

Jesus Followers

A Real Rest

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Are you tired?

*We are a community of Jesus followers who
desire to spread hope and peace through a
loving faith.*

As a community of Jesus followers, we need to take time to consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This will help us better define who we are, what it means to be a community, and it will even tell us more about who Jesus is. There are lots of theories about how this works — some good, life-giving, and restful, but some bad, draining, and toxic. In Acts 15, as Shane told us last week, there were some who were trying to turn the Way of Jesus into something Jesus never intended.

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1

Peter’s response was simple, but effective:

“Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Acts 15:10–11

When we talk about following Jesus, do we talk about a yoke that nobody could ever bear? Do we talk about something that sucks the joy out of the room? Do we talk about something that seems like an unbearable burden? Or do we talk about a message of salvation through grace?

A yoke is a set of teaching and a way of life espoused by a rabbi. Some of the Pharisee believers wanted to place a heavy yoke on the Gentile converts, but Peter wouldn’t do it. Paul similarly said that he wouldn’t yield to them for a second (Galatians 2:5). Their refusal to conform to the demanding ways of the Pharisees was because of their understanding of the Way of Jesus.

Jesus himself said,

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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

I love Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this passage in the Message:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” Matthew 11:28–30

Jesus’s first line — “are you tired?” — resonates with me. I feel tired, and I bet that some of you are tired too. The yoke that many of us have borne has left us tired, worn out, and even burned out on religion. In St. John of the Cross’s seminal work *Dark Night of the Soul*, he calls this period in our lives the “Night of the Senses.” It’s a time when we become disillusioned with ritual and routine. The things we normally find happiness and peace in leave us more drained than fulfilled. In this time, we often feel weighed down by rules, regulations, and procedures, and this produces a sense of guilt.

We may ask, “What is wrong with me?” “Am I doing something wrong?” “Why am I not getting anything out of this anymore?” What’s really scary is when we feel this way about our prayer life, singing, reading the Bible, or even something like communion. It makes us scared that we are being judged by others who are still finding joy in these practices, and, even worse, it makes us feel like we have been rejected by God.

But St. John of the Cross suggests that instead of this season being a sign of God’s rejection, perhaps this is a sign that God is inviting us into a deeper relationship with him and that this season of despair is a way for the Spirit to purge us of lesser desires. It’s like when Israel offered sacrifices to God for five hundred years, but then the psalmists comes along and boldly ask if God even takes delight in burnt offerings or if he even needs sacrifices! They radically suggest that God doesn’t even need a tabernacle or temple to live among the people.

These feelings do not render void the gift of ritual, but they do suggest that the rituals are not the goal themselves; instead, they are pointing to a greater reality beyond themselves. This is what Jesus is getting at in his invitation in Matthew 11.

Come to Me

*Come to me. Get away with me and you'll
recover your life. I'll show you how to take a
real rest. - Matthew 11:28-30, Message*

When we come to Jesus, we must come to him naked, with our egos stripped bare and our deeds and rituals cast aside. We mustn't hide behind the fig leaves of our piety or clothed with the skins of sacrifice and offering. Instead, when we find no more fulfillment in things below or things above, we embrace the fact that Jesus *desires* us. In "The Hound of Heaven" (1890), Francis Thompson writes about how God relentlessly pursues us. Towards the close of the poem, he imagines God saying,

All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!

We think that we might find real rest in our good deeds, in our rituals, or in our acts of worship, but the real rest is found in simply embracing the invitation of Jesus to hold his hand and follow him. And this is more than mental assent, this is placing an undying faith in our Lord and Brother. As Kierkegaard complained about some of his contemporaries, God is not looking for assistant professors; Jesus is searching for followers. This sentiment was also expressed by Brother Lawrence, a man who found God in the monastery kitchens, where he made bread and washed dishes while constantly communicating with God.

All that I have heard others say, all that I have found in books, all that I have written myself, seems savorless, dull, and heavy when compared with what faith has unfolded to me of the unspeakable riches of God and of Jesus Christ.
Christ alone can reveal Himself to us.
We toil and exercise our mind in reason and in science, forgetting that therein we can see only a copy, while we neglect to gaze on the incomparable original.
In the depths of our soul, God reveals Himself, if we but realized it, yet we will not look there for Him. We leave Him to spend our time in foolish behavior or speech, and pretend to scorn communing with Him, who is ever-present, who is our King.
It is not enough to know God as theory from what we read in books, or feel some fleeting affection for Him that is brief as the wave of feeling or glimpse of the Divine that prompts them.
Our faith must be alive, and we must make it so, and by its power lift ourselves

beyond all these passing emotions to worship the Father and Jesus Christ in all their divine perfection. This path of faith is the spirit of the Church, and will lead to great perfection.¹

Walk With Me

Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. - Matthew 11:28-30, Message

As Dallas Willard and John Mark Comer both say, Jesus has called us into apprenticeship. Some of you know what being an apprentice is like. You may have grown up on the farm, following your dad or mom around as they planted, worked horses, mended fences, or operated machinery. Often, they would give you a chance to try and fail at what they were doing, and then they would patiently teach you how to do it the right way, the way their parents may have taught them. For others, your experience may be different. Your dad might have yelled at you for holding the flashlight the wrong way. Thankfully, Jesus isn't going to do anything like that.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't find his rest in the temple or in the synagogue. These were often places of conflict. The crowds and the questions, though he could deal with them with ease, wore on him. Instead of approaching God in the conventional way, Jesus found rest in solitude with God in fasting and prayer. He would travel into the mountains and spend days with his Father, much to the chagrin of his disciples.

In Mark 1, after Jesus was baptized, he didn't capitalize on the preaching opportunity that inevitably followed the appearance of God in a dove and in a voice. Instead, the Spirit called him away into the wilderness for forty days. After his time in the wilderness, Jesus began preaching in Galilee, called his disciples, healed a man with an unclean spirit in Capernaum, and healed many in Simon's house. Just as it looked like his ministry was picking up steam, Jesus woke up before anyone else and went to a deserted place to pray. Simon and friends hunted for Jesus, and when they found him, they got onto him for going away! Everyone was looking for him, but Jesus wasn't interested in any of that. Instead, after his time of reflection and prayer, he went on to the next town.

We may believe the lie that we do not have time to pray. I know I have in the past. But we can, and should, make time. In fact, prayer should be one of our top priorities, and we should use

¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1999), 23.

language like “well I guess I’ll make time for that” for other things like work and even eating. Martin Luther, at the height of the reformation, allegedly said, “I am so busy that unless I pray more hours every day, I won’t get anything done.”² Prayer isn’t some kind of item we have to mark off of a laundry list; it is a two-way conversation with our Father. If Jesus, the sinless Son of God needed times of solitude and prayer, then don’t we? Are we better than he is?

Two things I do regularly as a form of prayer are hike and run. Hiking is a great way for me to spend time alone with God, praying, and meditating on the good things Jesus has done for us. While I hike and even while I run, I’ll often discover a sermon idea or thought that causes me to come to a stop, take out my phone or my notebook, and scribble a few ideas down. These moments are precious to me, and they are more than recreation; they are how I can keep my spiritual tank full week by week.

You may find different methods helpful to you: sewing, fishing, mowing the lawn, working in the flower garden, or even washing dishes and cooking like Brother Lawrence. These are moments the soul needs, and we need to assist our brothers and sisters when we can in creating these moments. We might offer to babysit, watch the dogs, or even offer to do something around the house for them so they can enjoy a time of solitude with God. But being able to perceive that our brother or sister might be tired means knowing each other, and knowing each other means living in a community and spending time in conversation with each other. This is why James requires his audience to confess their faults to each other; it isn’t an opportunity for shame, judgment and gossip, but it’s a time for healing, reconciliation, and offering a helping hand.

Live Freely and Lightly

*I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on
you. Keep company with me and you'll
learn to live freely and lightly. -
Matthew 11:28-30, Message*

If Jesus’s burden is light, why do both Paul and Jesus liken the life of a believer to one of crucifixion, dying and rising again? We are called to crucify ourselves, not because Jesus’s yoke is heavy, but because we must die to all of the burdens we have placed upon ourselves. We think to ourselves, “Surely, it can’t be that easy!” Jesus responds, “It is that easy, and don’t call me Shirley.” I hope that makes you laugh because it *is* funny! Of course, it is also sad that we have labored so

² Heuser, Roger; Shawchuck, Norman, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010, p. 39).

long under a burden that nobody can bear — a burden so heavy that even Jesus had to go into the wilderness to ask his Father for help.

But once you admit that Jesus’s Way is actually easy and his burden is light, a freedom will come over you like no other! Blessed is he who is in on the joke! There is no condemnation in Christ. All of the anxiety we have about religion, about our walk with Christ, all of the questions we have about who is doing it right and who is doing it wrong, all of the years we’ve spent worrying about our relationship with God—none of this comes from God! Jesus wants to set us free from this way of thinking.

God isn’t like how the one talent man says he is! He doesn’t reap where he does not sow, and he doesn’t expect us to walk one hundred miles in the desert on our knees repenting.³

In Philippians 3, when Paul talks about dying with Christ, the emphasis is on dying to all of the things he felt were important.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. Philippians 3:7–9

So let’s see this in action. Right after Jesus makes this grand invitation to embrace his easy Way and live lightly, he invites his disciples on a walk through the grain fields on the Sabbath.

An Example of Light Living

*But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.
Matthew 12:7*

Here’s the story:

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? How he entered the house of God, and they ate the

³ Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_wildgeese.html

bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests?

Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:1–8

Accepting that Jesus’s Way is easy and light is one thing; living it is another. Sometimes, Christians agree that the way is easy, but their practices do not reflect this. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing —there’s nothing wrong with methods and following a particular procedure. In fact, many Christians find a great deal of peace and security in observing the liturgical calendar in their congregation. Sometimes, though, we should embrace our freedom just because we can.

Jesus didn’t have to lead his disciples through the grain fields. He didn’t have to let them eat the heads of grain, something they probably saw their rabbi do a time or two. But he did. The Pharisees were beside themselves. They may have said something like, “Well just because you can doesn’t mean you should! Why can’t you just keep the peace by observing our traditions?”

Traditions are fine. We all have traditions. But when tradition becomes an idol and keeps us from living lightly, then that’s how we know it’s time to go through the fields and pick some grain! You were undoubtedly raised with a certain set of principles and ideas. Maybe you were taught a particular way to worship. But now, you know there is freedom in Christ. Knowing it is one thing, but have you ever picked grain on the Sabbath just because you can? Have you ever stepped out of your comfort zone because you were hungry for more and you were tired of denying yourself what you felt called to do?

This reminds me of a quote from Terry Tempest Williams:

For far too long we have been seduced into walking a path that did not lead us to ourselves. For far too long we have said yes when we wanted to say no. And for far too long we have said no when we desperately wanted to say yes. . . .
When we don't listen to our intuition, we abandon our souls. And we abandon our souls because we are afraid if we don't, others will abandon us.⁴

Remember the words of Jesus:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

⁴ Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice*

I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." Matthew 11:28-30