

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**Finding Rest In Jesus**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the things I've heard a few times over the last three months is how much quieter our lives have become. Everything moves at a slower pace when you suddenly cancel so many events. For a lot of people, spending time at home with the family became an actual possibility. Some even had to re-learn how to do that, how to live under the same roof and actually interact with each other. I hope, that despite all the turmoil and grief that this pandemic has caused, that our society would find a new appreciation for God's gift of rest.

Under the Old Covenant God made sure the Israelites rested. When God gave the third commandment, he gave himself as the example, having rested on day seven of creation. And one of the benefits of the Sabbath commandment was that labourers wouldn't have to work themselves to death. Everyone rested on the seventh day. No one did any work – "neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns." (Exodus 20:10, NIV)

Remember that the ten commandments were given just after God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt. In contrast with the gruelling daily work as slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were commanded to take a full day of rest each week under the Law of Moses. Even then, the Sabbath was intended to help God's people, not burden them. This was true of all God's commandments; they are given for our benefit, though we often don't treat them that way.

One time when the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus, they complained about his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath. And Jesus said to them, "the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath."
(Mark 2:27-28, NRSV)

We see this sort of thing repeatedly throughout the gospels. Jesus shows his disciples the true purpose of God's Law, but also that he is the fulfilment of the Law. One of the implications of this is that Jesus himself is our Sabbath rest. And this is what he means when he says:

"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 11:28-30, NIV)

Under the New Covenant, the Sabbath rest takes on a very different character. It is still for our benefit, but it becomes about learning from Jesus, and taking on his yoke. Now wearing a yoke doesn't sound very restful. It's what you'd put across a pair of oxen to pull your plough, or even on slaves to stop them running away. It was a very familiar symbol of burden and oppression and subjugation. But it was also a common metaphor for learning from a Rabbi and submitting to their teaching.

Unlike that placed on a beast of burden or on a slave, the yoke Jesus refers to is one that is willingly received by those who would be his disciples. And that's because it's not burdensome but life-giving. He's not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but he is gentle and humble in heart, as our text says. To take his yoke upon yourself is to be yoked to the one through whom the kingdom of heaven draws near, the kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion.

When Jesus says, "learn from me," he is calling us not just to read more of the gospel accounts about him, but to live as he lived. To be one who is gentle and humble in heart. To be one through whom God's kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is made present in this world.

There's a bit of a paradox here as he invites us to the difficult work of living out God's kingdom. To be gentle and humble in heart actually takes effort. Older translations use the phrase 'meek and lowly', the same 'meek' that we find in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5)

This is also given as a characteristic of Jesus, both here in Matthew chapter eleven and again in chapter 21. And our understanding of meek or gentle has to be in light of Jesus' own character. We don't see him being timid or ineffectual and he is certainly not what you might call a doormat. Jesus enters into arguments, speaks harshly about opponents, and overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple.

What we do see is that Jesus never promotes himself at the expense of others. St Paul describes a Christ-like nature as doing nothing out of selfish ambition, but placing the interests of others ahead of your own. This is not easy. Not for us who are born sinful, and who so readily act in selfish and self-serving ways. But Jesus calls us to follow him, to learn from him, to be his disciples. So, as we hear the invitation to 'learn from me', as we live as disciples of Jesus, who wear his yoke, how then do our souls find rest?

This promise of rest shouldn't be taken as some sort of unending holiday. God made this same promise to Moses as he was about to lead the Israelites into their wilderness journey. God promised to accompany his people along the way. He said to Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14, NRSV)

Wandering through the desert for forty years is not my idea of a restful holiday. But the focus here is on God's presence with them. And we see through the Exodus story that when the people trust God, he gives them water to drink and manna to eat. And even when they don't show much trust, he still provides for them.

This is perhaps closer to the sort of rest Jesus is meaning. God rested after creation, after he had provided everything this world needs for us to live. This was marred by the fall into sin, and so in one sense, we will only see true rest in the new creation. Rest then functions as a picture of salvation, of what will be when the world is finally ordered according to God's purposes and enjoys its full and complete Sabbath. In promising rest, Jesus promises life under God's reign in the new creation that he is bringing into being.

So, it's not so much that Jesus invites us to a life of ease here and now. Indeed, following him will be full of risks and challenges, as he has made abundantly clear. Yet, he still calls us to a life of humble service. A life yoked to Jesus under God's gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove ourselves. Free to rest deeply and securely in God's grace. And as we live this life, as we learn from Jesus, we do not simply attempt to duplicate the actions of our teacher. Rather, we rely on the ongoing presence of Jesus himself. This, too, is included in what Jesus means by 'rest'.

As Matthew reminds us early on in his gospel, Jesus bears the name of the one promised in Isaiah. He is Immanuel, 'God with us', and so all who take his yoke of discipleship upon themselves get to experience a foretaste of the new creation as they are sustained by the ongoing presence of the Creator. It is only fitting, therefore, that Matthew's Gospel ends not with Jesus' departure, but with the assurance of his ongoing presence: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

(Matthew 28:20, NRSV)

Our life as a disciple is grounded in our relationship with Jesus, and his very presence with us. And Jesus ultimately grounds the call to discipleship in his relationship with God the Father. 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."

(Matthew 11:27, NRSV)

To rest in Jesus means to rest in his righteousness and to know the Father through the Son. We are freed from any attempt to earn salvation, to somehow prove we can live a perfect life. We are freed from the burden of guilt for all those times where we don't measure up. And we are freed to live in God's presence, knowing that he is with us, knowing that life with him is ours forever, and knowing that Jesus is our true Sabbath rest. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.