

## 1 Gaudete – Matthew 11

John the Baptist was in prison. This was a cross God laid upon his prophet to teach him to trust in his promise. John taught that Jesus was the Christ who was coming into the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then, languishing in prison, soon to be executed by an evil king, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the coming Lord Christ. Or should they wait for another? John sent his disciples to Jesus, because that's what every faithful minister must do. John must decrease. Christ must increase. But John himself also needed the assurance of the gospel he was called to proclaim. He needed care from Jesus, especially as he was bearing this cross. God laid this cross upon John precisely for this reason, so that John would turn to Christ for assurance of his salvation.

This is exactly what Jesus gave him. He gave his prophet assurance. "Go," he said to them, "tell John what you hear and see: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news." These are exactly the things that the Old Testament said the Christ would do. As Isaiah prophesied,

Look, your God comes with vengeance; God will pay back. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be opened. Then the lame man will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing. (Isaiah 35:5-6)

Jesus had accomplished exactly what the prophet said the Lord would do when he came. No one had caused the deaf to hear or the blind to see until Jesus came. Even though John himself knew this gospel, he still needed to hear it himself. These consoling words of his Savior help him bear his cross with patience and courage.

Jesus gives these words of comfort to his prophet, but then he ends with this last statement. He says, "Blessed is anyone who doesn't turn against me." Or to put it another way, "Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized because of me." Jesus often warns against scandals. A scandal is something that causes people to fall away. It's a stumbling block. People are scandalized by Jesus, because he doesn't act the way they expect him to act. They expect simply a good moral teacher, but Jesus shows them that their hearts are completely wicked inside. They expect a worldly hero who will save them from political oppression, but Jesus submits to the earthly authorities, offering salvation from sin and eternal condemnation. People expect world peace, and Jesus does give peace to the world. But this isn't the peace the world gives. Instead, it is peace with God, the peace of the conscience to know that your sins are forgiven. They expect vengeance, and Jesus will bring vengeance when he returns on the last day. But this is God's vengeance set for a time appointed by the Father. In the meantime, Jesus gives us forgiveness of sins both to receive for ourselves and share with those who have sinned against us. This scandalizes those who just want to get even, can't let go of their anger, or are looking for quick results in this earthly life.

But the greatest scandal about Jesus' gospel is the cross. And yet, this is the most central teaching of the gospel. In fact, St. Paul calls the gospel the message of the cross. He says that it is foolishness to those who are perishing. He calls it a stumbling block, a scandal, to the Jews who want to be righteous by their own works. Jesus' cross is a scandal to this world. That the Father would offer up his beloved Son into such terrible suffering and shameful death is offensive. It shows how horrible our sin is. God isn't some teddy bear or lenient grandpa who

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just winks and smiles at you when you do something wrong. No, he is a consuming fire. His wrath burns against sin. And this is the depth of his love, that he gives his only begotten Son up into the shame of the cross to save us. Blessed are those who are not offended by this.

If Jesus' own cross is a scandal to those who are perishing, then the crosses he places on us are scandals as well. God lays crosses on his children to test their faith. He told Abraham to give up his beloved son Isaac. He allowed David to be persecuted by Saul and later by his own son Absalom. He caused his prophets to be arrested and even put to death. Sometimes these are crosses he gives to discipline us for our sins, like when he made David's son die after his adultery with Bathsheba. Other times these crosses serve as a witness to the truth against a hostile world, like when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den. And other times these crosses are a simple testing and proving of our faith, as when Job had to go through all his sorrows.

Crosses are always attached to the duties God gives us. God calls us to our duties. He also lays crosses on us. Not all our crosses are the same, just as not all our duties are the same. Parents have a duty to raise their children in the faith. God might require them to deal with a rebellious son or daughter so that they would learn to rely on his promise to save them and their children by the merits of Jesus. A child has a duty to honor his parents, and God might require him to suffer at the hands of abusive parents so that he would turn to the mercy and care of his heavenly Father. Why God chooses to give certain crosses to certain people is a mystery. But his goal is always that we would turn to the Word of the cross, the gospel, the assurance from our Lord that he has come to save us from sin, death, and all evil. His goal is that we would not be scandalized or fall away. Blessed is he who is not offended by the cross God gives him to bear.

The devil wants to use your cross to discourage you and make you lose hope. He does this by stripping away from you the care of God's mercy. This is so that you cannot see God's gracious promise of salvation, and all you can see is the suffering and misery of the cross. The devil works through evil, lazy, or incompetent people to do this. Take for example a child who is suffering the cross of an abusive father or mother. Let's say this child goes to his pastor or his church for help. All he hears from them is, "Honor your father and your mother," and, "God is pleased when you bear your cross with patience." But they don't offer the poor child any help. They don't confront the parents about it. No one is called to repentance. And the child continues to suffer without any assurance that anyone will help him. This is heartbreaking, especially if the child ends up losing hope in God's mercy (cf. James 2:15-16).

It is a very common trick of the devil. He takes a statement that is true, and he robs from it every bit of mercy. The statements, "Honor your father and your mother," and "God is pleased when you bear your cross in patience" are certainly true statements. They are divine truth. But if these are used simply to keep people in line and not to show them the mercy of their Savior, then they are worse than useless. We are called to walk in the Word of the Lord, not just recite it like it's a bunch of talking points.

This is why the cross, which God lays upon his faithful Christians, is not meant to be borne alone. Perhaps you can only do so much for someone suffering at the hands of another person. God doesn't call us to fix every problem. Only he can do that. But he does call us to bear one

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another's burdens, to go to bat for one another, to call people to repentance, and loosen the load on people as much as God has given us that ability. This is part of bearing the cross. Because when one member suffers then the whole body suffers. Jesus spoke these words to John to prepare him for his death at the hands of a wicked king who was supposed to protect him. But our Lord didn't just leave John by himself. He sent his disciples back to him to visit him and encourage him with these words. And in doing so, he was also encouraging these disciples whose beloved teacher was locked up.

When God lays crosses on us, he is not leaving us to languish by ourselves. We don't worship an absent Christ. He is the Lord who has come and who still comes in his Word and sacraments. We don't just eat bread and wine while the body and blood of Jesus are stuck in heaven. No, he comes to us with his body and blood in the bread and wine, just as his words tell us. So when we have to suffer, he doesn't just give us principles to follow, as good as these principles might be. He doesn't just say, "Submit, obey, don't give up," while leaving us to fend for ourselves. Much more, he is with us in his gospel. He is with us in the fellowship and conversations of our fellow Christians who are called to defend us, speak well of us, and comfort us with the truth.

And this is exactly what Jesus does for John. When John's disciples leave, Jesus goes on to defend him. He turns to those who heard John preach, and he asks them what they went out into the wilderness to see. John wasn't a reed shaken by the wind. He didn't just go along with what was popular. He wasn't dressed in soft, effeminate clothes. He wasn't some pampered wimp sitting in his palace. No, he fulfilled his office with courage. He bore his cross with patience.

You see what Jesus is doing here? He isn't merely leaving John with some principles to obey. He didn't say, "Go tell John that he should submit to Herod, because Herod is the king." Of course, that's technically true. Even though Herod is abusing his power, he still has his authority from God. But Jesus doesn't just recite true talking points. No, he gives John the good news that he has come to save him, and then he goes on to defend John, to speak up for him, and to rebuke anyone who didn't listen to him. He calls him a prophet. He calls him more than a prophet. He is the prophet whom Malachi spoke of hundreds of years before. And he says that no man born of woman has ever arisen who was greater than John the Baptist. This is the kind of Brother our Lord is. This is the kind of defense he gives to his Christians who are bearing their crosses. This is why he came to earth, and this is why he still comes.

Jesus's cross is a comfort to us, because it is our salvation. He bore the sin of all people. His blood wipes away all your guilt. And the Word of his cross blesses you, declaring you to be righteous in his sight. This is why it strengthens you when you must suffer in this life. When you suffer, the devil goes after your conscience. Maybe you wouldn't be so sick if you would have been a better steward of your body. Maybe he wouldn't be treating you this way if you acted with more kindness. Maybe they wouldn't react so negatively to what you said if you would have spoken with more tact. Maybe. There is no doubt that you have your sins. But the gospel shows you where to put them. Jesus bore them in his own body, and he left them buried in the tomb. He gives you a good conscience, washing you clean by his own blood and in the waters of your baptism, so that you can know that you are serving God. And he defends you, just like he did with his prophet John.

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Jesus calls John the greatest man who ever lived. And then he says that the least in the kingdom of heaven is even greater. This means that if Jesus defends John in this way, then you can be confident that he will defend you, no matter how unnoticeable you might be. You might not think that your suffering is worthy of God's attention. But when you are suffering for the duties God has given you, then you are suffering for the sake of Christ who blesses your work with his Word. And when, in the midst of your afflictions, you hold onto this Word, then Jesus promises to defend you. When he finally comes on the last day, he will defend all his Christians, setting the record straight for all to hear. In the meantime, he comes to you in your darkest hour to comfort your poor soul with the truth of his gospel. When the pressures of this life overwhelm you, this gospel of your Savior preserves you and keeps you from falling away. Blessed is everyone who trusts in him. Amen.