? Did one pastor or another drive people out? Was there infighting amongst different parties in the congregation that caused a split? Did parents feel that their children weren't getting what they needed here? Did the older people feel ignored?

Whatever the cause, something, it seems, has caused the church to start to fail. And it's not just us. Across the country, it seems, churches are shrinking, even dying out. What happened?

I want you to think of the Church in its earliest days – the days when Jesus walked the earth with his apostles. There was a time for them, too, that it seemed like the Church had failed. Jesus was in a garden, praying, and one of his apostles, Judas, came to him with a friendly greeting and a kiss. At that signal, soldiers arrested Jesus, and after a brief fight in which Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (Matt. 26:56). *That does it*, they certainly thought. *Our religion is dead*. A following that seemed at one time to be growing, and now each one of them felt as though they were the last.

We preach the Gospel, right? Why doesn't that seem to be working?

Understandably, we worry about the success of the Gospel, but look instead what Jesus does: after the disciples returned from preaching the Gospel to various towns around Israel, Jesus prayed, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from clever and learned people and have revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, because this was pleasing to you." Let us learn from Jesus to trust that **God is at work in the Gospel**.

I. Who Is He That Calls?

God is at work. The Father is in charge. This sinful world has not defeated him or caused the Gospel to fail. Instead, “it is the Father’s good pleasure to hide the truth from those who regard themselves as wise and understanding, and to reveal it to those who have no wisdom of their own, that is, to infants.”¹ Let me state very plainly, that when we see the sad state of affairs with churches shrinking and dying, our sorrows are legitimate. We have reason to weep over those who reject the Gospel of our Savior, as Jesus wept over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37). This is a real pain we feel, to see the Gospel rejected. But let us remember whose work it is, and who it is that offers the call of the Gospel:

“Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father,” Jesus said. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him.” There are two points to be made about Jesus’ prayer at the beginning of our text: First, let us recognize how deadly it is for us to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. It is so tempting for churches, and not only ours, to see the numbers shrink and to wonder, “What can we do?” and then to start planning various strategies. *What if we offered more youth programs? What if we installed various technological aids? What if we changed something about the Divine Service?* I don’t want to

¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34* (St. Louis: CPH, 2010), 585.

imply that we can't do different things in our congregation, but let us beware lest we think that *our* efforts somehow will change the souls. If we start to believe that *we* are the ones that convert people, then we are turning ourselves into the "clever and learned" from whom the Gospel is hidden.

Only Jesus gives the Gospel. *Only Jesus* is truly wise. *Only Jesus* can convert a soul. Think of how you were converted. Was it your own decision? Did you make a pros and cons list of all the religions and lifestyles in the world and decide, "Christianity is the one that will give me the greatest success and happiness"? No. Not only is that conclusion untrue (because frequently Christians are amongst the unhappiest people in a worldly sense), but the process for you to make such a decision is impossible. *We cannot grasp our own salvation by our own wisdom.* Instead who receives the Gospel? "Little children." These "little children," or "infants," really, are those "who are unable and insufficient in themselves to accomplish anything good."² The saved are those who are made aware that they cannot save themselves, and are made to rest on Jesus and his merits alone.

Because Jesus is united to the Father in a mysterious way – as we confess in our Creeds, he is "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God," and "there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one; the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit."

² Ibid., 587.

The work belongs to him. It is Jesus who calls. It is Jesus who makes disciples. It is Jesus who creates faith. None of the responsibility – absolutely none – rests upon us. We cannot save ourselves or anyone else. It is all the work of Christ. “Ultimately, all the praise and glory belong to God. And despite appearances to the contrary, whether opposition to the Gospel occurs in first-century Israel or in the twenty-first century in the Americas or elsewhere, wherever Christ’s good news is proclaimed, the Father *is* at work.”³

He is at work in Christ. Christ Jesus, the one who came to earth of his own volition – no one went up to heaven to bring him down! Christ Jesus, who went willingly to the cross – no one took his life from him, but he laid it down (John 10:18). Christ Jesus, who rose from the dead under his own power – no one went after him into the grave to bring him up. This same Christ Jesus gives you his Gospel, his grace, his forgiveness of sins, his life, without you having to coax it from him, beg for it from him, or reason with him as to why he should give it to you. He *gives it* freely.

Let us remember, yes, that it is Christ Jesus himself who calls, and his is the glory and the work. Look therefore also at what he offers.

II. What Does He Offer?

“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and

³ Ibid., 588.

you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Who can express what great comfort is offered in these words?

“Come to me,” he says. We’ve already seen that salvation is found in no one else, so why should we come after someone else? We cannot save ourselves, and no one else can save us, so let us go after Jesus only.

Who is he calling? “All you who are weary and burdened.” The heaviest burden we bear is that of sin: David said of his: “There is no wellness in my bones because of my sin, because my guilt has gone over my head. Like a heavy burden, it is too heavy for me” (Ps. 38:3, 4). He describes the weight and burden of his sin in extreme terms, coming to the point of saying, “I am totally crushed” (Ps. 38:8). Let us confess this of ourselves. We are totally crushed under our sins. We are totally crushed over the burdens of this world. We cannot bear up under them.

But it is just such as us that Jesus calls. No sin or burden is too great. Don’t even begin to think of yourself, “It can’t be me. This Gospel call can’t be for me, because my sin is too big.” No, listen to Jesus’ words: “Come to me *all* you who are weary and burdened.” This Gospel call is offered to *all*. There is no exception.

So what can we expect to find when we come to Jesus? “I will give you rest,” he says.

If sin alarms you, I came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). If the wrath of God oppresses you, I have with My blood dried up the flood of divine wrath and reconciled you to God by My blood (Rom. 5:10). If the Law accuses, I am the end of the Law; everyone who has faith is justified (Rom. 10:4). If your heart is bruised and broken, I will heal your heart and bind up your wounds (Ps. 147:3). If the devil pur-

sues you as a roaring lion, I am the Lion of the tribe of Judah, I will defend you (Rev. 5:5). If your soul thirsts and pants like a dry and parched land, I will give to the thirsty of the water of life freely (Rev. 22:1). If your conscience is distressed and troubled, I, as the heavenly Samaritan, will sprinkle the balsam of heavenly comfort over it (Luke 10:34). If you are like an intimidated dove, I am the Rock of Salvation in whose clefts, My wounds, you may hide (Song of Sol. 2:14). If you are in fear and need, I am with you and will deliver you (Ps. 91:15). If you are in peril, fear not, I will deliver you; when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Is. 43:1, 2). If you are hated by the world, My grace is sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:9). If you are in peril of death, be of good cheer, I live, and you will live also (John 14:19). If you fear that you may be separated from Me, I am your faithful Shepherd; My sheep no one shall snatch out of My hand (John 10:28).⁴

But there's an irony here: Jesus says, You are burdened? Come and take *my* yoke upon you. Isn't that silly? We are so weary and heavy laden, Jesus wants to put *another yoke* on us? But this yoke that he gives us is precisely to learn what he is like: learn of his gentleness and humility. He is this way because he is taking our burdens onto himself, suffering for them, dying for them, and destroying them in his death so that in his resurrection he can give us his life. Note this paradox: taking the yoke of Jesus onto ourselves *lightens* the burdens of life and eternity, because of who he is. He is the Savior who has taken our sin onto himself, and so now when we follow him, and that does include suffering with him for the sake of the Gospel, even suffering the loss of friends

⁴ Johann Gerhard, "Sermon on the Holy Gospel [for St. Matthias, the Apostle]," in Fred H. Lindemann, *The Sermon and the Propers*, Volume II: Pre-Lent to Pentecost (St. Louis: CPH, 1966), 155.

and fellow members in a shrinking church, we do have the lightness of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

When churches shrink and seem to die, let us remember the truth of death and life. We by nature are already dead in our trespasses and sins. But Jesus by his life, death, and resurrection, has brought us to life through the power of the Gospel. Let us not despair, but see that Jesus continues to call with his Gospel. He calls you. He calls your neighbors. He calls the whole world. Let us rejoice in the Gospel that calls to give us rest.

Amen. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

The Prayer of the Church, p. 48

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