

Rest from Carrying Heavy Loads

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July 5, 2020

- Matthew 11:28-12:14 Good News Translation ²⁸ “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”
^{12:1} Not long afterward Jesus was walking through some wheat fields on a Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began to pick heads of wheat and eat the grain. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to Jesus, “Look, it is against our Law for your disciples to do this on the Sabbath!”
³ Jesus answered, “Have you never read what David did that time when he and his men were hungry? ⁴ He went into the house of God, and he and his men ate the bread offered to God, even though it was against the Law for them to eat it — only the priests were allowed to eat that bread. ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law of Moses that every Sabbath the priests in the Temple actually break the Sabbath law, yet they are not guilty? ⁶ I tell you that there is something here greater than the Temple. ⁷ The scripture says, ‘It is kindness that I want, not animal sacrifices.’ If you really knew what this means, you would not condemn people who are not guilty; ⁸ for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”
⁹ Jesus left that place and went to a synagogue, ¹⁰ where there was a man who had a paralyzed hand. Some people were there who wanted to accuse Jesus of doing wrong, so they asked him, “Is it against our Law to heal on the Sabbath?”
¹¹ Jesus answered, “What if one of you has a sheep and it falls into a deep hole on the Sabbath? Will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² And a human being is worth much more than a sheep! So then, our Law does allow us to help someone on the Sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man with the paralyzed hand, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it became well again, just like the other one. ¹⁴ Then the Pharisees left and made plans to kill Jesus.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.”¹ You probably have heard those words of Jesus many times. You may not be able to recite them by heart, but they’re certainly familiar to you. And if this is the first time you’ve heard those words, the promise Jesus makes grabs your attention: “If you’re tired from a heavy burden, I will give you rest.”

We often hear these words of Jesus in a funeral or memorial service setting. When we hear Jesus saying, “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads,” they seem to speak of a bittersweet condition that can characterize the death of a loved one. That bittersweet condition is what we might think of as “the blessing of release”: that death is a release from the mental decline, the emotional turmoil or the physical pain that someone endured for their last days or months or even years.

Jesus telling us “...I will give you rest” gives us a sense of relief in the midst of our grief. As much as we miss the presence of someone dear, at the same time there is a sense of relief that our loved one has been released from a distressing, undeserved struggle at the end of their earthly life.

I’ve used those words of Jesus in that way many times in the past, and I’m sure I’ll do it in the future. But his words can speak to us in another way, too. We discover that when we consider the context in which Matthew placed them in his gospel. That’s often a helpful way to figure out what a Bible passage means: by looking at what was happening in the verses before or after the passage at hand.

In the case of “Come to me, all of you who are tired...,” let’s look at what those verses lead to in the next chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Chapter 12 begins with two stories regarding what you’re doing right now: figuring out an appropriate way to observe the Sabbath day of worship and rest.

¹ Matthew 11:28 Good News Translation

In Matthew 12:1-8 Matthew tells the story of Jesus and his disciples making a short trip on the Sabbath. (Religious rules promoted the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, so short trips were permitted on the Sabbath, but long trips were not.) Jesus and his disciples walked through a wheat field, and as some of the disciples casually passed their hands through the ripe heads of grain, kernels of wheat would sometimes stick to their hands, and so into their mouths they would pop that little snack of granola-on-the-go. Some religious traditionalists called Jesus on it: from their porches nearby they cried out, “Your followers are breaking the Sabbath rules. They’re doing the work of harvesting, work which is prohibited on the Sabbath.”

Technically, the disciples were removing grains of wheat from the stalk, which is what happens in the harvesting process. They violated the *letter* of the law. But was that their intention? Were they trying to do the work of harvesting? Of course not. Jesus reminded the onlookers that even King David violated the *letter* of the Sabbath law in order to feed his men.

Jesus proceeded to a nearby synagogue where some religious literalists were hoping to catch him breaking a Sabbath tradition. In the synagogue that day Jesus saw a man with a paralyzed hand. The leaders asked Jesus, “Is it permitted to work an act of healing on the Sabbath?” Jesus saw this not as a matter of performing work but rather performing an act of kindness. He offered his response to them in a rhetorical question: “If your sheep falls into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you grab hold of it and pull it to safety?” Then Jesus took the man by the hand and healed his deformity.

In both situations — the accidental harvest, and the healing on the Sabbath day — can you tell what irritated Jesus? When people try to make living a life that honors God more burdensome:

- Having to be careful how you feed yourself on your day of worship and rest? *Really?*
- Not helping someone you could help simply because it’s the day of worship and rest? *Really?*

Jesus wants us to discover God, to know God, to worship and serve God. Jesus bristled at rules and traditions that seemed only to get in the way, making it harder to live a life of faith. It was those nit-picky rules and regulations that were the “heavy loads” Jesus was referring to when he said, “Come to me, all of you who are tired of carrying heavy loads....”

What alternative did Jesus propose rather than learning and following all sorts of traditions and rules and practices and religious laws? Instead of trying to observe burdensome religious practices and nit-picky rules, Jesus suggested that we observe him. Observe his manner, his mindset. Follow his lead.

Here’s the mental image he used: yoked livestock. Most of us have never guided a team of mules or oxen as they pulled a plough through a field, but we have a general idea how it works. The yoke is a frame that fits around the necks of the livestock — usually in pairs. The yoke binds the two animals in parallel movement. What one does, the other does as well because they’re yoked together — one learns from the other.

Jesus told those who would follow him, “Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest....”

- ...Rest from the pressure of trying to meet someone else’s expectations for what you should do.
- ...Rest from the exhaustion of trying to fulfill an imaginary checklist of actions supposedly needed to make you worthy of God’s love.
- ...Rest from straining and pulling against a personal history of failed relationships and intentions that continues to weigh you down.

Because of God’s blessing of grace Jesus offers us rest from the heavy load of expectations. Jesus invites you and me to yoke with him as we strive to serve God. Bound to Jesus we will follow his lead, learning to live lives displaying a gentle and humble spirit.