

## Historic Commentary

(Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

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Commentary on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 11](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

**Jerome:** The comparison of children sitting in the marketplace, shouting and saying to their peers, “We sang for you and you did not dance, we lamented and you did not mourn” is made with that generation of Jews in mind. Recall the Scripture that says, “To what will I compare this generation? It is like the children sitting in the marketplace,” and the rest. We are not offered a complete understanding or a shared interpretation of allegory. But whatever we say about children should be related to their comparison with “this generation.” Those children who are sitting in the marketplace are the ones of whom the prophet Isaiah speaks: “Behold, I and my children, whom God has given me.” And also the psalm: “The testimony of God is faithful, giving wisdom to children.” And elsewhere: “Out of the mouth of babies and sucklings you have achieved glory.” So those children sat in the marketplace or in the agora, which is described in Greek more plainly as where there are many items for sale. Because the Jews did not want to listen, the children not only spoke but shouted to them, at the top of their voices: “We sang to you, and you did not dance.” We challenged you to do good deeds at the sound of our song and to dance to our flute, just as David danced before the ark of the Lord, and you did not want to. “We lamented” and we challenged you to seek repentance, and you did not want to do even this, rejecting both proclamations, which were an exhortation as much to goodness as to repentance after committing a sin. It is no wonder you have despised the dual path to salvation since you scorned poverty and wealth alike. If you are pleased with poverty, why did John displease you? If wealth pleases you, why did the Son of Man displease you? You called one of these a man with a demon, the other a glutton and a drunkard. Therefore, because you did not want to accept either teaching, “wisdom has been vindicated by her

children,” that is, the direction and teaching of God. I, who am the glory of God and the wisdom of God, have been acknowledged to have acted justly by my sons, the apostles, to whom my Father unveiled what he had hidden from wise, experienced people.

Cyril of Alexandria: When some children are dancing and others are singing a dirge, their purpose does not agree. Both sides find fault with their friends for not being in harmony with them. So the Jews underwent such an experience when they accepted neither the gloominess of John the Baptist nor the freedom of Christ. They did not receive help one way or another. It was fitting for John as a lowly servant to deaden the passions of the body through very hardy training, and for Christ by the power of his Godhead freely to mortify the sensations of the body and the innate practice of the flesh, and to do so without reliance on strenuous ascetic labors. Nevertheless John, “while he was preaching the baptism of repentance,” offered himself as a model for those who were obliged to lament, whereas the Lord “who was preaching the kingdom of heaven” similarly displayed radiant freedom in himself. In this way Jesus outlined for the faithful indescribable joy and an untroubled life. The sweetness of the kingdom of heaven is like a flute. The pain of Gehenna is like a dirge.

Hilary of Poitiers: “Wisdom has been vindicated by her children.” Those who resist the kingdom of heaven tear apart heaven itself in attempting to justify themselves. The action of Wisdom is just, because she has transferred her gift from the obstinate and faithless to the faithful and obedient covenant people. However, it is useful in this place to consider carefully the virtue of the remark “Wisdom has been proved right by her actions,” which Jesus certainly said about himself. For Jesus is Wisdom itself not because of his acts of power but by his very nature.<sup>67</sup> Everything has capability, but capability is demonstrated in actions. Thus an act of goodness is not the same as goodness itself, just as an effect is distinguishable from its cause.

Augustine: Jesus says, “My Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” Father of him through whom all things were made. Surely all creation is embraced by these two nouns heaven and earth. Therefore the first book of God’s Scripture says, “In the beginning God made heaven and earth.” And “my help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”<sup>3</sup> By the name of heaven is understood whatever is in heaven, and by the name of earth is understood whatever is on earth. Thus, by mentioning these two parts of creation no aspect of creation is overlooked, since the created object is either here or there.

Moreover, when the Son speaks to his Father his confession, Jesus admonishes us that confession is owed to God not for our sins alone. For very often when it is heard in the Scriptures, “You shall confess to the Lord,” many who hear this beat their breasts in remorse. They do not recall that the term confession means anything else except their accustomed use when they show repentance, confessing their sins and awaiting their just deserts from God, not because they deserve to suffer but because God deems it worthy to act mercifully. But if there were not confession in the act of praise, Jesus would not say, “I confess to you, Father,” since he had no sin to confess. It is said in another book of the Scripture: “You shall confess to the Lord” and say in your confession that “all the works of the Lord are very good.” This is certainly a confession of praise and not of fault.

Cyril of Alexandria: He employs the phrase “I confess you” in accordance with human custom. Instead of saying “I acknowledge you,” he brings in the phrase “I glorify you.” For it is customary in the divinely inspired Scripture for the word confession to be taken in some such a sense. It is written, “Let the people give thanks,” Lord, “to your great name, because it is formidable and holy.” And again, “I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart.” But those who are perverted in mind say, “Look here, if he renders thanks to the Father, how then is he not less than the Father?” To this objection one who knows how to guard the doctrines of truth might say, “My good man, what prevents the consubstantial Son from accepting and praising his own Father, who through him saves what is under heaven? If you believe because of this confession that he is in a lesser position than the Father, look also at what comes next. Jesus acknowledges and calls his Father Lord of heaven and earth. For he confesses him as ‘Lord of heaven and earth’ and at the same time he calls upon him as ‘Father.’ But the Son of God who is ruler of all is in every way with him the Lord and Master of all, not as one worse or differing in substance, but as God from God. He is crowned with equal renown, having substantially with him equality in everything whatsoever.”

Jerome: The Father entrusts. The Son receives. What is entrusted? All things have been entrusted to the Son, but this does not mean cosmically heaven and earth and the elements and the rest of nature which God himself made and established. Rather, it refers personally to the people who have access to the Father through the Son and who were formerly rebellious but afterward began to know God.

Chrysostom: This may seem to the uninitiated quite disconnected with the passage that went before, but the two stand in full accord. Having said “all things have been delivered to me by my Father,” he adds, “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.” In this he is quietly signifying his great privilege of knowing the Father and being of the same substance with him, he being the only One who knows the Father so intimately....

Note the timing and context in which he said this. It was just after he had worked miracles and the disciples of John had received proofs of his might by his works. He then thanks the Father that “that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.”

Cyril of Alexandria: The one who sees the Son, who has the image of the Father in himself, sees the Father himself.... These things are to be understood in a manner befitting to God. He said, “Everything has been handed down to me” so that he might not seem to be a member of a different species or inferior to the Father. Jesus added this in order to show that his nature is ineffable and inconceivable, like the Father’s. For only the divine nature of the Trinity comprehends itself. Only the Father knows his own Son, the fruit of his own substance. Only the divine Son recognizes the One by whom he has been begotten. Only the Holy Spirit knows the deep things of God, the thought of the Father and the Son.

Augustine: You are to “take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” You are not learning from me how to refashion the fabric of the world, nor to create all things visible and invisible, nor to work miracles and raise the dead. Rather, you are simply learning of me: “that I am meek and lowly in heart.” If you wish to reach high, then begin at the lowest level. If you are trying to construct some mighty edifice in height, you will begin with the lowest foundation. This is humility. However great the mass of the building you may wish to design or erect, the taller the building is to be, the deeper you will dig the foundation. The building in the course of its erection rises up high, but he who digs its foundation must first go down very low. So then, you see even a building is low before it is high and the tower is raised only after humiliation.

Cyril of Alexandria: Stand apart from the inclination to love sin and to love the flesh. Turn to deeds worthy of praise. Draw near to me, so that you may become sharers of the divine nature and partakers of the Holy Spirit. Jesus called everyone, not only the people of Israel. As the Maker and Lord of all, he spoke to the weary Jews who did not have the

strength to bear the yoke of the law. He spoke to idolaters heavy laden and oppressed by the devil and weighed down by the multitude of their sins. To Jews he said, “Obtain the profit of my coming to you. Bow down to the truth. Acknowledge your Advocate and Lord. I set you free from bondage under the law, bondage in which you endured a great deal of toil and hardship, unable to accomplish it easily and accumulating for yourselves a very great burden of sins.”

John Calvin: To what shall I compare? He does not include all the men of his age, but speaks particularly of the scribes and their followers. He charges them with this reproach, that while the Lord endeavored, by various methods, to draw them to himself, they repelled his grace with incorrigible obstinacy. He employs a comparison, which was probably taken from a common amusement of children; for there is probability in the conjecture, that the children divided themselves into two bands, and sang in that manner. And, indeed, I think that, in order to abase the pride of the scribes, Christ intentionally borrowed from children the materials of his reproof: thus declaring that, however distinguished they were, nothing more was necessary to condemn them than a song which children were wont to sing in the market-place for their amusement.

We are constantly looking for splendor; and nothing appears to us more incongruous, than that the heavenly kingdom of the Son of God, whose glory is so magnificently celebrated by the prophets, should consist of the dregs and offscourings of the common people. And truly it is a wonderful purpose of God, that though he has the whole world at his command, he chooses rather to select a peculiar people to himself from among the contemptible vulgar, than from the nobility, whose high rank would have been a greater ornament to the name of Christ. But here Christ withdraws his disciples from a proud and haughty imagination, that they may not venture to despise that mean and obscure condition of his Church, in which he delights and rejoices. To restrain more fully that curiosity which is constantly springing up in the minds of men, he rises above the world, and contemplates the secret decrees of God, that he may lead others to unite with him in admiring them. And certainly, though this appointment of God contradicts our senses, we discover not only blind arrogance, but excessive madness, if we murmur against it, while Christ our Head adores it with reverence.

Come to me all that labor He now kindly invites to himself those whom he acknowledges to be fit for becoming his disciples. Though he is ready to reveal the Father to all, yet the

greater part are careless about coming to him, because they are not affected by a conviction of their necessities. Hypocrites give themselves no concern about Christ, because they are intoxicated with their own righteousness, and neither hunger nor thirst (Matthew 5:6) for his grace. Those who are devoted to the world set no value on heavenly life. It would be in vain, therefore, for Christ to invite either of these classes, and therefore he turns to the wretched and afflicted. He speaks of them as laboring, or groaning under a burden, and does not mean generally those who are oppressed with grief and vexations, but those who are overwhelmed by their sins, who are filled with alarm at the wrath of God, and are ready to sink under so weighty a burden. There are various methods, indeed, by which God humbles his elect; but as the greater part of those who are loaded with afflictions still remain obstinate and rebellious, Christ means by persons laboring and burdened, those whose consciences are distressed by their exposure to eternal death, and who are inwardly so pressed down by their miseries that they faint; for this very fainting prepares them for receiving his grace. He tells us that the reason why most men despise his grace is, that they are not sensible of their poverty; but that there is no reason why their pride or folly should keep back afflicted souls that long for relief.

Take my yoke upon you. Many persons, we perceive, abuse the grace of Christ by turning it into an indulgence of the flesh; and therefore Christ, after promising joyful rest to wretchedly distressed consciences, reminds them, at the same time, that he is their Deliverer on condition of their submitting to his yoke. He does not, he tells us, absolve men from their sins in such a manner, that, restored to the favor of God, they may sin with greater freedom, but that, raised up by his grace, they may also take his yoke upon them, and that, being free in spirit, they may restrain the licentiousness of their flesh. And hence we obtain a definition of that rest of which he had spoken. It is not at all intended to exempt the disciples of Christ from the warfare of the flesh, that they may enjoy themselves at their ease, but to train them under the burden of discipline, and keep them under the yoke.

Learn of me. It is a mistake, I think, to suppose that Christ here assures us of his meekness, lest his disciples, under the influence of that fear which is usually experienced in approaching persons of distinction, should remain at a distance from him on account of his Divine glory. It is rather his design to form us to the imitation of himself, because the obstinacy of the flesh leads us to shrink from his yoke as harsh and uneasy. Shortly afterwards, he adds, (verse 30,) my yoke is easy But how shall any man be brought

willingly and gently to bend his neck, unless, by putting on meekness, he be conformed to Christ? That this is the meaning of the words is plain; for Christ, after exhorting his disciples to bear his yoke, and desirous to prevent them from being deterred by its difficulty, immediately adds, Learn of me; thus declaring that, when his example shall have accustomed us to meekness and humility, we shall no longer feel his yoke to be troublesome. To the same purpose he adds, I will relieve you So long as the flesh kicks, we rebel; and those who refuse the yoke of Christ, and endeavor to appease God in any other manner, distress and waste themselves in vain.