

“Refreshment from Jesus” Matthew 11:28-30

In my daily reading of Scripture, I am two-thirds of way through the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, most of which is comprised of the laws God gave Israel through Moses. As I am reading it I am once again reminded of how careful, how conscientious, and how vigilant every Jew had to be in order to properly observe all the laws, perform all the rituals, obey all the commands, offer all the sacrifices, avoid all the things that were unclean, and jump through all the hoops in order to become clean if somehow, even inadvertently, he/she became defiled.

It is a ponderous set of rules and regulations, and as I read them, I find myself being profoundly thankful that Jesus not only came to fulfill the law, but to set us free from the ceremonial aspects of the law.

Yet, as Paul said, the law is holy, righteous, and good (every part of it), because it reflects God’s holy character and reveals His expectations of how His people are to be holy as well. I repeat: the law itself is good. But as is the tendency with all things good, when man imposes His deceitful heart and will upon the law, God’s intentions can become obscure. And one of the primary ways this happens is when man uses the law as a means by which He can attain a measure of *self-righteousness*.

Self-righteousness is the smug, self-congratulatory conceit that comes from thinking that through your efforts and your vigilance in keeping God’s commands, you have impressed not only your peers, but God Himself. And self-righteousness is so deceptive that it often convinces its victims that they have arrived at moral perfection. It is so intoxicating that it often compels its victims to look for ways to set the bar even higher than God did, so they can *exceed* God’s standards and requirements.

This is precisely what had happened in Jesus’ day, particularly among the scribes and the Pharisees. These men loved the law. They were meticulous in the way they handled and observed the law, and they were careful to pay attention to every single detail in the law, because they wanted to make sure that God and others were impressed with their goodness. So conscientious were they that they went above and beyond the requirements of the law so they could be honored and congratulated for their “righteousness”.

And it worked, because the Jewish people held the scribes and Pharisees in very high esteem. They had a saying that “if only two people could go to heaven, one would be a scribe and the other a Pharisee.” That was because they were convinced that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees really did impress God. In fact, they thought God was so impressed that He wanted everyone in Israel to adopt their strict interpretations of the law and their strenuous standards. So, they imposed them on every Jew, and they confronted and scolded and shamed those who did not comply with them.

But these rules and regulations proved to be a tremendous burden for the Jewish population in the first century—a burden that became so heavy and cumbersome that it sapped their spiritual strength.

Of course, Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God knew this. In a series of damning accusations against the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, the first thing He said was, ***2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat...⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders...” (23:2-4).*** And this made Jesus furious.

But Jesus had compassion on the Jews who were victims of the Pharisees self-

righteous schemes, and He offered them a wonderful solution. We read in **Matthew 11:28-30**, ***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.***

I want to remind you that Jesus has been addressing some theological misunderstandings about God's plans and purposes, specifically about how the kingdom would look and what the Messiah would do. These misunderstandings were so great that most of the people in Israel, and almost all the religious leaders in Israel, were on a completely different page than God. So, when God began to establish His kingdom, they didn't recognize it; when God sent His Messiah, they rejected Him.

But in the previous few verses, Jesus said that it was His Father's will to hide these things from the wise and understanding and reveal them to little children. He also said that ultimate truth is only possible with divine enablement. Only Jesus knows the Father and His plans and purposes, and only Jesus can make Him known. And He *will* make Him known to those He chooses to reveal Him.

That doesn't mean Jesus is trying to conceal the Father. The reason He came to earth was to reveal the Father and make it possible for human beings to know Him intimately. And so, Jesus follows up these statements about His sovereignty with an open invitation. **Verse 28**, ***28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*** If we want to know the Father and receive the blessings and benefits the Father offers, we begin by coming to Jesus. Jesus said in another place, ***"no one comes to the Father except through me"*** (John 14:6).

But *who* gets to come to Jesus? The invitation is extended to all *who labor and are heavy laden*. The participle that is translated "those who labor" refers to toil that exhausts, and the emphasis is not so much the work itself, but the *weariness* that results from work. Jesus is inviting those who are weary from their spiritual journey, those who are exhausted from their spiritual efforts to come to Him. I'll tell you how I know this in a moment, but first, let's look at the other participle in this statement.

Jesus also extends an invitation to those who are "heavy laden" or "heavily burdened". The tense of this participle is perfect, and the mood is passive, which indicate that the burden has come from outside of themselves, and that they have been carrying this burden ever since it was placed upon them.

What are these burdens, and who put them on these people? On one occasion Jesus was dining at a Pharisees house and the Pharisee was astonished that Jesus did not wash before the meal. By the way, this was one of their self-imposed rules. And Jesus went on a veritable tirade. He said, ***"Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers"*** (Luke 11:46). Then, at the end of His series of indictments He said, ***"You have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering"*** (11:52).

Remember what Jesus was talking about in the context of Matthew 11? He was talking about the people's lack of *knowledge*—their theological ignorance. And that lack of knowledge was hindering people from entering the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees and Scribes were partly responsible. Because they had made Judaism a religion that was all about *self-effort* and *self-exertion* and *self-righteousness*. And in so doing they had missed the kingdom and missed the Messiah and missed God's provision for their spiritual health

and well-being. Worse yet, they had caused others to miss it, too, because they had imposed their insufferable rules and regulations on everyone else.

But Jesus says, “I’ve come to offer something to those of you who are worn out with self-effort and exhausted from the burden that has been placed on you by the scribes and Pharisees.” Look at the end of **verse 28**. ***28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.***

Invariably, when the Jews in this day went to the synagogue or the marketplace to hear a sermon from one of their teachers of the law, they didn’t come away from that sermon feeling refreshed or invigorated; they came away feeling guilty and shamed. Because these teachers just kept piling on the demands and formulas and prescriptions of how to live a God-pleasing life. And the massive weight of all these do’s and don’ts kept getting heavier and heavier, until it was unbearable.

Jesus says, “Not so with Me. When you come to Me, I will refresh you in such a way that you will have renewed vigor to carry your burden.” And *refreshment* is an accurate rendering of the word that is translated “rest”. Jesus is promising to replenish and renew the strength and energy and desire and motivation of those who come to Him.

But I want you to notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Come to me and I will *take off your burden*. I will relieve you of your obligation to obey God’s law.” Jesus is not telling His audience to stop working, take off the burden, and relax from now on. He actually goes on to invite us to work *with Him*, which, as we will see, is a completely different kind of work. **Verse 29**. ***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.***

Jesus is using a metaphor to describe what we would call *discipleship* (I’ll explain that in a minute). A yoke was a hand-made, wooden frame joining two animals (usually oxen) for pulling a cart or a plow or a heavy beam. A yoke allowed the farmer or the master to guide the animals and keep them under control.

So, it shouldn’t be surprising that a “yoke” was widely used in the ancient world as a metaphor for *submission*. A student was often said to be under the yoke of his teacher. There is an ancient proverb that says, “Put your neck under the yoke and let your soul receive instruction.

But “yoke” was also a common metaphor in Judaism for the law. There was a well-known saying in Judaism that went like this: “He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Law, for him shall be taken away the yoke of the [oppressor] and the yoke of worldly care; but he that throws off the yoke of the Law, upon him shall be laid the yoke of the [oppressor] and the yoke of worldly care.” There is another statement in a well-known Jewish book called the *Sirach* that invited people to the yoke of studying the Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament. (Sir. 51:25-26).

In Jesus’ day people understood this “yoke” to be not only the Torah, but the strict interpretations and traditions of the Pharisees. In this sense, the Pharisees were recruiting their own disciples, and these students would learn from them, or yoke themselves to them and become subject to them.

But Jesus says, ***“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...”*** Jesus is inviting His audience to be His student or His disciple, and the “my” and “me” in this phrase are emphatic. “Take *my* yoke upon you, indeed, the yoke that *I* offer, and learn from me, even *me!*” And His yoke, in stark contrast to the rigid, oppressive, exhausting yoke of the Pharisees, is a yoke that provides rest from the weariness and burden of religiosity. For, as He said in verse

27, Jesus has exclusive knowledge of the Father and His will, and His yoke will bring true learning. To learn from Jesus is to learn who God really is, what the law truly intends, and what the kingdom is truly like. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a disciple and therefore a learner. To follow Jesus means to commit oneself to a process of learning.

And this yoke brings rest because Jesus is *“gentle and lowly in heart”*. Jesus is stating why it is better to be yoked to Him than the Pharisees or scribes, who were harsh taskmasters when it came to observing the law. First, He is gentle, a word that could also be translated “meek”. It’s a word that has the same root as the word “friend” or “friendly,” and it conveys the idea of someone who is soothing, calming, or nurturing. It was used the calming effect of someone who worked with skittish animals, like a horse whisperer.

Aren’t you glad Jesus is *gentle*? Aren’t you glad He has a soothing, calming, and nurturing nature? Aren’t you glad that a patient and understanding Teacher who gently guides us into the truth?

But that’s not all. Jesus is also “lowly in heart,” which is another way of saying He is humble and unpretentious. This, again, is in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, *“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others”* (Matt. 23:5-7). What is that? It’s pride. It’s a haughty spirit.

But in contrast, Jesus is “lowly in heart.” Even though He is the Son of God, He voluntarily laid aside many of His divine prerogatives when He left heaven and came to earth. But His entire M.O. was about humbling Himself. He was born in a stable, grew up in an obscure village, and was a carpenter by trade. He never travelled beyond Israel, never owned a home, never had any money, and never hung around any VIP’s. More significantly, He never insisted on being first, never tried to win an argument, never tried to assert Himself, and never retaliated when He was wronged or accused. He was humble, even though He knew who He was—the Messiah, Son of God, King of kings, and Lord of lords.

And this gentle, humble Teacher invites us to be yoked with Him and learn from Him. And when we do, we will find rest for our souls. The concept of rest in the Jewish community was very much tied with their hope of the kingdom. The rest is an *existential* rest, which is what the prophets had predicted, and Israel had long hoped for. It is a profound peace (shalom), a sense of ultimate well-being with regard to one’s relationship with God and His commandments. God spoke of it through Jeremiah when He said, ¹⁶ *This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.* (Jer. 6:16).

Jesus is saying “I am the fulfillment of that promise. I am the one who is showing you the way and I will teach you how to walk in it. And when you become my disciple, you will discover the rest, the peace, the security that you have longed for.

And how can we have assurance of this rest? **Verse 30.** ³⁰ *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* Jesus is comparing and contrasting two kinds of discipleship. Discipleship under the scribes and Pharisees offered its students a very strenuous yoke and a very heavy burden. In other words, the demands were impossible, the obligations were unbearable, and they created an enormous amount of anxiety, frustration, and weariness.

Discipleship under Jesus offered its students an easy yoke and a light burden. In other words, the demands are manageable, the obligations are bearable, and He provides rest, reassurance, and refreshment. Yes, there are still demands and obligations as disciples of

Jesus—He doesn't remove the yoke or the burden—but His demands and obligations are possible. Unlike the Pharisees, what Jesus tells His disciples to do, they *can* do.

Which is interesting, because not long ago we studied the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus' commentary on the Law, which significantly raised the bar in terms of God's expectations for the behavior and attitudes and morality of His people. For example, murder (in God's eyes) is not just taking the life of someone, it is wishing they were dead. Adultery is not just sleeping with someone who is not one's spouse, it is wanting to. The moral bar that Jesus sets in the Sermon on the Mount is so high, that one can reasonably conclude that no one can possibly live up to God's standards. Especially because at the end of Jesus' commentary on the commandments He says, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48).

So how in the world is Jesus' yoke easy and His burden light? There are two primary reasons. First, through Jesus' death on the cross He would fulfill, once for all, God's sacrificial requirements for the forgiveness of sin. No longer would there be any need to perform all the rituals with the blood of animals through the Temple system that required waiting in long lines, going through a priest, butchering animals, and offering sacrifices. Now, Jesus simply invites us anytime, anywhere, to confess our sins because He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Talk about an easy yoke and a light burden!

Second, when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and when He talked about taking His yoke and carrying His burden, He knew that was going to provide a means by which His disciples *could* joyfully, enthusiastically obey His commands. And that is through the Holy Spirit—the Spirit that would indwell every follower of Jesus, the Spirit that He called the Comforter, the Counselor, the Helper, the Spirit who would empower and enable His disciples to obey all His commands.

There is not, in Matthew 11, a direct reference to the Holy Spirit (just as there is not a direct reference to the Holy Spirit in the Sermon on the Mount), but I don't think you can fully understand Jesus' offer of an easy yoke and a light burden without realizing that the Holy Spirit is the One who would make it easy and light.

If it was up to our self-effort and self-exertion to obey Jesus' commands, we would be just as stymied and frustrated as the disciples of the Pharisees. But He didn't leave it up to us. He gave us His Spirit, so that when Jesus asks us to do something, He gives the resources so that we can, indeed, do it.

Aren't you glad Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart? Aren't you glad His yoke is easy, and His burden is light? Aren't you glad He has made provision for everything we need to do everything He wants?

What a gracious and generous Savior!

“Refreshment from Jesus” Matthew 11:28-30

Main Idea: Those who come to Jesus will be relieved of their burdensome religiosity and find rest for their souls.

Jesus' Invitation to be Refreshed (28-30)

Coming to Jesus (28a)

“All who labor”

The meaning of “labor”

The cause of this weariness

“All who are heavy laden”

A burden placed upon them

The meaning of this burden

Refreshed by Jesus (28b-30)

The meaning of “rest” (28b)

The Giver of “rest”

The way to enter the “rest” (29-30)

Become “yoked” to Jesus (29a)

Learn from Jesus (29b-30)

He is gentle and lowly in heart

His yoke is easy and His burden is light