

Following Jesus

The Most Wonderful Invitation, Part #3

Matthew 11:30 David Sunday May 21, 2017

This will be the last time we look at Matthew 11:28-30, the sweetest, greatest invitation ever given. I'll read this passage, and then I'll read another verse, Jeremiah 6:16. While I'm reading from Jeremiah, keep your eye on Matthew 11 to see how Jesus fulfills the Jeremiah passage. Oh, how I love these words in Matthew 11. They comfort my soul.

Thank You, Jesus, for speaking like this to us:

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Sometimes people wonder, "Where does Jesus claim to be God in Scripture?" There are a lot of different places to which you can turn, but the reality is it's suffused throughout His sayings. Listen to this passage from Jeremiah 6:16 and look at what Jesus is saying in Matthew 11:

Thus says the Lord [Yahweh]:

*"Stand by the roads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls."*

Jesus knew His Bible through and through. He knew that passage from Jeremiah 6. But here in Matthew 11 He doesn't start with "*Thus says the Lord...*" because He is the Lord. He doesn't say, "Stand by the roads and look for the ancient paths where the good way is," because He is the way. He is the "ancient path." He is the good way and He is the One Who gives rest for your souls. No one else could have thought up these words. These words are beyond what any human writer could ever invent.

One commentator wrote, “No one making up words for a divine figure would have had either the insight or the daring to say that.” And anyone who understands Matthew 11:28-30 has come into the very heart of Christianity. “Come to Me,” says Jesus. “I will give you rest.” Not like Buddha, who offers a four-fold path to peace and enlightenment. Not like Muhammad, who says, “Follow these five pillars and you will experience peace through submission.” Not like popular religion in America today, which one sociologist has called “moralistic therapeutic deism” which gives you ten steps for this and for that.

Jesus doesn't give us ten steps. He doesn't give us principles. He gives us Himself, a Person. He says, “Come to Me—Me.” He tells us what He is like in verse 29, the only verse in the New Testament where Jesus tells us what His heart is like. He says, “I am humble and gentle, meek, lowly and tender.” The universal solution to everything that burdens and wearies you is found in Jesus Himself—and in Jesus only.

Last week, as we looked at the heart of Jesus in verse 29, we saw that it's impossible to come to Jesus as your Savior (verse 28) without also submitting to Jesus as your Master and Lord, taking His yoke upon you and learning from Him(verse 29). Coming to Jesus means becoming His disciple, His learner, His follower. This involves much more than just taking a course from a teacher, getting a grade and moving on into something else. To be a learner of Jesus—a disciple of Jesus—means you follow Him wherever He goes. You watch His example. You listen to His instruction and you give Him complete control of your life.

Today, in this last message on this wonderful passage, I want to ask: why would you want to follow Jesus? But a better question even than that is: why wouldn't you want to follow Jesus? He is unlike any master in what He gives and how He leads those who follow Him. Why wouldn't you want to follow One as gentle, lowly, kind and powerful as He? So we're going to look in verses 29 and 30 at two great incentives to those who would follow Jesus.

What He gives: rest for your souls

Let's think first about the incentive of what Jesus gives. He gives rest for your soul. You've heard of REM sleep—rapid eye movement. You can lie in bed at night and never get real rest if you don't enter into a certain number of those REM phases. The world is craving the REM of the soul—deep rest of the soul. It's in high demand and low supply. You know what it's like to take a day off—at least I think you know what it's like—to have physical rest, but your mind can't stop going. You can't rest in your mind and you get to the end of your day off feeling like you never really rested. Or maybe you've gone on a vacation and had physical rest, but emotionally,

spiritually, mentally something was going on that troubled you and you didn't really feel like you took a vacation.

I can identify with the Jewish author named Judith Shulevitz, who wrote an article for the New York Times called, "Bring Back the Sabbath." In that article she argued that it takes more than physical rest from your labors to get rest. She said we also need rest from a constant mental striving that's going on in our minds. Listen to this sentence that she wrote: "The machinery of self-censorship shut down, too, stilling the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach."

I can identify with that. I know what she's talking about. How do you "still the eternal inner murmur of self-reproach"? What is that anyway? What is that "eternal inner murmur of self-reproach"? I read some different pastors describing things that go on in their minds, like, "I'm not good enough." "I'm not popular enough." "I'm not strong enough." "I'm not fit enough." Or maybe it's, "I'm too fat." "I'm too dumb." "I'm too selfish." "I'm too weak." "I'm too unspiritual." "I'm not self-disciplined enough." "I'm not religious enough." On and on and on we go with this "eternal inner murmur of self-reproach." The bottom line is, "I'm not enough. There's something wrong with me." I think every human being knows that eternal inner murmur. I think we have conversations going on in our minds all the time, when we're thinking things like this about ourselves.

Where you go to still that "eternal inner murmur of self-reproach" tells you who you are following, who you are looking to to give rest to your soul. Do you turn to the approval and accolades of others? "If only they think well of me, then I'll know I'm okay." Do you look to success in your job as the place where you find your significance and rest? Is it financial independence and prosperity? If I have so much money, so much security, then I'll be able to rest. Maybe it's alcohol or food or sexual pleasure.

Or maybe you don't turn to those things at all. Maybe you turn to stringent spiritual disciplines or following all the rules of your church. You think, "There is where I'll find rest for my soul." But none of these things can give you rest. None of these things can still the "eternal inner murmur" that is saying, "I'm not enough. I'm not good enough." Because there's something true about that "eternal inner murmur." There is something true in the reality that we in ourselves are not enough. Do you run to Jesus when you need to silence that eternal inner murmur of self-reproach? Because no one can do that for you except Jesus.

Jesus says in verse 28, “*Come to me...and I will give you rest.*” Verse 29, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” That’s an amazing promise, an astounding claim. Jesus can make that claim, because Jesus bore the weary load and the heavy burden of everything that is not enough in you. He clothes you with everything that is beloved and well-pleasing in Him. Jesus is the only human being Who has ever lived His life not always hearing that “eternal inner murmur” in His mind. Jesus is the only human being Who heard throughout His life the affirmation of God His Father, which came at His baptism and at His transfiguration. He heard it every morning as He opened His heart to God and communed with Him in prayer. This is what Jesus heard from the Father: “You are My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:13-17). Jesus lived His life in that identity. “I am beloved of God. He is well pleased with Me.”

This beloved Son Who is well pleasing to the Father, and Who knew His Father’s pleasure upon His life willingly, in great love for us, plunged Himself into the fiery inferno of God’s wrath. He bore in Himself, in His death on the cross, all that is inadequate, insufficient, shameful and vile in us. Jesus’ death on the cross says, “It is done. The work is finished. You are righteous, completely accepted in the Beloved and free from all shame of all that is not good enough in you, because you are clothed with the righteousness of all that is beautiful and well-pleasing in Christ.”

That’s the great exchange the gospel gives us. To know that we’re accepted by God, gives us rest for our souls, because the guilt of our sin has been covered by the righteousness of Christ. We are freed from bondage to sin in our lives through the power of Jesus Who rose from the dead. Only Jesus can give that to you. Only Jesus can give you rest for your soul. Follow Him and you will find that to be true. Run to Him with your sin, shame, fears and worries about your inadequacies and you will find that in Jesus you are acceptable to God. You are the Father’s delight. You are His well-loved son or daughter, with whom He is well-pleased, if you trust in Jesus. He gives you that rest for your soul.

How He leads: His yoke is easy and His burden is light

The second thing we learn from this passage about following Jesus is how He leads us. How does Jesus lead? He says in verse 30, “*My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” I’ve been wanting to chew on that sentence. I’ve heard that since I was a child and have wondered, “How

can that be true?" I know it's true because I know Who said it. Jesus said it, so it's true. But how is it true? It doesn't always feel true to me. It doesn't always gibe with my conception of what Christianity is all about. My yoke is easy? My burden is light?

This does not mean that following Jesus is not demanding. When you take the yoke of Jesus on you, you trust in Him and what He did for you on the cross. You are now committed to obeying His teachings. You're saying, "I will submit to His will in every part of my life." That's what you're pledging to do at your baptism. You're saying, "I have decided to follow Jesus—no turning back. The cross before me; the world behind me. Though none go with me, still I will follow." That sounds demanding. "Deny yourself. Take up your cross daily and follow Me (Matthew 16:24). Whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple," Jesus says (Luke 14:25-33). That's demanding. That's stringent.

But what makes following Jesus hard is not Jesus. What makes following Jesus hard is the sin that remains in me that chafes against His yoke and His will. What makes following Jesus hard is the world that is hostile to Christ and His Kingdom. Jesus says, "There are going to be dangerous toils and snares. In this world you will have tribulation. There will be difficulty. There will be trouble in your life if you follow Me." But what Jesus is telling us in verse 30 is that there is enough in Christ to overpower all these hardships. There is enough in Jesus and in relationship to Him to make amends for all that you will suffer as you follow Him. There is enough in Him that every believer will agree by the testimony of personal experience that in following Jesus, truly His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle said, "No doubt there is a cross to be carried if we follow Christ. No doubt there are trials to be endured and battles to be fought. But the comforts of the gospel far outweigh the cross." That's the experience of the believer. The comforts of the gospel far outweigh the cross. Ryle said, "His yoke is no more a burden than feathers are to a bird." How can that be? How can it be His yoke is easy, which means good and pleasant, kind and useful, manageable, serviceable, that which fills a need and is well-fitting? How can that be true? "Jesus, Your yoke fills a need. It fits well. It's good and pleasant."

He tells us His burden is light. How can that be? The word "burden" was often used of a ship's cargo. Jesus uses a diminutive version of that word to say, "My burden is little." But how can that be? Let me give you a few reasons that I think help us understand why Jesus can say this.

1. His yoke is easy and His burden is light because we are motivated by love for Him. How did Jacob feel about serving his uncle Laban for seven years in order to get Rachel, the wife

he loved? Genesis 29:20 tells us that these years “*seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.*” When your heart is engaged in love with someone, it doesn’t matter how great the pains or how much time it takes or how much it costs you—you are delighted to serve that person because you love her. There is no love like the love a redeemed sinner has for Jesus. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). He went to the cross and died for us when we were still His enemies (Romans 5:8). So because we serve Him out of love, it’s not a burden for us—it’s a delight.

2. His yoke is easy and His burden is light because our hearts have been transformed. Now your hearts are inclined to obey Him. When you come to Jesus, He gives you new life. He puts a new heart in you. He causes you to be born again. You now delight in the law of God in your inner being, and His law is written on your heart by His Spirit. So you agree with 1 John 5:3-4:

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

John Newton said, “What is hard or impossible for a child is easy to a man, and what is hard to flesh and blood apart from Christ is easy to faith and grace.” Now we have faith in Jesus and grace comes to us from God through Christ. That grace comes in the form of a new heart—a heart that beats in sync with the heart of Jesus for us. It’s a heart that now says, “I will run in the path of Your commandments, because You have set my heart free. I delight to do Your will, O God. Your law is upon my heart” (Psalm 40:8). We are now inclined to obey Him.

3. His yoke is easy and His burden is light because Jesus empowers us by His Spirit to obey. What a contrast to the Pharisees. Look at Matthew 23, where Jesus is condemning the religious teachers of His day. One reason Jesus condemns them is because of the heavy burden they put on the necks of those who follow them, always adding to God’s commands. The law was always meant to be a delight for those who follow God in humility and faith. But the Pharisees turned the law of God into man-made rules and regulations they added on to it. Jesus said of them in Matthew 23:4, “*They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.*” They just burden you down with all kinds of rules that God does not intend. And they won’t help you.

But when Jesus says, “*My yoke is easy, and my burden is light,*” the word “easy” He uses there is the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 4:32 that’s translated “kind.” “*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*” Jesus is saying, “My yoke is kind.” His philosophy of discipleship is not “harder equals better.” His philosophy of discipleship is, “I want to bear this burden with you and for you. I want to come alongside you. I want to empower you. No matter what it costs Me, I want to enable you to live a new life and walk in that new life. I’ll be the great burden bearer. I’ll give you the strength to follow My commands.”

As we read in Isaiah 46:4, “*Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.*” That’s what Jesus is saying to us. “I have made you and I will bear you. I will carry you and I will save you. I will lift more than a finger to help you obey Me. I will be lifted up onto a cross, so that My Spirit can then be poured out on you through My risen life at the right hand of the Father. And in the fullness of the Spirit you will find you now have wings to fly in obedience to My commands.” He empowers us.

4. His yoke is easy and His burden is light because He more than generously rewards us for all obedience, no matter how small or great. We get the reward of a clean conscience, which Proverbs 15:15 says is a continual feast. We get the reward of friendship and fellowship with God. We get the reward of eternal life in His presence. No matter how much He asks of you, it will never feel like Jesus took more than He gave. He always gives more than He takes.

5. His yoke is easy and His burden is light because Jesus designs the yoke for each one of us. He designs it so it will fit us perfectly. He knows what He asks of each and every one of us, and He designs the path of your discipleship masterfully to fit you and your unique needs.

I read about Dr. Paul Brand, who worked with leprosy patients in India back in the 20th century. Leprosy is the disease of the nerves, causing its victims to not feel pain, so they would eventually wear off their limbs. As he studied leprosy patients, he discovered that it was usually small, repetitive stresses that caused the nerve endings to die—and the people didn’t even realize what was happening to them.

For example, they’d wear a sandal that would have just a little bump. But as they would walk on that bump, that small repetitive stress, step after step, from that tiny rough spot protruding from the sandal, would cause cells to die. Because they had defective nerve endings, they couldn’t feel what was going on until part of their foot would die. Eventually parts of their bodies would start falling off. Another thing Dr. Brand discovered was that if you don’t use

muscles, they atrophy. He treated one patient who was doing some religious observance where he held his hand over his head almost all the time for 20 years. All his muscles atrophied and all his joints fused together. So it's not good to have that small repetitive stress, and it's also not good to do nothing.

Not only did Dr. Brand work on these leprosy patients, he also worked with animals. Because of where he was, he'd work in the hospitals designing yokes for oxen. This is what he discovered as he worked to design these yokes:

If I put a flat, uncharted piece of wood on an ox's neck, and use it to pull a cart, very quickly pressure sores will break out on that animal's neck and he will be useless. A good yoke must be formed to the shape of an ox's neck. It should cover a large area of skin, so that the stress is distributed widely. It should also be smooth, rounded and polished with no sharp edges, so that no one point will endure unduly high stress. If I succeed in my workshop, the yoke I make will fit snugly around the ox's neck and cause him no discomfort. He can haul heavy loads every day for years and his skin will remain perfectly healthy with no pressure sores.

As he worked on these ox yokes, he realized, "I think I understand what Jesus is saying here in Matthew 11 better: 'My yoke is easy. My burden is light.'" Dr. Brand then wrote: "Jesus offers each of us a well-fitted yoke of custom design. He does not call us to the kind of rest that means inactivity or laziness. That would lead to spiritual atrophy."

It's not just doing nothing that Jesus is saying here when He says "rest." Instead, He promises a burden designed to fit my frame, my individual needs, my strengths, my capabilities. I come to Him weary and heavy laden. He removes those crushing burdens that would destroy any human being, and replaces them with a yoke of appropriate stress designed specifically for me. That's His kindness. He knows what you need. He knows what I need. And the yoke He gives us is designed specifically to fit our need. Why wouldn't you want to follow a Master like this?

Let's bow before Him in prayer.

Gracious Master, so gentle and kind, so willing to stoop to our weakness and bear our load, You are so wise in the way You design the path of our lives so that whatever You call us to do in service to You is never designed to hurt us, but to help us. How we praise You for the way You give rest to our souls. You know how to still that "eternal inner murmur" of self-reproach, Jesus. You know how to calm our fears of the guilt and shame of our sins by what You've done for us on the cross. You took the heavy burden of God's wrath against our sins and You fully

came under that heavy yoke that would have been unendurable to us. You submitted Yourself fully so that now You can say to us, “My yoke is easy. My burden is light.” And truly, Jesus, following You is a joy and delight compared to anything this world can offer us.

So as we gladly come to this Communion Table, Lord Jesus, to You Who gave Yourself so freely and fully for us. We yield our lives in joyful submission to You. We surrender ourselves to You, our wise and gracious Master. We thank You for Your great love for us, Your mercies that are new every morning. We pray, Lord, that as people come into fellowship with our church that the gospel of Matthew 11 would be what they see in us, that they would see people who are delighting in You, because Your ways are pleasant and Your paths are peace. Lord, we pray that they would see people who are light and easy and kind to one another, because we have a Savior Who is so kind to us.

So help us, Lord, as we come to this Table, if there’s any rancor, any division or hardness of heart, any bitterness of soul toward another brother or sister, rid us of it now, we pray. Give us Your gentle, kind, tender disposition toward one another. We ask this in Your holy name. Amen.

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