

The King Who Gives Rest to the Weary

Matthew 11:25-30

Every couple of weeks I have the privilege of sitting down with the pastors of five other churches in the area as part of an accountability and fellowship group (the same group that gave birth to our MetroWest Men's ministry partnership with First Baptist Sudbury and Trinitarian Church in Wayland). Five out of six of us are about 2 years or less into our first lead pastoral role, which means we often find ourselves in similar situations, and can pool our collective ignorance to address them.

As is typical in these kinds of groups, at some point in the meeting we share an update with each other on our life and family and ministry, along with a few prayer requests. And for the last several months mine has usually gone something like this: "Well, I'm really tired. A lot going on. A lot of good things, but busy. Kids are sick again, and Carissa's pretty tired. We have this coming up, and you can pray for this. Probably depending on myself too much; not trusting the Lord. I'm presuming on him instead of praying to him. So I'm really thankful, but I'm really tired." And I've realized lately that month after month I'm kind of saying the same thing.

Then you read verses like Matthew 11:28-30—"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"—and you think, 'How did we get to this place? Why doesn't my life, my ministry, my pursuit of God feel like *that*?'

And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one feeling this. Weariness, insecurity, anxiety, exhaustion, guilt, shame. These are the words we often use (if we're honest) to describe our relationship with God. We feel what Lynn was just singing about—in our desire to follow God, we find the hidden evils of our heart, as though the angry powers of hell are assaulting our soul.¹ What God designed to be a joy has become for many of us a chore. What God designed as a life-giving relationship, we've turned into a life-draining performance. And though it may sound strange to put it this way, it's one of the symptoms of attempting to know and follow God *without* Jesus.

That is the problem that Jesus addresses in this passage—the attempt to know the Father without need of the Son. To come to God, not depending on Jesus, but depending on *ourselves*. It's a life of performance, where our wisdom, our ability, our knowledge, our strength are all we have and (so we think) all we need to know God—to figure him out, follow him, fellowship with him.

But the reality is, as so many of us know the hard way, there are only two real possible results of a performance-based relationship with God: pride or despair. Self-righteous pride, when we think

¹"I Asked the Lord," John Newton, Laura Taylor. ©2004 double v music (ASCAP).

we have him figured out, that we're good enough to make him happy or somehow make it up to him for any ways we've let him down. Or self-loathing despair, when we know we're not good enough, and we never will be. The temptation is too strong; our opposition is too strong. We're buried in guilt and shame and frustration.

Jesus speaks to this temptation to try and know the Father apart from him, and he addresses both of those results—both pride and despair. First, he speaks to pride, reminding us that true rest begins by acknowledging God's sovereign control over our salvation. He holds the keys to knowing him, not us. Which means it's actually *impossible* to know him on our own, from our own wisdom and ability, apart from the Son who makes him known. But second, Jesus also speaks to despair, inviting us to find true rest in him and obedience to his Word.

So first is the reminder: God has sovereign control over our salvation. And second is the invitation: to find true rest through our union with Jesus and obedience to his Word.

True Rest Begins by Acknowledging God's Sovereign Control over Our Salvation (11:25-27)

We'll look first at the reminder in vv. 25-27:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

True rest begins by acknowledging God's sovereign control over our salvation. Jesus is responding here to the pride of those who just rejected him earlier in chapter 11. Last week we looked at the first part of this chapter, and how there was a gap between what people expected Jesus to do, and what he really came to do. The crowds who had been following him around Galilee, when they looked at his deeds, his great miracles and signs he's been doing over the last few chapters, they were unimpressed. Instead of remembering God's promises and recognizing how Jesus was fulfilling them before their very eyes, they stood in judgment over Jesus, weighing his actions, deciding for themselves, according to their own wisdom, whether his ministry had any relevance or credibility. The problem was not their desire to know God. The problem was that they didn't think they needed Jesus to do it.

And so after condemning them for their rejection of him in some of the most solemn words Jesus ever spoke (vv. 20-24), he now thanks his Father for in fact *hiding* the kingdom from the 'wise and learned,'—from those who, in their pride and presumption, thought they had enough wisdom to judge and discard the embodiment of Wisdom himself, Jesus Christ (11:19). Jesus thanks his Father for hiding the kingdom from them, and instead revealing it to the simple, the humble, to little children—to those who do not and cannot claim in and of themselves to have figured God out. Their only hope for knowing God is for him to make himself known.

Imagine a conversation where the top scientists in a particular field are sitting around discussing a problem that no one has ever been able to figure out, not after years and years of research. All of a sudden, in walks a four-year-old and explains to all of them the answer. At that moment two things happen. First, the scientists are all humbled. They've just been shown up by a kid. But second, it tells us there's somebody else in the picture. Because there's no way that a child that

age could have figured this out on his own. He was dependent on *someone* for his answer. And that's who really gets the credit—whoever it was that showed the answer to the child.

So it is that when it comes to knowing God, to entering into and enjoying relationship with him, being cleansed of our sin and becoming his child and part of his kingdom, no one is wise enough or righteous enough to do it on their own. Our sin and disobedience have separated us from our holy God, and our wisdom is too limited to find him or figure him out. You cannot know the Father *unless the Son reveals him to you*. Which not only humbles those who depend on themselves to know him, it gives all the credit for your salvation to God.

God has sovereign control over our salvation. He alone has the *authority* to save. He is “the Lord of heaven and earth,” as Jesus says in v. 25. He made this world; he has the authority to rule it and redeem it according to his plan.

God alone has the *wisdom* to save—to know what to do. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:20-24, ESV)

God alone has the *character* to save. He does so, as v. 26 puts it, according to his “good pleasure” or “gracious will.” God not only has wisdom to know what to do, and the authority to do it, he has the character to do the right thing and follow through with his good and gracious plan.

Only the Son *knows* the Father well enough to make him known to us. Jesus describes the exclusive, intimate relationship he and the Father have in v. 27: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son . . .” Jesus alone can make him known. And his Father has given him authority to do just that: “All things have been committed to me by my Father. . . . and no one knows the Father except the Son *and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*.” God has sovereign control over our salvation, and he exercises it through Jesus.

This idea, what we sometimes call the doctrine of election or predestination, sometimes makes us pretty uncomfortable. It's certainly a controversial subject, and we're not going to sort it all out this morning. It raises some honest and important questions—for instance, what about human responsibility? What role does free will play in coming to God? But understood properly, *the assurance of God's sovereignty over our salvation is actually a source of incredible comfort*. Think of all of the weight we feel in performing for God or trying to please him. The anxiety, the insecurity. What happens when we realize, it's not up to me! It's not on my shoulders. I'm not in control. God is, and he has the authority, wisdom, character, and knowledge to do what I cannot do for myself—to save me and give rest to my soul!

There are lots of reasons the idea of God's sovereignty over our salvation can make us uncomfortable, but one of them is that we don't like the suggestion that we're not really in control. It's the same reason that most of us feel far safer driving a car on the interstate than we

do riding in a plane across the country. Statistically speaking, airline travel is far safer than car. So why do we feel safer in the car? Because “we’re in control.”

But are we really? Do we really have control over when the tire might blow, or over what other drivers might do? And *should we be* in control when to our salvation is at stake? Do we really have enough wisdom, or authority, or character to come to God and find life and rest in him?

Which of you, when traveling on an airplane, were it to suddenly lose an engine and start to go down, would jump up and say to the pilot, “Get out of the way, let me handle this!” No one! Who could bear the weight of responsibility to do something you have neither the wisdom nor knowledge to do? In those moments, it’s actually best *not* to be in control, and instead to entrust ourselves to someone who does have the wisdom, knowledge, authority, and character to save us. Which means that he’s the one who gets all the credit for landing the plane safely, not you! And when that someone is not a fallible pilot, but an infallible God, who has all authority, perfect wisdom and character, there’s great comfort and rest in trusting him.

Here’s the point: until we recognize that God alone holds the keys to salvation, we will continue either to puff ourselves up or wear ourselves out trying to impress and persuade God. True rest begins by acknowledging God’s sovereign control over our salvation.

That’s the reminder. Verses 28-30 bring us the invitation: true rest comes through our union with Jesus and obedience to his Word.

True Rest Comes through Our Union with Jesus and Obedience to His Word (11:28-30)

Look again at v. 28 with me:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

True rest comes through our union with Jesus and obedience to his Word. Whereas Jesus spoke to the temptation toward pride in vv. 25-27, here he speaks to the temptation to despair. To lose hope, being weighed down and crushed under life’s trials or the expectations of religion.

This is one of the most beautiful and open ended invitations to come to God in all of Scripture. Which is exhilarating when you think of the weariness we’ve been talking about, the weariness of trying to perform for God. But also a little surprising, given what he just said in vv. 25-27 about God’s sovereign control over our salvation.

It’s striking to see these two paragraphs side by side, and it reminds us that just because the Bible makes much of God’s sovereignty over our salvation, it doesn’t mean that we do not at the same time have a responsibility to freely respond to him in genuine faith. That’s what Jesus invites us to here. The Bible consistently holds both of those realities before us.

It’s like the opening scene in C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Silver Chair* (part of the Narnia series). It begins with two classmates, Eustace Scrubb and Jill Poole, complaining about their school. Eustace tells Jill how he once went to a place called Narnia, and he guesses that if they start calling out for the king of that land, Aslan, they might be able to go there and leave the school.

So they call out his name, “Aslan, Aslan, Aslan!” Just then, some bullies start to chase them. Eustace and Jill take off running, and come to what they thought was going to be a dead end: a big, stone wall with a door that is always locked. But this time the door was open. So they go through and they’re transported from their world into the land of Narnia. Soon they see the great lion, Aslan, who tells Eustace and Jill that he has *called* them out of their world for a special task. Jill says to him, “Nobody called me and Scrubb here, you know. It was we who asked to come here.” But Aslan says, “You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.”²

Who called whom? Yes. We genuinely call out to God because he sovereignly calls us to himself. And so Jesus issues his invitation in vv. 28-30—come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls.

What is true rest here? To understand that, we need to understand what kind of burden he’s offering to relieve us from.

The imagery of being burdened or heavy laden, or of bearing a yoke (which was a wooden harness you would place on an animal like an ox so it could pull a wagon)—that imagery is associated elsewhere in Matthew (and other parts of the Bible) with the load of keeping the old covenant Law. Or more specifically, trying to keep the Law apart from Christ.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat [they teach God’s Law]. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matt. 23:2-4; cf. Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1). To the extent that the Pharisees taught the Law of Moses (God’s Word in Genesis–Deuteronomy), they were to be obeyed. But they had a tendency of adding regulations to God’s Word on how to obey it, stacking up a bunch of human traditions that eventually eclipsed and functionally replaced God’s Word in Scripture (read Matthew 15 for a good example).

The result of this is what we’ve been talking about here—a performance-based relationship with God that either puffs up or deflates us. And Jesus is calling to himself all those who are deflated. Those who are broken, who have messed and failed in life. Those who, left to themselves, know they have nothing to bring to God but their sin. The little children to whom God reveals himself.

As long as we continue to live as though we can know God without Jesus, there will be no rest for our souls. And I’m not just talking about beginning a relationship with God, I’m talking about walking daily with God. Growing in our relationship with him, walking in obedience to his Word. So often we stop believing what we believe, and we live as though the Christian life is entirely up to us. We acknowledge Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, for beginning a relationship with God. But then we try to do everything else on our own. And we cannot bear that burden. And sometimes God takes us through some painful processes to open our eyes to that reality. That’s what we heard sung earlier, how God in his kindness employs our “inward

² This illustration was inspired and adapted from Eric McKiddie, *Show Then Tell: 52 Illustrations for Believing and Living the Gospel* (2013).

trials” that we might seek our all in him.³ We don’t need Jesus only to come to God; we need Jesus every day to live and walk with God. Only he can give us true rest, *lasting rest*, despite whatever chaos surrounds our lives.

But what does rest look like? It’s not laziness or inactivity. It’s not leisure or recreation (though those are a good thing, and we need to build them into our lives). That’s not what Jesus is talking about here. As Doug O’Donnell puts it, “Jesus did not say, ‘Take my chair,’ or ‘Take my mattress.’ . . . [or Take my X-Box controller]. He said, ‘Take my yoke.’”⁴ He’s talking about *work*. Activity. More specifically, he says “take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me.” He’s still talking about obedience to God’s Word. But it’s an obedience that comes not from our own effort, our own flesh that weighs us down, but from being united with Jesus. With the one who, as Matthew 5:17 told us, is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. With the one who, unlike the taskmaster of the Law, is gentle and humble in heart. The one whose yoke, when we are united with him in faith, is not a heavy burden, but is actually easy and light (cf. 1 Jn 5:3).

We think we’ll find rest in inactivity, checking out. If I can just get home and sit on the couch and watch TV for two hours, then I’ll feel better (that’s my default). We think we’ll find rest when we no longer have this particular problem. But then there’s always something else. Or we think we will find rest if we can just escape—we pick up the bottle, we pick up the pills, the porn, we pick up the fork, we pick up some new shoes, a new gadget. But how heavy is all that? Has any of it ever truly given you rest?⁵

True rest comes through our union with Jesus and obedience to his Word. What greater rest is there than to be united with the One who is perfect in every way we fail, who loves us despite our sin and brokenness, who is committed to us such that once we belong to him he will never let us go, and who is with us by his Spirit to give us life and strengthen us to obey?

What deeper peace of mind or peace of soul is there than following God and knowing your right at the center of God’s good will? As Doug Webster writes,

. . . for those who live under the yoke [of Jesus] there is absolutely no other way to live. Who in their right mind would go back to the gods of Self, Money, Lust and Power? Who would return on bended knee to the shrines of pious performance and judgmentalism? Is not love better than hate, purity better than lust, reconciliation better than retaliation? And is not ‘better’ really ‘easier’ when measured in character rather than convenience, rest for the soul rather than selfish pride?⁶

Until we recognize that God alone holds the keys to salvation, we will continue either to puff ourselves up or wear ourselves out trying to impress and persuade God. True rest begins by acknowledging God’s sovereign control over our salvation. And as long as we continue to live as though we can know God without Jesus, there will be no rest for our souls. True rest comes through our union with Jesus and obedience to his Word. He is the King who gives rest to the weary. May he be glorified as we find our rest in him.

³“I Asked the Lord.”

⁴ Doug O’Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 219-220.

⁵ See O’Donnell, 220.

⁶ Doug Webster, *The Easy Yoke* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 201; as cited in Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 447.

Discussion Questions

1. When you hear Jesus' call, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," what burden do you most long to be relieved from?
2. When you think about the sovereignty of God over our salvation (e.g. "no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him"), how does your heart react? How might this idea bring rest to us in our weariness?
3. When you are worn out, frustrated, anxious, or burdened, where do you tend to look for rest? In what ways does that satisfy or disappoint?
4. When Jesus describes true rest as involving taking up his yoke and learning from him, he indicates that his rest is not inactivity or laziness, but the work of obeying God's Word through our union with Jesus.
 - How does obedience give rest?
 - How does disobedience drain us?
 - How does union with Jesus make our obedience not burdensome but easy and light?