

“Lay Your Burden Down”

Matthew 11: 28-30



Dr. Will Cotton
Senior Pastor

Take a deep breath. The early Thanksgiving has provided you and me a gift, an extra few days before the Advent/Christmas blitz. Quite often, the Sunday after Thanksgiving is the first Sunday of Advent, but this year we have a one Sunday gap, a spot to breathe and gather our wits, in our family lingo, to “chill”. To do so, we will have to make a very deliberate act that will seem absolutely counter-intuitive.

When I look at Jesus, I see a very busy man, but he rarely seems to be in a hurry. He had the biggest job of all, saving the world, and yet he seemed to always have time for the people he wanted to touch, time to pray, and time to reflect on what he was doing and why. On the face of it, Jesus was the perfect picture of “easy-going”. That’s why us driven type A’s just can’t relate to Jesus, right? I’m not so sure. For I believe that the picture we have of Jesus has been planted mainly by artwork and less by God’s word, “the Jesus who holds lambs a lot.” Our picture of Jesus is that he is always in control, never belly laughing and screaming only twice (once at the temple and once at the cross). I don’t believe that picture for two reasons. The first is that nobody would follow somebody like that. He would have been boring. That may be the greatest sin of the church – to make Christ boring. I’ll blame the Puritans for that one. The Bible says that people were attracted to him, yes by his miracles, but also because he spoke with authority. Jesus was magnetic and dynamic in both his words and his actions.

We have also made him dispassionate. The artistic Jesus has glowing eyes and an occasional halo, but rarely is he pictured giving someone a playful shove or getting in somebody’s face to make a point. What was he like at the marriage party at Cana or at the meals with “the tax collectors and the sinners?” What was he like when he spoke of King Herod saying, “You go tell that fox...” or when he told Peter, “Get thee behind me Satan?” So did Jesus ever get stressed out? Some would say that he trusted his heavenly father so much, that he never did. But the Bible will not allow that. Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and their refusal to receive him and the message of the kingdom of God. Jesus sweats drops of blood over his coming death, wondering whether the experiment of the kingdom could be carried out by disciples who couldn’t even pray with him for an hour. Jesus stresses out that the religious leaders of his day shun children, blame the last and the least for their situations, and made a mockery of true worship and faith. The gospel picture is not of a milk-toast, “always in neutral” Jesus, but of a Jesus who full lived in the moments of his life. At the same time, Jesus knew when to step out of the crush of life and rest. In so doing, his perspective is clear. He is able to sort out when he can wait awhile and when its time to act. He is able to sort out what is important and what is not. Great leaders not only teach well, but they also model what they teach.

Jesus lived the words of today’s scripture lesson,

“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden 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.”

In Handel’s *Messiah*, these verses are done first by a soprano soloist followed by a chorus that is one of

the most lyrical and at times burdensome of the choruses. Many choirs leave it out. But it is meant to be dance-like and playful. The idea is that once we have given him our burden then life is freer, energized and more fun. And yet, I am aware that this season is often for most people, the most burdensome of all.

The first burden is unrealistic expectations. Smile, it's Christmas! We feel the constant pressure to be "up" and "happy," when there are things like end of year demands, past holiday experiences, and hidden conflicts that can make the smile of Christmas the ultimate sham. And I fear that the church may add to that sham. We don't live in the days of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and the night is never "silent." Romantic quaint Bethlehem wasn't quaint or quiet then, either. It was overrun and in bedlam, as people came into pay taxes to a government that they resented. Advent and Christmas is about Christ coming into the confusion, pain and realities of life, not by creating a false reality.

The second burden is financial, as we feel continual pressure to measure our love by the expensiveness of our gifts. People are gathering for days ahead of time to get the PS 3 at a cost of \$600.00. One computer chain actually opened on Thanksgiving evening from 9:00pm – midnight. The Christmas crush is moving earlier. But retailers are concerned this year because the "sentiment index" is down from 93.2 to 92.3. I must confess that I had never heard of the sentiment index. It measures how generous we are feeling in this shopping season. It adds up to lots of money. The article I read said that even though our economy is good, people are tightening their belts because of financial stress. I wonder if Christ would consider this development so alarming. What if we chose to measure our love by time spent and love expressed more than by adding to our debt structure? I wonder if the true "sentiment index" would be much higher. But the burden to get what is best, what is newest, and keeping up with "the Jones" (who never really exist like we think they do) hold us hostage in a big way.

The third burden is time-related. There is so much to be done in such a small window. How do we find the freedom to "just say no?" The season tries to create supermoms, superdads, superteachers, and even superChristians. What the season really creates is burned-out, depressed and love-deprived people, who can only relax with a drink.

Add to that our personal burdens that are with us no matter what the calendar says. Health concerns come or remain. Work situations arise or continue. And then we're right back to where we started with unrealistic expectations and the cycle continues...

Or does it? The invitation of Christ is to one specific group of people, "Those who are heavy laden." The picture here is of a beast of burden, most likely an ox, that has been overloaded by its master. Life does that to us, doesn't it? And we also do it to ourselves. These are those who are "hard working," yet never seem to get ahead. They are the "worn out," the "burned-out," and the "overwhelmed." I said they were a select group, but also a very large one. Jesus invites them to lay down their burdens and receive the gift of his rest. But the way to get this rest, this peace is the strange turn of this life lesson from Jesus. He says, "Take my yoke upon you..." The yoke is in the words of Dale Bruner is "an instrument of work". At first, that sounds like every other part of life where all people do is add on to the load and expect you to do it in the same amount of time. As Adam Clarke writes, "Strange paradox! A man already weary and overloaded must take a new weight upon him, in order to be eased and find rest!" Exactly. And the truth is that is what we all yearn for that in the long run. In the short run, we would like to be burden-free, but we would soon be bored. The truth is we need to be "at work" for something. So obviously the rest and peace Jesus promises is something like the Sabbath rest of the book of Hebrews. We enter into it and it becomes a part of everything we do.

Oswald Chambers writes,

"... and I will give you rest," i.e., I will stay you. Not - I will put you to bed and hold your hand and

sing you to sleep; but - I will get you out of bed, out of the languor and exhaustion, out of the state of being half dead while you are alive; I will imbue you with the spirit of life, and you will be stayed by the perfection of vital activity.

But what we have not talked about are the three most important words of the text: “Come to me.” Quite often, that is where the problem is. We don’t want to come to Jesus for the answers and the strength we need, because we still think we might be able to come up with our own answer and find our own strength. We are like the old Excedrin commercial, where the irritable person with the headache refuses the help of a friend saying, “I’d rather do it myself.” We want to be self-sufficient, rather than God-supplied. We want to be self-reliant and not God-dependent. So we wait until we “hit bottom,” until “the wheels come off” before we come to Christ. In so doing, we deny who we are. We are human beings, created by God: designed to be in relationship with God and filled by his Spirit. When we act, talk, and think only in ourselves we are less than we can be. We are like the man who has a brand new Mercedes who chooses to push it all around town, just because he can. All he has to do is take his key and put it in the ignition, but that would mean relying on another power. We take on ourselves impossible yokes and the world then starts piling on, and we’re too proud to “come to Jesus.”

The theme for Advent this year is *Even So, Lord Jesus, Come*. You can get a jump on advent, by hear this truth. Jesus comes to those who come to him, because he is already here! And the picture I have right now comes as a combination of Psalm 23 and John 10. In Psalm 23, the sheep, that have been injured trying to feed themselves, come to the shepherd and he pours oil on their wounds. They experience healing and relief. Back to another headache commercial, “How do you spell relief?” J-E-S-U-S. David writes, “You anoint my head with oil. My cup runneth over.” When we come to Jesus we are overwhelmed not by stress but my amazing love and amazing grace. How long has it been since you have let Christ do that for you? According to John 10, Jesus is that good shepherd who “knows us by name and leads us out.” We are not forgotten and we are not just going through the motions. We have purpose and we have significance, not in ourselves but rather in the fact that we are God-related. In the words of our scripture lesson, “He lets us trade in that old oppressive and overloaded yoke, for his lighter yoke.” And this burden is light, because it is a shared burden. For the truth is, this is a yoke for two - and the yoke is uneven. Christ takes the heavy part and you take the lighter part. And the result is rest, true rest. Thanks be to God.

P.S. As I printed this sermon, I noticed that the print was hard to read and faded. It was that way when I printed last week’s sermon, only now it was even more faded. I opened the cupboard above our desk and there was a brand new cartridge. I bought it several weeks ago. The choice was “Do I just use the one I printed and maybe even use it one more time when the cartridge will be even more empty?” or exchange the cartridge. I exchanged the cartridge. After all, the cartridge was already provided. I wonder if I will be so smart with my self-imposed, world-imposed burden. I wonder if you will be that smart. Come to him. Don’t wait another minute.