

*The Secret of the Easy Yoke**

Matthew 11:25-30

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 15, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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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.” (Matthew 11:25-30, NRSV)

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People are revealed, not discovered. There are lots of things you can discover in this life, but the heart and soul of a human being is not one of them. Through exploration people have discovered new lands, new species, even new planets and galaxies. Through science we have discovered the way gravity works, the way clouds produce rain, even the very make-up of atoms and molecules. Through careful observation we can learn what makes animals act the way they behave, why they possess certain instincts. But when it comes to another human being, no amount of exploration, science, or observation *alone* will help you come to know the heart and soul of that person.

I'm reminded of the words of the modern prophet, Sting, whose song, *All Four Seasons*, is about the mystery of knowing and understanding his lover:

*Watching the weatherman's been no good at all
Winter, spring, summer, I'm bound for a fall
There are no long term predictions for my baby
She can be all four seasons in one day'*

But it's not only that men can't understand women, or women men, or parents their teenager children or vice versa, you cannot know a single other human being *unless that person chooses to reveal himself or herself to you.* You will never know me, the true me that is in my heart and soul, unless I allow myself to be known. Same is true of you.

This is actually part of what it means when the Bible says we were created in the image of God because God, though divine, is also a person who cannot be discovered, only revealed. It's what Jesus is getting at in verses 25-27 of our text when he says, “**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.**”

There is profound truth here. Christ is the face of God because Christ is God. He is not just God's representative, but God's revelation, the divine incarnated in human flesh. This is the power of the Christmas message. And so it is through Christ, and through Christ alone, that we come to know God. There is no other way. Christ is God's revelation! It's why Jesus says in the next verse, “**Come to me...**”, not “Come to God...” You can't come to God except by way of coming to Christ, who is God. But not only that, only certain people can come to know God through Christ - only those, Jesus says, to whom he chooses to reveal the Father.

So who can come to know God through Christ? That's a very important question, right? Jesus wastes no time in giving us the answer: “**Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens...**” Notice that there are two qualifications for coming to know God through Christ. First, you must be worn out, exhausted from trying to live life the way you are currently living it. But that's not enough. You have to be worn out *and*, in response, you have to come to Jesus because you are worn out. Let's take those one at a time.

First, who in this life is worn out, or at least on the verge of being worn out? Everybody. That's what I believe. I don't care whether you are rich or poor, black or white, educated or not, old or young (except the very young, perhaps), healthy or sick, it doesn't matter. Life on this planet is a series of one heavy burden after one

*The title of this sermon is taken for the title of the first chapter of Dallas Willard's book, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper, 1988).

¹ Written by Gordon Sumner, “All Four Seasons”, © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

heavy burden that will eventually wear you out. Let me name a few.

There is the burden of accomplishment. There is something deep in us that keeps telling us that we were put on this planet to do something significant, to make a difference. In our jobs, as parents, as volunteers, we are supposed to contribute in a meaningful way. The message is clear, your life will be judged by what you can accomplish. It wears you out.

There is the burden of status. Early on the message we receive is that the best way to judge your life is to compare it to the lives of those around you. Grades. Athletic accomplishments. Physical appearance. Wealth and possessions. Knowledge. Being in the right crowd. We are always in this race to make ourselves look better by comparison. Nobody posts their failures on Facebook or Instagram. Hey, here's a picture of my kid who just flunked out of school. Here's our family Christmas photo taken right after we had yet another huge fight. Look at me, at how much weight I've gained. Nobody posts their worst, only their best. That means nobody walks away after spending an hour on social media feeling better about themselves because you are always comparing your actual self to everybody else's best version of themselves. The weight of this constant comparison is crushing. It wears you out.

There is the burden of addiction or bad habits. There are behaviors or obsessions in our lives that we know should not be there and yet, in spite of countless years of trying to live differently, they remain. Same bad decision made over and over again. It leaves us absolutely defeated.

And, of course, there is the burden of circumstance, things which affect us but which are out of our control. Devastating illness or disability, the loss of a loved one which brings heavy grief, broken relationships we just can't fix, political or economic trends that impact us and our communities, the list goes on. And we can bear the weight for a while, but eventually we are left overwhelmed.

How many of you are just worn out? 68% of Americans regularly have trouble sleeping and turn to drugs, supplements, and high-tech gadgets for help.² 55% of us say that we live with stress most of the day every day.³ 1 in 7 of us will deal with some substance abuse or another, many of us trying in escape, if only temporarily, the crushing burdens of life.⁴ About 1 in 5

of our teenagers live with some level of depression.⁵ I don't know what the load is doing in your life - sometimes I barely recognize what it's doing in mine - but one way or another it's likely wearing you out.

We are not meant to live like this. A fish is designed to live in water. It's got gills that enable it to absorb oxygen from the water, not the air, and fins that enable it to move through the water, not on the land. To live, a fish must honor its design. If you put a fish on dry land, it will not survive.⁶ We were not designed to carry these heavy burdens. But we do. And the main reason that we do is simply pride. We believe the lie, because we have been saturated in the lie, that we can navigate life on our own. You can be anybody that you want to be. They sky's the limit! There is no substitute for hard work. Just muscle through! I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. Yes, you can!

Too often we can't. We just can't. And this is why Jesus says that those to whom God is ultimately revealed are not only those who are worn out, but those who *realize they are worn out*, those who suspect this is not the way we are supposed to live, and those who then come to Jesus because they know otherwise they out of options. Do you remember how Jesus opened the Sermon on the Mount, his manifesto on discipleship? **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”**⁷ He goes on from there. And it begs the question: Blessed are those at the end of their rope, whose hearts are broken, who are lowly, who are feeling unsatisfied? They are blessed? According to Jesus, yes! And be careful, these are not prescriptive, but descriptive. Jesus isn't telling us that we have to become these things if we want to be blessed. That would be cruel. He's telling us that if we are these things, more importantly if we recognize we are these things, that's where the blessing comes - heaven, comfort, inheritance, satisfaction!

In his book, *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer, writes that the sort of person who has come to this place “has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God has declared him to be.”⁸ One way to read Jesus here when he says, **“Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened”**, is to hear him

² <https://www.consumerreports.org/sleep/why-americans-cant-sleep/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/25/us/americans-stressful.html>

⁴ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/11/17/surgeon-general-1-7-us-face-substance-addiction/93993474/>

⁵ <https://psychcentral.com/blog/why-are-so-many-teens-depressed/>

⁶ I'm borrowing an illustration from Tim Keller. See

<http://dailykeller.com/true-freedom/>

⁷ Matthew 5:3-6 (NRSV)

⁸ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Christian Publications Inc, 1948), 75.

saying, “All you are weary and heavy burdened!” The question, of course, is whether or not you believe it and will come. Do you recognize that on your own you are being crushed by the burdens of this life? Until you recognize this you will not come to Christ. And until you come to Christ you will never find or know God. Because again, Christ is God’s revelation.

But – and this is where it all turns, where gospel breaks in! – but, Jesus says, if you come to me **“I will give you rest.”** How badly are you longing for rest in your life? I’m not talking only about physical rest – a good night’s sleep, a good vacation – through that sort of rest is vital. I’m talking as well about a deeper rest, rest not only for the body but for the mind, the heart, and the soul. You can lay down at night to sleep, even take a couple weeks off of work, and things can appear restful on the outside, but all the while the burden remains on the inside. Your mind won’t shut off – worry, anxiety, future plans, unanswered questions. Your heart won’t lighten – grief, regret, shame, guilt. Your very soul is restless, a deep dissatisfaction in the core of who you are. It is from this that Jesus came to set us free.

First, Jesus gives us rest from the burden of accomplishment in the form of grace. Every single significant thing that needs to be accomplished in our lives Christ has already done or has promised to do *himself!* Success or failure has absolutely zero impact on the value of your life or your standing before a God who loves you as much in your failure as in your success. In Christ you are becoming the person you were meant to be, not by your accomplishments but by his grace.⁹

Jesus also gives us rest from the burden of status in the form of love. The very Creator of existence says to you, “You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter. I delight in your life.” Are you then going to turn around and continue to worry about how you measure up compared to other people? What measuring stick are you using if you do? Once you are in Christ, what other people think about you is no longer any of your business. It’s certainly no longer any of your concern.

Jesus then gives us rest from the burden of destructive additions and habits in our lives in the form of strength. Because the very Spirit of the risen Christ makes his

⁹ Dallas Willard writes, “The most important thing in your life is not what you do. It is who you become.” Tim Keller puts it this way: “Jesus essentially says to us: ‘I call you only to do those things you were created to do, and you will find therefore that my yoke is easy. I put on you the burden of following me, but I have already paid the price, so that when you fail you will be forgiven. I’ve taken off you the burdens that other people have. I’ve removed the burden of earning your own salvation through your striving and effort. I’ve removed the burden of guilt or shame for past failures. I’ve taken off the burden of having to prove yourself worthy of love. I am therefore the only Lord and master who, if you find me, will satisfy you, and, if you fail me, will forgive you.’” <http://dailykeller.com/true-freedom/>

home in your life, the power of the resurrection is fully present to bring dead things back to life. What was impossible for you is now possible for Christ!

Finally, Jesus even gives us rest from the burden of our circumstances, and he does so in the form of hope. It doesn’t matter what circumstances you face along the way – cancer, disability, unemployment, divorce, bankruptcy, pain, age, grief, or the more global challenges of politics, economics, the environment – it doesn’t matter because in Christ the promise is that a day will come when all that is wrong will be made right again. Paul writes in II Corinthians, **“For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”**¹⁰

Jesus gives us rest from every burden that is wearing us out in life. How? **“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.”** Perhaps not what we expected? How about a pillow, Jesus? Or a hammock. A spa day or a room at the Hilton would be nice. A yoke wasn’t exactly what we had in mind? A yoke is a symbol of work, hard work. What kind of person gives that to somebody badly in need of rest? You look tired, here’s a yoke!

To be clear, it’s not that Jesus is against sleep, and time off, and vacation. Sabbath is something he actually commands. But if that’s all Jesus offers us then even after a sound eight hours, or a very restful weekend, or an incredibly relaxing week at the coast, after it’s over the burdens you set down earlier are still there waiting for you and more are likely lined up to join them. Therefore, what Jesus wants to give us is a new way of living with the burdens that are always with us, a new way to carry life, a fresh way to bear the weight.¹¹

You see, a yoke is an instrument designed to harness together two workers, usually oxen in those days. And Jesus is clear, he isn’t giving us another yoke as a burden but giving us *his* yoke. We are to be yoked with him to carry these burdens together. And the burdens of accomplishment, status, addictions and circumstances are not burdens to Christ who is, himself, infinite grace, love, strength and hope. On our own we are crushed. But as Paul declared in Philippians 4:13, **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”**¹²

¹⁰ II Corinthians 4:17-18 (NRSV)

¹¹ I’m indebted to Frederick Dale Bruner for this insight. *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 538.

¹² NRSV

Furthermore, when we are yoked to Jesus we begin to learn from him. That word ‘learn’ here in the original Greek is the root of the New Testament word ‘disciple’. That’s what a disciple is, a learner, an apprentice. It implies process, something that takes time. Jesus wants us to go to school with him so that he can show us his ways. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases this verse this way: **“Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”** That paints a beautiful picture of life with a teacher who is gentle and humble of heart.

So what are these unforced rhythms of grace? I think that they at least include the disciplines of the Christian life that Jesus teaches us and modeled for us. The rhythm of work and Sabbath. The rhythm of time at the beginning and end of each day listening to God in scripture and responding to God in prayer. The rhythm of gathering with God’s people Sunday morning for worship. The rhythm of feasting and fasting, receiving and giving away, speaking and silence, community and solitude. In these rhythms or practices we don’t so much accomplish anything as much as God accomplishes something in and through us because these rhythms are done in the yoke with Christ. This is allowing the reign of God, his Kingdom, into ordinary, daily life.

I love how the Scottish evangelist, Oswald Chambers, puts it, “The teachings of Jesus are not sets of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus. His teachings are a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting its way with us.”¹³

This past summer on Sabbatical I had a profound experience along these lines. I left for sabbatical last spring quite worn out, even discouraged. And part of the problem was that I was trying to carry too many burdens on my own strength. I see that now. Among other things, God taught me during my time in Africa that I needed to stay in my lane. Specifically, for too long I have thought it was my job to make fruit grow in the church. *I* have to make people come to believe. *I* have to make people change. *I* have to instill vision in the leadership. *I* have to make ministries and programs succeed. *I* have to make preaching stick.

This summer God humbled me. Since I’m a slow learner, he’s still humbling me. This may go on for a while; it’s a lesson that he’s going to be teaching me for some time. It all began with one verse from I Corinthians 3:7, **“Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”**¹⁴ It’s my job to love the church. It’s my

job to pray for the church. It’s my job to teach the church. Those unforced rhythms of grace are the work of a gardener. But a gardener can’t force fruit to appear and ripen on the vine. Neither is it my job to make the church grow. And it certainly isn’t my job to create growth in any of you. When I try to do so, I pick up a burden that will absolutely wear me out. I see that now. And I’m trying to come to Christ, to take his yoke upon myself.

Now please don’t get too hung up on my example. That’s my example. Don’t dwell on it. Let’s turn the focus now to you. What burden are you trying to carry in your life that is absolutely wearing you out? Where is life crushing you right now? Can you recognize it? Can you see the hopelessness in it? They say in business, ‘Your system is perfectly designed to give you the results you are getting.’¹⁵ If the results of your life are weariness, anxiety, fear, busyness, shame, guilt, insecurity, loneliness, hopelessness, then the system of your life needs to be changed. And Jesus’ invitation is simple: “Come to me. I will give you rest. Take my yoke. Learn from me.”

Sometimes I think we could all benefit greatly from sitting in regularly on a 12-step support group. In some ways, I wonder if the folks that gather down the hall in Room 2 here every evening for Alcoholics Anonymous are closer to understanding all this than many people who sit in church every Sunday morning. Some of you know the first three steps of AA and other 12-step groups:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.¹⁶

The other nine steps talk about how a person then goes about working all this out in his or her life.

An addiction to alcohol is just one of the crushing burdens which wears us out in life, one of the burdens out from under which we cannot escape on our own. You’ve got your own set of burdens. So do I. But the first step is always to admit that we are being crushed, that we’re worn out. Then we have to turn to look for help. The straight promise of the Christian Gospel is that if we turn to Jesus he will give us enduring rest. He is the only one who can give us rest. He will teach

¹³ Cited by Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 8.

¹⁴ NRSV

¹⁵ Source unknown.

¹⁶ Read all 12 steps at <https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/>

us, by his grace, how to live life. Ultimately, because he is God he will reveal God to us. What a joy it is then to discover that God is truly gentle and humble in heart. His yoke is easy. His burden is light. All we have to do is come to Jesus.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 11:25-30. What do you notice first here in Jesus' words?
2. Jesus' solution for weary and heavy-burdened people is to offer them a yoke, a symbol of work. What could this mean?
3. What is one thing that is wearing you out in life? How are you feeling heavy burdened? (Jeff mentioned the burdens of accomplishment, status, addiction/habit, and circumstance. Does one of those seem particularly heavy right now?)
4. Jesus talks here about rest for our souls. What would that look like for you?
5. Have you found Jesus to be the gentle and humble teacher he describes himself to be here?
6. What is the message Jesus has for you in all this?
7. How will you respond to Jesus' message? What is one step you can take this week?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is something we cannot do in life without God's help?