

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus speaks in our Gospel text both to those who are the “*wise and understanding*” and to the “*little children*,” both to the comfortable and self-satisfied and to “*all who labor and are heavy laden*.” The former remain in ignorance; the latter “*find rest for their souls*.”

Now in verse 1 of Matthew 11, we hear that Jesus is teaching and preaching in the cities of Galilee. Remember, He had sent His disciples out to proclaim the coming kingdom, and then He Himself went out and preached. Shortly thereafter, some of John the Baptist’s disciples came to Jesus, and He sent them back with a report: “*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk*” (Matt. 11:4-5), and so forth. He then teaches a bit about John and his prophetic, preparatory ministry.

But then He lambasts those Galilean cities for their unbelief. They had witnessed Jesus’ miracles, and yet they refused to repent (Matt. 11:20). “*Woe to you*,” Jesus said to them. “*If the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you*” (Matt. 11:21, 23-24).

Jesus then turns to the Father prayer, teaching us as He does: “*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*.”

Now Jesus is not promoting an anti-intellectualism here, especially when it comes to God’s word. He’s not promoting foolishness and ignorance. But there is something about the “*wise and understanding*” that makes the kingdom of heaven so hard to attain. No, He’s not promoting foolishness or ignorance, but Jesus is saying that the wise and understanding are actually fools and ignorant about God’s promise of salvation.

How easy it is for the “*wise and understanding*,” the rich and powerful, the talented and popular, who rely on these things to advance in the world, to also rely on these things before God. But that makes these things idols, as Luther teaches about the First Commandment: “whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god” (Large Catechism, Part 1, 1st Commandment, 3).

But the Lord our God is a jealous God. And so the Blessed Virgin sings, God scatters “*the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*”; He brings “*down the mighty from their thrones*” (Luke 1:51-52). Jesus teaches, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... I came not to call the righteous,*” — that is, those who think they are righteous — “*but sinners*” (Matt. 9:12-13). And

again, He said to the Pharisees, *“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains”* (John 9:39, 41).

Jesus calls sinners to *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt. 4:17), and yet these *“wise and understanding”* would not do it; they would not confess their sins; they would not admit, *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*

Paul, on the other hand, did — those are his words. And he challenges those *“wise and understanding”* who think they are so special before God: *“If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless”* (Phil. 3:4-6).

And yet, he says, I deserve death even for that, for I am a sinner, *“for I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” “Who will deliver me ... ?”* Paul was laboring under the burden of sin, laden down with guilt. In the weakness of his flesh, he couldn’t even do right when he knew what was right and wanted to do right thing.

But then, almost as if he had heard the invitation, *Come to me,*” Paul turns to Jesus: *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* The truth no longer hidden, the veil pulled back, Paul had become as a little child before God — not innocent, for we know children aren’t sinless, but humble before God, completely dependent on Him.

You can almost hear the relief in Paul’s response, relief from all his endless striving for a standard of sinless perfection that ordinary flesh cannot attain! *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,”* Paul exclaimed. That righteousness comes through Jesus. Burdened with sin that not even Pharisaic-zeal could remove, he turned to Jesus and found His rest. And so shall we. Jesus invites us also to find our rest in Him

Of course, to speak of rest is to speak about the Sabbath, and Matthew takes us there immediately in the next chapter. The Pharisees challenged Jesus and His disciples about their disregard for the Jewish Sabbath rules. Jesus instructed them that He who is greater than David is here; He who is greater than the temple itself is here. Jesus instructed them that He is Lord even of the Sabbath.

In fact, St. Paul teaches us that the Sabbath that God established on the seventh day and codified in the commandment was but a shadow of what was to come; it was really all about Christ; Christ is the substance (Col. 2:16-17)! Thus Christ says, “*Come to me*” for your rest. “*Come to me,*” Jesus says, “who for your sake labored and was heavy laden with the sins of the world and bore them to a cross.” “*Come to me,*” He says, “whose body lay asleep in a tomb, resting from my work of redemption, resting on the seventh day, even as I had done in the beginning at the creation.” “*Come to me,*” Jesus says, and “*learn from me*”; “believe in Me and you will ‘*enter that rest*’” (Heb. 4:3). That’s the yoke Jesus places upon us — merely to believe, to be a disciple, to learn from Him — and that yoke is easy; that burden is light — so light, indeed, that it, too, is God’s gift to sinners.

What a gracious invitation! What a comforting promise! Indeed, this is one of my “go to” passages of the Scriptures. I love it. Yet, some reject it. Who would reject such an invitation? The “*wise and understanding,*” filled with the “*wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age*” (1 Cor. 2:6). For to come to Jesus is to come to the One crucified in weakness. It’s to believe the foolish message of the cross. It’s to boast not in oneself, but in the Lord alone. It’s to trust not “*in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*” (1 Cor. 2:5). It’s to trust like a child in what the Lord of heaven and earth has revealed — that the message of Christ crucified is “*the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1 Cor. 1:24), and that message saves all who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).

Jesus’ words today are a warning to the wise and understanding, but are a comfort to the weary and heavy laden. May God ever reveal these things to us by Word and Sacrament, and may we receive them as little children, finding our eternal rest in Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.