

Rest for the Weary

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Isaiah 40: 28-31, Matthew 11:25-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened" says Jesus, "and I will give you rest."

Ah, rest for the weary, release from life's burdens! Come to Jesus and experience a life of comfort and ease. No more work. No more responsibilities. No more demands upon our time and energy. Sit back and relax and enjoy a life of leisure . . .

Is this what Jesus is promising - a care- free life of rest and relaxation?

It is pretty evident that Our Lord does not relieve us of life's burdens and responsibilities. In fact, if anything, there is a sense in which he greatly adds to them. Jesus reminds his followers: *"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees (and their requirements were very demanding), you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."* *"Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

The apostle Paul makes it clear that those who follow the Lord must bear not only their own burdens but must bear the burdens of others - the one who is strong should bear the burdens of the weak.

It seems that to be a follower of Jesus is to accept even more responsibilities and burdens in this life, called as we are to life of service, and yet here in this morning's text he seems to be promising an easier life. Can we make sense of this? Is it possible to double one's load and yet still find it easier to carry?

Have you ever tried to carry a bucket-full of water in one hand? The Chinese found that if you carry two buckets of water on a pole across your shoulders it is much less wearying. Or have you ever gone on an overnight hike and tried to carry your sleeping bag in your hand for five miles? Its exhausting. But, put it in a pack rack and you could easily carry two sleeping bags without much strain.

A farmer knows that the yoke his horses or his oxen wears enables them to pull their loads and accomplish the work that must be done. If the yoke doesn't fit, if it cuts and irritates the animals, he will get little work out of his team. But if the yoke fits smoothly to the shape of the animals, they can accomplish so much more.

Jesus, a carpenter, knew the importance of a yoke fitting (probably made a few himself) and knew that heavy loads could be carried without irritating or exhausting the animals. So when Jesus says, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy (that is, it fits),* he is offering us a way for us to carry our burdens and responsibilities –even though they be increased – so that they are easier to bear.

Let me explain:

The Pharisees and Scribes used to speak of the "yoke of the law."

Their religion was essentially a religion of the rule book. There were a thousand detailed "thou shalt's" and "thou shalt not's" and countless ritual requirements. It didn't take long for all this to become a terrible burden. Jesus himself said of the Pharisees: *"They bind heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders."* The practice of faith became a tiresome chore as they tried to win God's favor and the favor of others through righteous living. Ultimately God was lost in all the rules. There was precious little joy in that and not a lot of love.

So it can be for you and me -- our walk of faith can become only a matter of grudging duty -- a wearying struggle to live up to a demanding moral code. No wonder so many are burned out on religion. The life of faith was never meant to be like that. Such joyless, exhausting obedience -- certainly such a yoke does not fit our nature as children of God.

Jesus offers a different way.

First, he says, *"Come to me . . . Get to know me. Accept my invitation to become my follower and friend. Live in me and I in you."* The reason why so many find the life of faith so burdensome and wearying is because they are trying to live their Christian life apart from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They are trying to live it in their own strength and are finding it impossible. *"Come to me...."* he says. The life of faith is not about rule keeping, its about coming to Jesus, walking with the Lord, enjoying his companionship day by day, trusting him, relying upon him, expecting him to show up as we go about our daily tasks ...

"Come to me...."

And then he says: *"Take my yoke upon you."* His way -His yoke - is the way of love and grace. *"Look,"* he says, *"I already love you -- you don't have to prove anything to me. You are loved. I redeemed you at great cost. Now love me, and love others in all that you do."* He sums it up like this: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* In exchange for the yoke of the law and a religion of the rule book, which irritates and oppresses, Jesus offers the yoke of love. Its a yoke that fits -- it is not irritating or exhausting, but exhilarating and fulfilling.

Though our burdens be doubled (and our Lord requires much of us), we find them easier to bear, because we know God loves us and we love God and love makes the burden seem light. The heaviest burdens undertaken out of eager love of God and neighbor do not break us, but bless us.

There is an old story that tells of a man who came across a boy carrying yet a smaller boy, who was lame, upon his back.

"That's a heavy burden for you to carry" said the man. *"He's not heavy,"* replied the boy, *"he's my brother."*

Burdens are not heavy when we carry them in love.

So when Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest,"* he does not promise the end of hard work on our part, or freedom from life's burdens and responsibilities. But even as we carry them we find "rest."

The word "rest" actually it has two meanings: On the one hand, it means release from strain -- the kind of strain that comes from carrying loads unnaturally -- like the bucket of water or the sleeping bag in one's hands. And on the other, the word "rest" especially in its Hebrew form, has a strong connotation of refreshment, renewal of strength, release of energy.

Jesus' way is easy not only because we love, but because as we love, as we expend our energy to carry out the tasks he has for us, he makes his divine energy available to us so that the burden seems light. We find rest and refreshment even as we carry our load; we tap into new reservoirs of power so that what is impossible for us is possible with Him. As Paul said, *'I can do all things through him who strengthen me.'*

Isaiah knew the secret of that power: *"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."* By "wait upon" Isaiah means "serve" as a servant serves or waits upon his master" -- not "sit and do nothing." -- they that wait upon the Lord in loving service, who obey out of a sense of love and gratitude, shall find their strength renewed.

You and I must learn to draw on that power and expect it: Isaiah reminds us:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth doesn't faint or grow weary. His energy is inexhaustible."

As we gather around the Lord's table, he says to you and me:

Come to me and I will give you rest, refreshment, renewal of strength sufficient for all your needs. Take this bread and drink this cup, remembering all that I have done for you. Commune with me and feel the power of the Spirit working within you. Then go, love others even as I have loved you. Wherever you are, whatever you do, do everything in love. This makes the burden seem light.

If you and I will but accept and live by this love of God in Jesus Christ, though our burdens be doubled, we will find rest and renewal of strength: *"We shall mount up with wings like eagles. We shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint."*

Let us pray:

O God, grant us a deeper faith in our possibilities of living by this love in Christ. Let it be our goal day by day wherever we are. May we grow in this love which bears the burdens of life easily. Amen.