

Thanksgiving

To Whom and For What

Matthew Chapter 11

25 At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. **26** Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

馬太福音 第十一章

25 那時耶穌說：父阿，天地的主，我感謝祢，因為祢將這些事，向聰明通達人就藏起來，向嬰孩就顯出來。 **26** 父阿，是的，因為祢的美意本是如此。

Matthew Chapter 11

27 All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and *he* to whomsoever the Son will reveal *him*. **28** Come unto me, all *ye* that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

馬太福音第十一章

27 一切所有的,都是我父交付我的,除了父,沒有人知道子,除了子和子所願意指示的,沒有人知道父, **28** 凡勞苦擔重擔的人,可以到我這裡來,我就使你們得安息.

Matthew Chapter 11

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. **30** For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.

馬太福音第十一章

29 我心裡柔和謙卑, 你們當負我的軛, 學我的樣式, 這樣, 你們就必得享安息. **30** 因為我的軛是容易的, 我的擔子是輕省的.

Today we worship and give thanks not just because it is the Sunday closest to Thanksgiving, but also to celebrate how our Lord God has manifested Himself to us through His grace to our church in the past 30 years.

The passage chosen today is not a typical one for this season or occasion, but chosen because it helps us focus on the essence of Thanksgiving rather than on the wrong or at best secondary instead of primary reason, not to mention the folly of giving thanks to any person or persons as none qualify.

Looking at the context of this chapter, one can see clearly how easy it is to have the wrong focus. Going still further back than this chapter, we see that in chapter ten, the Lord has sent out the twelve disciples to bring the good news that the Kingdom of God is near to God's chosen instruments of His grace.

This should cause us to ask ourselves: as God's new chosen instruments of His grace, am I willing to be sent out like these disciples for spreading the good news? Or am I a closet Christian, or at best, a Sunday Christian, or even more accurately a Sunday morning Christian?

In this culture, we are all too often brain washed by society to think that it is only when we get things or have it our ways that we need to be thankful. For some, there is an added condition, they better be exactly WHAT we want and may be even more importantly, WHEN we want it.

Unfortunately, such poor attitude affects even our prayer lives. Many of our prayers have become asking God for this and that and we forget that the most precious gift is already ours: His only beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, whose birth we will be celebrating in less than one month.

But, how do we celebrate? Buy gifts and expect to be given gifts? Some of us may even be giving hints to those we expect to get gifts from, as to what we would like to get for Christmas gift or gifts, maybe including the model and make and other specifications. Isn't that sad, or even sick?

Now, let us get back to this passage. If you have suffered anxiety or depression in your own experience, you probably think that the situation our Lord Jesus found Himself in at the time this passage describes is a real good reason for having an anxiety attack or an outright depression.

However, neither did He give up nor allow Himself to become depressed. What is His secret? The passage we have in front of us can give us some clues as well as serve as a recipe against anxiety attacks and decreasing the likelihood of having depression.

First of all, let us take stock of what the situation was like. Our Lord just sent out His twelve disciples to do their first job. They are to go around the country side in pairs to evangelize, or to use simpler term, to tell the good news of God fulfilling His promise in bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Of course, the first step would be to help their listeners understand the promise of the Old Testament. Many of them have not been going to the synagogue regularly, their knowledge of the Old Testament is at best sketchy and very much polluted by rules of the Pharisee or ritualistic substitutions, etc.

Like many in America, they may be too contended in their daily lives and have not given much thought to God's salvation, maybe only when tax time comes around and they feel oppressed by the Roman government, and then long for their own country to be freed from being a colony of the Romans.

But other than that, maybe they have lost their identity as God's chosen people. Therefore It is not going to be an easy job for the twelve disciples and it would be very natural if their master, our Lord Jesus, Who sent them out, to feel a little anxious as to whether they can do the job or not.

Now, after He sent them out, He was not idly waiting for their reports, He also continued to evangelize the countryside himself. In fact, He performed many miracles and healings and preached His unforgettable sermons loaded with great, down to earth illustrations, known as parables.

Unfortunately, He did not get an acceptable response. Now, if you were in His shoes, would you not feel depressed? Would that not add to your worry that His disciples are having the same receptions and getting more and more discouraged? How would you take it if you were in Jesus' shoes?

Like they say, it never rains, it pours. Just at this time, His forerunner, John the Baptist, who was in prison and most likely facing a violent death, was more than depressed. He sent his own disciples to ask if Jesus is indeed the Son of God, a question showing his serious crisis of faith:

“Are you the one we are waiting for, or should we wait for someone else?”

Remember that he is the person who introduced to the world that Jesus is the Messiah. He also saw with his own eyes at the Lord's baptism that the Holy Spirit came upon Him and heard with his own ears what God declared.

We can understand that John the Baptist has been under duress for an extended period of time. Worse, there was no sign that the Lord Jesus is going to exercise His great power to get him out of prison and certain death. As fellow weak human beings, we can understand that, can't we?

I guess if we switch place with him, we may have asked more pointed questions and maybe even make demands on the Lord for Him to get us out of this dire condition right at that point of time. Thus, we should appreciate John the Baptist instead of being down on him.

However, we need to look at the situation from the standpoint of our Lord. Just imagine that you have even just a fraction of the power that our Lord has, would you not be tempted to simply empower John's disciples and empower them to go incognito and free their teacher?

Would it not be great to show the authorities and the King how powerless he is to stand against God's power? Isn't that the mentality of some charismatic churches to flout their "power" of healing or whatever show off stuff to try to draw people to themselves?

Please note that the Lord was not bothered by John's questioning at all. We don't have time to go into that and I leave it for you to read the rest of the story. However, He was bothered by the way the people to whom He has labored and ministered to, because of their lack of response to His ministry.

It was not that our Lord was powerless as if the Lord did not work in miraculous ways to help the people to know Who He is. He had. However, the response is, to put it mildly, very disheartening by human standard, even more so by God's standard. The response has been worse than being lukewarm!

It is not that the Lord lacks self-esteem and needs people to respond positively to Him to make Him feel good. We need to be careful to not assign to others what we may feel in similar circumstances. That is a fatal flaw for a lot of people, as Satan uses this to prevent us from learning when we are skeptical.

You see, the Lord's answer to the question brought by John's disciples was helping them to see: Yes, He is the One John was sent to prepare the way. The Lord did that by pointing to His ministries. His answer was enough for John the Baptist, but for the people He ministered to, miracles doesn't matter.

By the way, the miracles that the Lord performed were not the same as some of the charismatic preachers of today. I don't have time to go into that and will simply say that it is up to you to check things out for yourselves.

The Lord answered the question John the Baptist asked and we should also marvel at the way He answered him. However, time will not allow me to go into that and again I leave it for you to follow up on this line of thought and learn your own lesson on this matter.

I have to hurry to the main focus of today and the first point is that in our thanksgiving, we should first and foremost be giving thanks to our Heavenly Father. I have not heard this expression for quite some time now, but when I first came to America, I heard people say thank goodness.

Who is this goodness, I wondered. Is goodness a person? Do we give thanks to the person who was kind to us, help us, give us gifts, or who do you give thanks to? Is our focus on the kind deeds or the gifts or the one that is our benefactor? Goodness is indeed a poor substitute for God.

But we should learn Who God is and that He is bigger than all that He has done for us. He is far more valuable than all that He can give and help us under any circumstances. What, or I should really say Who, is more precious? The giver or the gifts? We should thank Him for Who He is.

That is what our Lord is teaching us here on this passage of scripture. In this prayer, the Lord acknowledged Who the Heavenly Father is and His power. Not just that He is the Creator of heaven and earth, He has a plan and a design in all the He does. Our Lord's focus is always on the Father in Heaven.

Instead of focusing on the Heavenly Father in an abstract way and recognizing not only what He has done through creation, we are shown His purpose in allowing all these strange things to happen, including the sad state of the listeners and eye witnesses of the words and works of His Son.

Our Lord gives thanks to the Heavenly Father for His purpose: hiding the truth from the wise and learned, but revealing them to little children. If you wonder why? Read on. Because His purpose is to bestow on those who are weary and burdened, His rest, or to put it in another way: resting in Him.

To put it in another way, the wise and the learned want to rest on their own wisdom, on their own learning, or yet in other words, on their own pontifications, their philosophies, or even theologies. Only the little children and those who are carrying heavy burden, will value what the Son has to offer.

For the self-style wise and learned, they may question the exchange that the Lord is offering. What is the exchange? Instead of our own weariness and our own burden, He want us to have His rest and exchange for His yoke. The wise will ask: Isn't that jumping from the frying pan into the fire?

Why should we make such an exchange and be expected to be thankful, they will ask. What kind of rest is that? Can you find the answer in this short saying of our Lord? Why is His yoke easy and light? Why do we have to be given a new yoke after all?

The Lord invited us to learn from Him. That is a great reason to become thankful. We understand that He teaches us to be thankful to God, that is the Who, but now we know the What. It is to learn from our Lord Himself. What better teacher and what better example?

There is a Chinese saying that can be loosely translated as: There is no more convenient way to learn than from being near to the master teacher. We need not just concepts but also example and who can be a better example than our Lord Who came from heaven to earth to show us?

He came to give Himself on the cross,
but He also came to train the disciples,
to allow them to live with Him and
watch Him closely and to learn from
Him in their everyday life and living. How
can we do that now that He is back in
His heavenly abode?

That is why we need to read the Bible at least every day, as we memorize His word and ask the Holy Spirit to bring it to our minds when we are doing things that does not require our full attention, as well as study it as often as we can, which means more than just once a week when we come to church.

The best rest is not idleness, because our minds cannot be shut down. If I ask you to please don't think for just one minute, can you do it? Of course not. Thus, true rest comes from thinking and focusing on the right Person – Our Triune God, and the right subject matter – His word to us.

When we do that, we find that it is more than a fair exchange. It is indeed a priceless and unequal one. We give to Him our heavy loads, our perplexities, our problems, our unsolved and very often can't be resolved difficulties, and in exchange His yoke and His burden, and find that He is bearing the heavy end

Do you have problems you cannot even get a handle on? Give it to the Lord. All churches, including ours, are often faced with problems we cannot resolve, how do we as a body of Christ handle that? Just as we did in the past 30 years, give it to Him and exchange that for His burden and His yoke.

Remember to give thanks to the only ONE Who deserve all our thanks. In giving thanks to people who helped us and are good examples for us, don't forget that all worthy of such thanks owe the Lord as much as we do. Remember to give thanks for what He want us to learn from taking up His yoke and the burden He want us to bear.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus to die for us and to teach us and be our supreme example. Help us to be always thankful to you, the Triune God and to what you want us to learn from the burden and the yoke you want us to bear. We give you thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.