Bible Study: Luther’s Five Favorite Verses

Week Three: Faith Alone

Matthew 11:29-30

*29 (Jesus said) “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

1. Background on Matthew’s Gospel
   1. Matthew’s place within the bible
      1. Matthew is one of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
      2. What makes a Gospel a Gospel is that it tells the story of Jesus death and resurrection
         1. All four have this in common.
         2. Little of Matthew is unique. Most of it is also in Luke and Mark.
         3. There are Gospels not in the bible
      3. Matthew is the first in order
         1. It was placed there because in it, salvation is communal. Church liked this, promoted membership
         2. Also asserts the primacy of Peter.
         3. For these reasons, it’s the book that best fits Catholicism
      4. Is a gap between OT and NT of around 500 years. Most recent OT events are Nehemiah, took place in around 450 BC. This period between the Testaments is called the Intertestamental Period, much is in the Apocrypha
   2. Writer
      1. Matthew was probably written around AD 70-100. Oldest surviving fragments are from the 4th century. This writing date is believed to be true because it took place after the temple fell in 70, and it seems to have been written to second generation Christians, not first
         1. Suspect this because one theme is the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in one community. This wasn’t necessary until the second generation, split wasn’t that big until then
      2. This means that this Gospel- and indeed all but Mark- were likely written AFTER the authentic writings of Paul. So if you believe that writings written closer to the date of the event are more accurate, Paul is best. Given the amount of books still coming out about historical people and events that we seem to accept as more accurate, I’m not sure this is a solid approach, but it is one taken by many biblical scholars (with whom I disagree).
      3. Gospel itself doesn’t say who wrote it. Attributed to Matthew the Tax collector well after 100. May or may not have been. Don’t know.
      4. Example: Pastorals contain word Presbuteros, never appears in the seven Pauline letters, but it does in all three Pastorals
      5. Some unique things: refers to a "church" (ecclesia), an organised group with rules for keeping order; and the content of "M" suggests that this community was strict in keeping the Jewish law, holding that they must exceed the scribes and the Pharisees in "righteousness" (adherence to Jewish law).
   3. Intended readers
      1. The author of Matthew wrote for a community of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians located probably in Syria (Antioch, the largest city in Roman Syria and the third-largest in the empire, is often mentioned)
      2. How we know he was Jewish: Unlike Mark, he never bothers to explain Jewish customs, since his intended audience was a Jewish one. Also he traces Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, father of the Jews;
2. Setting of This Verse Within the Gospel
   1. Matthew is broken into five sections. Each end of each section is the words "When Jesus had finished saying these things...". Each section begins with a story about Jesus and then him giving a speech. This five-fold division corresponds in a general way to the divisions found in various parts of the Old Testament.
   2. Chapters 1-4 in Matthew mainly deal with Jesus’s background, birth and the events of his early life. The genealogy goes all the way back to Abraham on Joseph’s side, which is interesting given that Jesus is not the son of Joseph. Also, Jesus is the Greek version of Joshua. Odds are his name was Joshua.
   3. Chapters 5-7 is the Sermon on the Mount.
   4. First verses of Chapter 11 is 7:28-29, “Now when Jesus had finished instructing his disciples, he went on...”
   5. This section goes until 13:53. It does not end precisely with the end of Chapter 13 because chapter and verse were done by Archbishop Langton in the 13th century and he just sort of did it the way he wanted. Before then, there were no chapters or verses. And in the original Greek, there were no capital letters or punctuation.
   6. Chapter 11 & 12 are the story portion. This section is the transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Jesus. A passing of the torch.
   7. Chapter 13 is Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, which in Mark and Luke is the Kingdom of God.
   8. And Chapter 14 begins with the death of John the Baptist, making the transition from John to Jesus complete.
3. Read Matthew 11:20-30. This is the cradle of this verse within the third division.
   1. Jesus has been talking about John the Baptist, and about how John suffered for it
   2. \*read 11:20-24\*
   3. In this passage Jesus is basically saying, yeah, John had it bad, but not doing what God wants is even worse. Which is not very uplifting, but hey, life isn’t rainbows
   4. \*read 11:25-30\*
   5. Now here comes the hope. Jesus says here that in the midst of the sufferings we will endure following Jesus, that it still feels like an easy burden. He tells us that the struggle of following, while still a struggle, is easier than the alternative. And he says that though it will be hard, we will have peace in our hearts.
   6. This peace is described later by those who witnessed the death of some of the earliest martyrs of the Christian faith. They went to their deaths joyfully, gladly, because they had this peace Christ describes.
   7. Finally, the concept of a Yoke is important. A rabbi would refer to their teaching as their “yoke.” So the teaching of Scott would be “Scott’s yoke,” and if you wanted to be my disciple, you would “take on Scott’s yoke.” So that Jesus is really saying here is that following him, being his disciple, is a light burden. Remember the earlier parts of this chapter when you think about that.
4. Luther’s Life and Comments:
   1. The Catholic church during Luther’s life used a lot of guilt and shame. There was a heavy emphasis on sinfulness and the consequences of sin, namely purgatory.
   2. As I discussed last week, indulgences, relics, and pilgrimages were how a lot of people made their money, but that money making machine started with this guilt
   3. Luther himself felt very guilty, and that he was undeserving of God’s perfect love. He felt a lot of shame and guilt.
   4. This verse taught him that the Gospel is Good News, and is meant to free people from guilt and sin.
5. Summary
   1. Matthew 11 is set where the baton is being passed from John the Baptist to Jesus.
   2. Jesus promises that trials will face those who follow him, but it is better to proceed in faith, because the yoke Jesus gives us makes our life better, not worse
   3. This knowledge freed Luther from doubt and fear, and left him happy for the first time in his life.