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MATTHEW 11:20-30: THE JESUS OF MODERNISM VS. THE JESUS OF MATTHEW

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Who was Jesus? What did he do, and what was his message? Many scholars and religious leaders in the church today, while not explicitly denying Christian beliefs about Jesus, offer a different view of Jesus and of his message that undermines the essence of the gospel of Jesus. We will here contrast this liberal or "modernist" view of Jesus with the view of Matthew--which, we will argue, was also the view of Jesus himself.

Modernism	Matthew
Jesus did not preach hell, or if he did, it was only a symbolic condemnation of the rich and powerful oppressors of the common folk.	Jesus preached an eternal judgment on all who failed to repent, regardless of their class or position (vv. 20-24).

- The judgment was compared to those which came on whole cities in the OT (vv. 20-24), not just their religious or political leaders.
- Jesus spoke harshly of that generation as a whole (v. 16; cf. 12:39-45).
- Since Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom had already received a temporal judgment, Jesus must have been speaking of an actual future judgment that comes after death.
- Jesus healed the servant boy of a Roman centurion, whose faith he said exceeded that of his own Jewish people (8:5-13); that is, Jesus granted healing to an authority figure of the great oppressor, Rome!
- Jesus also healed the daughter of a synagogue ruler (9:18-19, 23-26).
- The suggestion that these words did not reflect Jesus' considered opinion is shown to be false by the fact that Jesus had said almost exactly the same thing earlier (10:15) and spoke repeatedly of a coming judgment (e.g., 5:22; 7:22-23; 12:36; 13:41-42).

Modernism	Matthew
Jesus was not sure about his divine calling or purpose and expressed doubts and worries about failing.	Jesus knew exactly what he was doing and was confident that his Father's purpose was being realized through him (vv. 25-26).

- Jesus warned people not to stumble over the fact that he did not fit their preconceptions of the Messiah (vv. 6, 19). This does not sound like a person who is himself unsure of his role.
- The ease and intimacy with which Jesus addressed God as "Father" (v. 25) shows that he was quietly confident about his relationship with God.
- Popular images of Jesus as an uncertain prophet (from Jesus Christ Superstar to The Last Temptation of Christ) have no basis anywhere in the Gospels.

Modernism	Matthew
Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, let alone the divine Son of God; these honors were bestowed on Jesus by the church long after his death. Of the Gospels, only John presents Jesus as considering himself to be God.	Jesus avoided the term "Messiah" because of its political implications, but he clearly claimed to fulfill OT Messianic expectations and to be the unique, divine Son of God (v. 27).

- Jesus accepted the designation "the Coming One," pointing to the Messianic works prophesied by Isaiah as proof (vv. 3-6, cf. Is. 35:5-6; 61:1).
- Since the NT writers freely used the title "Christ" (Greek for Messiah) for Jesus, almost as another

name for him, the reluctance of Jesus throughout the Gospels to use this title for himself is almost certainly authentic, and shows that the Gospels were not simply putting exalted titles into Jesus' mouth.

- Jesus claimed to be "the Son of Man" (v. 19), a Messianic figure spoken of in Daniel 7:13-14. That this title was not put on Jesus' lips by the church after his death is proved by the fact that Jesus is virtually the only person in the NT who used the title (elsewhere only in Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:13).
- Jesus does not call himself "the Son" only in John: he does it here in Matthew also (v. 27) and in the parallel passage in Luke (10:22). Nor is this the only such passage in the Synoptic Gospels (see also Matt. 24:36//Mark 13:32; and Matt. 28:19).
- It is not merely the title "the Son" that shows that Jesus thought of himself as God, but the fact that as the Son Jesus claims to possess a unique knowledge of the Father and an exclusive authority to reveal the Father (v. 27; cf. John 14:6). This text is so similar to the way Jesus speaks in the Gospel of John that scholars often call Matthew 11:27 "the bolt from the Johannine blue"!

Modernism	Matthew
Jesus' message was not about himself, but rather it was about following his teaching and example by seeking to challenge and correct injustice and to bring freedom.	Jesus' message was that freedom was to be found in a relationship with him, not in any religious system or social program, however noble (vv. 28-30).

- Jesus' call is not merely to imitate him or follow his instructions (though we should do both), but rather, "Come to me... and I will give you rest" (v. 28). This rest consists in the knowledge of God which only Jesus could give (v. 27).
- Jesus' call here again clearly shows that he thought of himself as God, speaking as God did in the OT (Ps. 95:9-11; Is. 45:22; Jer. 6:16; 31:25, 34).
- Judaism in Jesus' day encouraged Jews to submit to the yoke of the Law (cf. Ecclesiasticus 51:23-27 [Apocrypha]); Jesus replaces the Law with himself (v. 29).