Lesson 10

Matthew 11

Verse 28: What does it mean to come to Christ? Has he already told us how we can do that in readings from some of the previous lessons?

The word translated labor means “wearying labor.” The phrase “heavy laden” translates a Greek word that means “weighed down.” What wearying, taxing work does Christ have in mind here? From what does he offer relief? Why is that described as something that wears us out? As something that burdens us? The word translated rest literally means “cessation.” It is used to mean “refreshment,” “ease,” or “rest.” How does the Savior offer cessation from taxing labor? How does he offer refreshment?

Verse 29: The word translated take means literally “lift up.” The Greek word translated yoke could also have been translated scales (the kind of scales one sees in statues representing justice). Does that suggest what kind of yoke Jesus has in mind? How would it be different from a yoke used on oxen?

Do you agree with the KJV decision to translate the term as yoke, or do you think scales would have been more meaningful? Why?
In the Old Testament the yoke was often used as a symbol of tyranny. (See, for example, 2 Chronicles 10:4.) Why do you think that was? Why do you think Jesus uses an image that is usually associated with being subjugated by a tyrant?

How do we learn of Christ? In other words, when he commands us, “Learn of me,” what is he commanding? The root of the Greek word translated learn means “to direct one’s mind toward something.” That results in a variety of meanings, including “to experience” and “to learn a skill” as well as “to know.” In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the version many used at the time of Christ), the word translated know is used almost exclusively to mean “learn the will of God.” Might that tell us something about what Jesus is teaching in this verse?

Should we understand “come to me” and “learn of me” to be parallel?

The word translated meek means “mild,” “gentle,” “friendly” and occurs in Matthew’s writings more than in the other Gospels. Why does Matthew use the word so often in comparison to other writers?

The word translated lowly means not only “lowly” but also “modest,” “humble,” “obedient,” “compliant,” and the verb from which it comes can mean “to level.” Is “meek and lowly of heart” a hendiadys, a case of saying the same thing twice (as in Genesis 1:1: “without form and void”), rather than a case of saying two different things?

In the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Proverbs 16:19) meekness and lowliness are associated with each other, and Daniel 3:87 speaks of lowliness of heart, using the same Greek phrase.
used here in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Do those connections to the Old Testament tell us anything about how to understand this verse?

**Verse 30:** The Greek word translated *light* means “serviceable” or “useful.” How might that change our ordinary understanding of what Jesus is teaching here?

**Verses 28–30:** Both the *Hermeneia* volume on Matthew on Matthew 8–20 and the first volume on Matthew in *Word Biblical Commentary* suggest that this saying is part of the Old Testament Wisdom tradition.¹ (That is the literary tradition that produced works such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.) Here Jesus speaks as Wisdom herself has spoken. See, particularly, Sirach 6:23–31, which has many similarities to this saying. Sirach is part of the Apocrypha. Does that connection to Wisdom literature suggest any fruitful interpretations of this passage?

What makes the Pharisaic law a burden? How is the way of Christian life (life following the law of Christ, following Wisdom) an easy one? After all, Jesus has already said that he doesn’t preach a less strict law than the Law of the Torah (Matthew 5:17–20). If we feel that living as a Christian is burdensome, what should we conclude from these verses?

Do these verses advocate that we respond to the trials of our life merely inwardly, seeing trouble as something pertaining to the world and thus seeking peace only in our hearts but not necessarily in our external circumstances? If not, how do we square these verses with the truth that, as Ernst Bloch says, Jesus “is anything but an artful dodger

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into invisible inwardness, or a sort of quartermaster for a totally transcendent heavenly Kingdom”?

How would you use your own words to paraphrase these verses? How would you explain what they teach to someone who didn’t understand them?

Matthew 12

Are the stories that follow supposed to illustrate what Jesus meant by the easy yoke?

Verses 1–9: This story is one of a number of stories that center on the controversy between Jesus and the religious authorities. (See Matthew 9:1–8 for the beginnings of that controversy.) If you’ve been on a grain farm, you probably know that you can pluck a head of grain and rub the kernels between your palms to get rid of the husk. Then you can blow away the chaff and chew on the threshed grains for a snack. This practice was permitted by the Mosaic law. (See Deuteronomy 23:26.) But the rabbis had decided that, though it was permitted, it was a kind of work and so was not permitted on the Sabbath. Jesus replies to the scribes (in other words, the rabbis) with a good rabbinical argument, namely an argument from scripture: first, David ate what was unlawful for him to eat (see Leviticus 24:5–9), but that violation of the Law was justified because he had nothing else to eat (see 1 Samuel 21:2–7); second, the priests in the temple work on the Sabbath, and that work is justified by the fact that it is done for a holy purpose.

This last example becomes an affront to the scribes, for Jesus explicitly says that what the disciples are doing is justified by
the fact that they are in the service of someone—or something, the Greek could be translated either way—greater than the temple. Which do you think Jesus is saying is greater than the temple, something, presumably the principle of mercy, or someone, perhaps Jesus himself?

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 in verse 7: “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” He tells the scribes that if they had understood that scripture they wouldn’t have accused the disciples. How would understanding that have saved them from their mistake? In other words, what does understanding that mercy is more important than sacrifice have to do with this particular case?

**Verses 10–13:** The first disagreement with the religious authorities over the Sabbath is immediately followed by a second. Why do you think the dispute over the Sabbath was so important?

It appears that the rabbis allowed for healing on the Sabbath if death was likely, but not otherwise. Jesus heals a withered hand, something that could have waited until the next day. Jesus heals the man’s hand in response to a challenge from the scribes: “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days?” Why does he take up their argument? Why not just ignore them? Why does he respond with a deed rather than an argument?

How do we know when we should respond to the challenges of those who attack us rather than ignore them? How do we know what kind of response is most appropriate?

**Verses 9–14:** One contemporary commentary understands these verses as chiastic:

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A 9 And when he went away from there, he came into their synagogue.

B 10 And behold, (there was) a man with a rigid hand.

C And they asked him and said, “Is one permitted to heal on the Sabbath” so that they might accuse him.

D 11 But he said to them: “Who among you will be the person who has a single sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath will not grasp it and lift it out? 12 How much more than a sheep is a person?

C’ Therefore, one may do good on the Sabbath.”

B’ 13 Then he said to the man: “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and it became whole again, like the other.

A’ 14 But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him to destroy him.

What does this chiasmus make most important to the story?
So what?

Luke 7

Verse 36: Given the Pharisees’ hostility to Jesus, it was brave of this Pharisee, named Simon, to invite Jesus to his house for dinner. (See Luke 7:36 and 11:37 for two other occa-
sions when Pharisees do this.) What do you think might have motivated Simon? What do you make of the fact that each time he was invited to dine with a Pharisee, Jesus did something that scandalized his host?

**Verses 37–38:** The word translated *sinner* isn’t used to describe the general condition of human beings: we are all sinners, but that is not the point of this word. (See verse 40.) Most have assumed that the woman was engaged in a dishonorable profession (an occupation that the Pharisees assumed disposed one toward sin), and there were many such occupations. Among the dishonorable professions were shepherds and shopkeepers, weavers and launderers, tax collectors and copper smelters. For women the most common was arguably prostitution. Perhaps Luke is implying that the woman is being described as a prostitute. That he adds “in the city” to her description may suggest as much. But that isn’t necessarily the case. She could also be someone married to an outcast, such as a publican or a weaver. Given the Pharisees’ interpretation of the Law, there was no significant difference between the alternatives.

But Jesus and his disciples didn’t follow the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law, as we have just seen and as we will see in Matthew 15:2, where they do not observe the hand-washing rituals of the Pharisees. Thus, the word *sinner* would equally have described them. We don’t know what ointment the woman used. The Greek word translated *ointment* refers to any oil rendered from animal fat or any vegetable oil except olive oil, for which there is another
word. Mark may tell us that it was spikenard, a musky-smelling perfume ointment made from a plant found in India. (This assumes that the incident in Mark and this incident are the same; they may not be.)

What is the significance of the woman’s washing of Jesus’s feet? Is it significant that she washes them with her tears? What does anointment suggest? Can we understand what she does symbolically as looking forward to the crucifixion? If so, how so?

**Verses 39:** On what grounds does this Pharisee believe that Jesus cannot be a prophet? What kinds of similar arguments are made today regarding modern prophets? What is the proper response to such arguments?

**Verses 40–42:** In verse 39 we saw that Simon was thinking to himself. What does Jesus’s answer to his complaint show? How is that relevant to Simon’s accusation?

**Verse 43:** What kind of attitude does Simon’s “I suppose” suggest? Has the parable brought him to repentance?

**Verses 44–47:** The translation of these verses makes it appear that the woman is forgiven because she loves. That translation, however, is problematic. A better translation would say that she loves because she is forgiven. What is the difference?

What does Jesus’s rebuke of Simon tell us about how Simon has treated Jesus? Why didn’t Simon provide water to wash Jesus’s feet, kiss him in greeting, or anoint his head?
Verses 48–50: Why do the onlookers ask, “Who is this that forgiveth sins also?” When did the woman exercise faith?

Luke 13

Verses 10–13: Luke often shows Jesus showing regard for women, especially for women in difficulty. Given the culture of his day, how is that significant? What lesson is in this for us today?

Verse 14: Why does the head of the synagogue address the crowd rather than Jesus? It is obvious that his reproach is aimed at Jesus.

Why is healing on the Sabbath such an issue? Is there any symbolic significance to the fact that Jesus insists on healing on the Sabbath? In fact, he is portrayed as flaunting before the scribes and Pharisees the fact that he heals on the Sabbath. Why?

Verses 15–17: Why does Jesus call the head of the synagogue a pretender, a dissembler? What is his pretense?

Though they are not the same, the Greek word translated loose here is related to the Greek word translated loosed in verse 12. What point is Matthew making by using related Greek words? It appears that tying and loosing knots were among the forbidden kinds of work on the Sabbath, though some knots were exempt. Does that matter to our understanding of these verses?

The Greek verb translated ashamed can also be translated dishonored and it can also be used to describe someone whose hopes have been dashed. How might each of those
meanings give us a different understanding of verse 17? What is the point of the contrast that Luke makes between the response of Jesus’s adversaries and the response of “all the people”?