

A discipleship of rest

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“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.”

Matthew 11:28-29

These words of Christ sound like a refreshing call to work less and rest more, but to the original hearers of these words there was even more meaning.

Words of peace and rest from a religious rabbi would have been very surprising in their day and time. Any Jew who sought to be rightly related to God was constantly trying to obey the many, many rigid Jewish laws that applied to every area of life. Most of these laws did not come from the Old Testament, but from their religious leaders, who created even more regulations to show the people the way to obey God. It was a religious nightmare. A constant burden. A continuous pressure in the life of anyone who was seeking to be holy. Jesus said of the Scribes and Pharisees: *“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders”* (Matthew 23:4).

Jesus’ words were contrary to everything that the Jews knew about religion. Could coming to God truly be restful? In regards to rest, Jesus’ first instructions in these verses were *“Come to me”*.

Jesus did not give them requirements like the five pillars of Islam. Jesus did not propose a four step path to enlightenment like the Buddha did. Jesus did not give them 7 steps to self-improvement so they could somehow fix themselves. Jesus gave them Himself. He was not an unknowable, distant, God who is out there somewhere running our universe. He is Immanuel, God with Us. He is God come near. Taking the form of a man. He is the exact representation of the Father. If we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father. This is our God who wants us to know Him . . . intimately.

Rest is not found in just knowing all the information about Jesus Christ. Rest is found in having a relationship with Him. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). He has invited us to *"Cast all our cares upon Him"* (1 Peter 5:7). He invites us to sit at His feet and learn from Him.

Rest can only be found in Him. In John 15 Jesus says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* As we abide in Him and dwell with Him . . . we find our source of rest. What other option do we have? If we are dwelling with the Almighty God, our Wonderful Counselor, our Prince of Peace, Our Advocate, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, our Deliverer, our Good Shepherd, our Great High Priest, our King of kings and Lord of lords, our Hope, our Redeemer, our Savior, how can we do anything but rest. It is all bound up in the *"Coming to Him"*. With Him we gain everything and we rest. Without Him we lose everything. We then seek to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders and believe that we must meet our own needs.

Jesus then instructed his listeners to, *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."* Jesus is calling His hearers to a life of discipleship. A life of living under the guidance and lordship of Christ.

A yoke was a farming apparatus that would bind two beasts of burden, such as oxen, together. This would allow the two animals to share the workload and work more efficiently.

Every rabbi of Jesus' day had their *"yoke"*. This yoke was seen as the rabbi's view of scripture, their brand of teaching, and their way of living. The rabbi would pass this on to his students by living in community with his students. The goal was that the disciple would not just learn the rabbi's beliefs, but that he would actually become like the rabbi. Not just in what he knew, but how he lived. The use of the word *"yoke"* brought with it a sense of submission. Putting one's self under the authority of another.

At first most people hear these verses and picture Jesus as the farmer to whom we must submit. To some degree that is true, but we also find another role of Christ in this analogy.

At times the farmer would put an older, stronger ox, with a young ox. The older ox would train the young ox. Of course, they did not carry the burden evenly, the larger, more experienced ox would carry most of the burden.

That is a more accurate picture of what is being described here. Jesus is under the yoke with us. Jesus is the One from whom we learn. He is the real burden bearer. Without Him we can do nothing. Our burden is light because He too is with us in the yoke. He is with us, in us. He is our daily bread. Our grace that is sufficient. Our strength when we are weak. Our indwelling power. Our intercessor when we know not what to pray. He is not just the farmer, our Lord and our God. He is also in the yoke with us and making holiness and obedience possible in our lives. He carries the burden, and in Him we find rest.

In the Gospel, Jesus takes upon Himself our unbearable yoke of sin and guilt and grants us his easy yoke of righteousness. He meets our every need (Philippians 4:19). By faith we enter into His rest.

Jesus then continues with these words, *"For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* This would have been in direct contrast to the demanding rabbis of Jesus' day, whose ultimate goal was to obey all the religious rules and whose motivation was fear and guilt. Jesus is making it very

clear that He will not be the slave master who drives his workers to despair and exhaustion. He is calling them to rest in His gentle and humble care.

We see this idea of rest all the way back in the creation account in the book of Genesis. The key to understanding this concept of Sabbath is found in the Hebrew word *sabat*, which means “to rest or stop or cease from work”. On the 7th day God “*ceased from His labors*”. It was not because God was tired, because we know that He is omnipotent. The Sabbath idea in all of its forms in scripture is ultimately pointing us towards the Messiah, who would one day come to provide a permanent, eternal rest, for His people.

All throughout the Old Testament you find the Jews under the bondage of God’s law, which they can never obey perfectly. They are slaves to sin and their sinful nature. They were constantly “laboring” in pursuit of being right with God. It was a losing battle. They longed for spiritual rest, but it was always out of their reach.

We see this imagery lived out in the story of the Israelites. For 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. Their freedom was then bought by the blood of the Passover lamb. They were promised freedom and rest in Canaan if they would believe and obey. If so, God would be their Provider and Protector.

They chose to not believe and did not obey. Because of this, they were banished to the wilderness for 40 years. At the end of this period the next generation believed and obeyed. By faith they entered into Canaan, their promised rest, but even this was not all God had promised. God promised that if they would continue to walk in faith and obedience they would continue in God’s rest. But they were never able to continue to walk in faith and obedience. None of us are. It is only through Christ that our hearts are changed and holy living is possible.

The faith and obedience that leads us into all rest is made possible because of the works of Christ. The enmity between God and man has been brought to an end and reconciliation now endures. Finally the promised rest has arrived through Christ.

God’s rest is available, but how many times have we not believed in His truth and instead chose to do life our own way? How many times have we debated about how to respond to an issue when scripture makes it very clear? How many times do we doubt when God has promised His provision? How many times have we worried instead of placing it before God and receiving His peace that passes all understanding? Faith which results in obedience ushers us into rest.

Faith is the key to rest. Many have heard God’s Word, but these truths will be of “*no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith*” (Hebrews 4:2). This faith demands that we finally rest from our own works of vain righteousness and trust in Christ alone. Christ is the Author and Perfecter of Faith. Only through Christ are we given faith.

Jesus states, “*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” Jesus had been a carpenter so it is very likely that He was speaking from real life experience. The word “easy” in this verse literally meant well-fitting. When an ox was going to be taught how to use a yoke he would first be brought to a carpenter and

fitted for the yoke. It would be measured and then shaped to fit as rightly as possible with the contours and size of the ox.

In a similar way, this truth applies to each believer as well. We are called to submit to Christ's yoke with the confidence that it will be well-fitting. Somehow God will disciple us in a way that is well-fitting to our needs, our struggles, our strengths, our calling, and our life situations. He will masterfully do what is ever required to make us like Christ.

Once one has entered Christ's rest, the only time the load becomes overwhelming is when one rebels against the lordship of Christ. When we refuse to submit to God's Word. When we seek to be the master of our own situations. When we drift away from a daily walk with Christ. When we get behind or ahead of God's desire for our lives. In Galatians, the Apostle Paul instructs us to "stay in step" with the Holy Spirit. Just as a soldier marches in line according to his commanding officer. This is our calling as we submit to the yoke of Christ.

At times we consider ourselves disciples of Christ, but when it is time to submit to Christ's yoke we refuse to take it upon ourselves. For one reason or another we don't trust His will for our lives. In this moment we forfeit the "rest" that has already been won for us by Christ. As we believe and obey we are ushered daily into the rest of Christ. As we rebel, rest is lost even though it was available.

May we each receive His restful yoke as we submit to His will and trust in His goodness.