

“...All Who Are Weary and Heavily Burdened...” Matt. 11:28-30 9/20/20

This morning we continue in our series on Jesus’ famous invitation from Matt. 11. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30) We’ll focus today on the phrase “all who are weary and heavily burdened.”

On our Mexico mission trips, concrete day is the hardest day for the construction projects we do there. It’s the day we mix and pour a concrete roof, floor, or an outdoor pavilion. The day begins by moving the bags of cement from wherever they are stored inside out to the construction site. Each one weighs 50 kilos. A kilo is 2.2 pounds, so the bags weigh 110 pounds each. You would probably enjoy seeing us wrestle with them—sometimes man-handling them into a wheelbarrow (if one is available), sometimes sharing them between two people. Other people, who like showing off their strength, carry them by themselves, sweating up a storm in the process. It doesn’t help matters that the Mayan men, often just over 5’ tall, place them on their backs and walk happily along to the construction site, carrying them as though it’s no big deal! But the rest of us are experiencing what Jesus talked about when he invites those who are weary and heavily burdened to come to him.

What did Jesus have in mind when he talked to his original listeners about being heavily burdened? Listen to what he says a few chapters later about the Pharisees, the religious conservatives of his day. *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. (Matt. 23:1-4)*

The heavy burden here is the Old Testament law, as taught by the Pharisees. God gave the law as a gift to show his people how they were created to live, but the Pharisees had expanded and amended it to ridiculous lengths. For example, they created over 600 laws defining precisely what it meant to refrain from work on the Sabbath day! So one Old Testament law became 600! My wife and I recently watched a Netflix docu-drama called “Unorthodox,” which follows Esther Shapiro, a young New York City woman who chose to leave an ultra-orthodox Jewish sect. The show is pretty rough at times, but part of what struck me was the stifling effect of the rules which governed every part of a person’s life in that community- from the clothes they wear, to the food they eat, to the education they receive (or aren’t allowed to receive), to the strictly

prescribed roles for men and women. And it dawned on me that that's what life was like for every Jew in Israel in Jesus' time.

The law no longer functioned as a gift from God to reveal how we should live. Instead it became a burden that men and women attempted to follow to the smallest detail in order to be righteous before God, in order to please God. The problem was that they could never succeed in keeping the law! No one can! So it became a lifetime burden that got them no closer to being made right with God. That's probably what Jesus had in mind when he invited people to lay down their burdens and find rest in him. But there are other kinds of burdens, too.

Some of us are burdened with an inner need to be perfect, in order to somehow prove our worth. We have set unrealistically high expectations for ourselves at work, in our marriage, as parents, or how we keep our home or yard. Our perfectionism even spills over into our hobbies, as we must be the best runner, biker, or tennis player, adding still more stress to our lives as we can never quite achieve our goals. These burdens largely come from within ourselves. But other burdens come from outside.

In a Pearls Before Swine comic strip, Goat asks Rat, "Hey, Rat. Did you bring us a pie?" Rat replies, "This pie represents my future plans." He sets his pie down and says, "O look. Here comes 2020." Then he smashes the pie with a large mallet! In the final frame he is holding a large

vase while he says, "This vase represents my hopes and dreams." As he prepares to drop it, Goat replies, "We should go." Pig agrees, saying, "One step ahead of you."

There are things that just happen to us, like this year's pandemic, which can become huge burdens for us. We didn't choose them, but these burdens affect us in profound ways. We could get laid off from work, go through a divorce or the death of someone close to us, have a diagnosis of a serious illness for ourselves or someone we love, or have serious money issues. Getting good grades at school is a big burden for some, or we could be dissatisfied with our bodies. You get the picture. We carry all kinds of burdens. Jesus invites us to bring all of those burdens to him, too.

But that doesn't come naturally for many of us. John Rogers was a professor at Virginia Episcopal Seminary, where I did some of my study for ministry. Late one night he got a call from the bus terminal in Washington, D.C. from a young man who had grown up as an acolyte in John's church. He had gotten away from his faith and was deeply involved in drugs. He was out of work, estranged from his family, and without money. He asked John for help.

Rogers got into his car, drove across the river through the snowy streets and picked up the young man. As they ate supper that night at John's home, they talked about his dire situation. John asked him if he had

ever asked Jesus to help him with his troubles. The young man said, “No.” It had been too long since he had even thought about those things. Then he brightened and said, “You know, when I get myself together and start coming back to church, I’m going to ask Jesus to help me again.”

With great spiritual insight, Rogers replied, “My friend, it will never happen that way. If you think that you have to get yourself together on your own and then come to Christ, you will never do it. You’re going to have to come to Christ as you are at this moment, and then he will give you the strength to start getting things together.”

Some of us are carrying heavy burdens. It may be the weight of our sin that makes us feel we can never be right with God, no matter how hard we try. It may be a sense of needing to be perfect (or very, very good) in order to prove our worthiness. Or it may be circumstances around us that threaten to overwhelm us. You may very well be incapable of handling those burdens. It doesn’t matter, for Jesus extends grace to us as we are. What’s grace? Writer Anne Lamott puts it like this, “Grace means you’re in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own.” Come. Just as you are.

Jesus said, ²⁸*“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* (Matt. 11:28) What burdens are you carrying this morning? Jesus invites you to bring them to him, and he

will give you rest. We'll talk more next week about exactly how that works, but for today, why not bring your burdens to Jesus?