

Jesus' Invitation to Rest

Our second Scripture is Matthew 11:25-30. Jesus thanks God for his gracious revelation of salvation to those who are open to his message. After this prayer of thanks, Jesus then issues one of the most memorable passages in all of Scripture (28-30). This is his invitation to the rest that we may find in him.

Follow as I read **Matthew 11:25-30**:

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

A friend of ours, who with her husband has served in ministry to the point of exhaustion, in desperation finally visited a professional counselor. His immediate diagnosis was that she had worked herself to total exhaustion. The counselor said that unless she changed her ways of constant work and stress she would be dead in two months' time. If not to this dangerous extent, there likely are some here, possibly even retirees, who need rest, and not just by sleeping in on Sunday mornings, as is the manner of some.

In my youth and early ministry, church busyness seemed to be of great value in spiritual formation. In my pastor-father's home, we attended a plethora of weekly and sometimes daily church meetings and activities. I even recall a conference preacher bragging about how he kept the people in his church busy attending meetings and performing tasks, even to the point of exhaustion. He disclosed his theory that "Busy Baptists don't sin as much." I wasn't so sure then, and I'm certainly not in accord with this statement now. Church busyness can indeed become a preoccupation that keeps Baptists and others away from taverns and other places often designated as sinful, but busy Baptists can devise other ways to be sinful, even in church. In the midst of church busyness, we can be ungodly and judgmental toward others. During seminary days, I served my first church on busy weekends, ending with a Sunday evening service before driving back to Louisville for another week of studies. Preaching on humility, I misquoted Jesus' promise that those who humble themselves in service "will be exalted." I said, almost unconsciously, "shall be exhausted"!

The Old Covenant Sabbath laws were provided to give God's people rest. But the Sabbath was a prefiguring of a greater rest that is to be found in a relationship with God, something that many Israelites forfeited (Ps. 95:11). Jesus invites us to enter God's rest through faith in him (Heb. 4:1-11). Jesus praised the Father for revealing his invitation to the willing, those he described

as “little children,” those who realized their need for him. These are the “ordinary people” (Peterson), those Paul describes as the most likely candidates for God’s salvation rest. The willing are those who’re aware of their need and who are weary of an empty, futile life.

The weary that Jesus addressed included those weighed down by religious demands, some 613 laws that the Jewish teachers had mined from the Old Covenant Scriptures and their oral tradition (28). The faith of Israel had become a great burden because the joy and the music had been drowned out by legalistic requirements. The call of God to a personal relationship had been drowned out by the harsh demands of law and traditions that were impossibly demanding.

In the church of today there are many so-called Christians who are weary and tired of trying to live by their or others’ expectations, and they simply can’t measure up. They’re described by Paul’s weary condition, when he tried by his efforts to keep the law and failed to do what he should have and couldn’t stop doing what he shouldn’t have. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Such weary people, and I confess I too easily slip into their company, are simply missing out on the joy of Jesus’ rest because a love relationship with Christ has been replaced by performance demands, beginning in childhood with our parents. There are lots of church people doing lots of church work without joy and purpose.

The Message paraphrases a part of our text with these words: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?” and indeed I have seen a lot of people who were burned out, not because of what Jesus was doing *through* them, but by what they were trying, frenetically and legalistically, to do *for* him. They’ve lost the music singing, dancing and joy Christ came to give because of the rules and expectations we placed on ourselves and others. Christ has come to set us free from the condemnation and burden of the law and has set us free with the joy of his forgiveness and the presence and power of his life and Spirit to enable us to live a full and meaningful life (Jn. 10:10) in the joy and freedom of the Spirit (Rom. 8:1ff).

In our culture, instead of the burden of legalism, many are heavy laden with immorality and the real guilt that accompanies a life with no moral absolutes or restraint. Chuck Colson was conversing with a young lady, who had obviously become weary of a life of self-indulgence and non-stop partying. She had come to believe that she was obligated to live a hedonistic life-style of unrestrained pleasure, which obviously was losing its pleasure for her. When Chuck explained to her about God’s forgiveness and that she could follow Christ in a life of loving obedience to his plan and will, she asked in amazement, “Do you mean I don’t have to do what I want to do?” She spoke for the many who are burdened down with the bondage and emptiness of the meaningless pursuit of sensual pleasure and addictions. Jesus can set us free from the bondage of such a so-called hedonistic “freedom.”

The willing are the burdened (28) from sin and guilt, and realize their need for forgiveness, whether from overt sins of the flesh or the sin of proud religious

performance. Some are tired of trying to live up to the expectations of others and of trying to prove their worth to themselves or to others.

Those who are invited are the weary—religious and secular, church people and those outside the realm of religious faith. And as a long-time believer, follower and servant of Christ, I'm all too aware of my weariness from ignoring the rest Jesus offers. As G Campbell Morgan says, all restlessness is godlessness, and most of us carry burdens we're not supposed to carry, such as the burdens of bitterness and anger towards others or even towards God for life's disappointments and pain.

Jesus promises his rest to all who come to him. This is the language of faith and trust and of a personal relationship with Christ that results in his salvation rest. Scripture speaks a lot about the rest of salvation that we receive in Christ, which is the rest of sins forgiven and a life of trust in Christ and a hope of perfect everlasting rest with Christ for all eternity (Hebrews). He invites us to the rest of freedom from anxiety and fear as we learn to trust him, who replaces our restlessness with his peace-instilling presence. We learn to cast all of our anxieties upon him, knowing that he cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). In our relationship with Christ, we receive the peace that transcends all understanding (Phil. 4:7). Our rest from guilt, anxiety, restlessness, fear, bitterness and a sense of worthlessness doesn't come through human effort or psychotherapy, but rather through a relationship of faith and trust in Jesus.

FW Robertson noted that there are three causes of unrest: 1) suspicion of God, 2) inward discord and 3) dissatisfaction with outward circumstances. Jesus invites us to bring all of these to him. Maybe there is a suspicion of God, and a doubt of his steadfast love and faithfulness toward you. Perhaps it's time we revisit the cross, to be reminded of the unfailing and absolute love of God. Maybe there's inward discord, a spiritual or moral struggle within our hearts. We can't have God's peace until we relinquish all compromise with sin and self-will. Perhaps there's a dissatisfaction with our outward circumstances that causes inward rebellion or resentment. If so, we need to ask God for grace to trust that we are exactly where we ought to be and our circumstances have come to us through the permission of a loving God.

Ironically, in his invitation to rest Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us. This is figurative language. Scholars say that as a carpenter's son, Jesus doubtless made wooden yokes that were tailor made to the shape of the oxen, to insure greatest ease and comfort to the animals as they pulled the burden of the ox cart. There might even have been a sign over Joseph's carpenter's shop which read, "My yoke fits well" (Barclay).

Jesus invites us to join him in his service, but first of all, to a well-fitting personal relationship with him whereby we are yoked to him in a life of glad service. He invites us first to know and learn from him, who is "gentle and humble in heart" (29). As CH Spurgeon points out, this is the only place in Scripture that refers to the heart of Jesus, and how precious this is for us. And only Jesus, the divine and eternal Son of God, could refer to himself as humble. He, the Lord of glory, humbled himself in his incarnation and all the way to

death on the cross (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus invites us to know his heart in the most intimate of personal relationships, which, alas, is one we often neglect. Jesus invites us to learn true humility from him as we yoke up with him in living in the Father's will and doing the Father's work.

Thus, the rest to which Jesus invites us is not inaction or passivity. He calls us to a life that is humanly impossible and one that can be lived only by dependence on his grace and the Holy Spirit. We can't and we shouldn't try to live this life in our strength, but only as we are properly yoked up with Christ Jesus and learning of him and becoming more like him day by day. This easy yoke and light burden is what reminds me of something I heard that The Great Awakening Leader and founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-91), is reported to have said: "I grow weary *in* my work but never weary *of* it."

Even when we grow weary in mind and body, in step with Jesus, our strength is renewed (Is. 40:31). The rest we have in Jesus is through a relationship with him, when we're aware of him and living by his grace and power at work in us. This is how we can be at rest and peace even as we labor with him. His yoke will fit us well. We're not to become weary in doing good, as Paul writes (Gal. 6:9). The answer is not to retreat into resignation and indifference, or allow ourselves to become totally burned out to and embittered toward the work of God and his people. The answer is to return to Jesus and to submit to his well-fitting yoke.

Jesus may be inviting you to take a time of spiritual retreat, to take an inventory of your life and activities that seem to deprive you of your spiritual rest. You'll find rest through personal and corporate worship, which keep Jesus central in your thoughts. To get things sorted out, take a personal retreat, perhaps for an overnight, or at least a morning or day in prayer and reflection.

Jesus invites us all to his rest and to join him under his restful yet useful and fruitful yoke of service. What we're talking about is being aware of Jesus' presence and being led by the Holy Spirit. The Savior lovingly invites us to repent of our weariness from doing good *for* him instead of restfully and graciously doing work *with* him. He invites all of us who are weary and burdened. Let's find our rest in him.

I'm glad our faithful religious worker friend is finding rest in Jesus, physically, emotionally and spiritually. I'm glad she has a good, wise and godly counselor. Perhaps you need one too. In any and every case, we all need to accept Jesus' invitation to his rest.