

Rest, part 2

“The Rest Given”

Matthew 11:28-30

Pollsters poll everything. 2000 persons were surveyed to rate 200 common activities as to their importance and pleasure content on a scale of one to ten, ten being highest. “Going to church” ranked quite high at 8.5, but it was tied with “sleeping.” I’m not sure how those results should be interpreted. Perhaps, for many, going to church and sleeping are essentially the same activity.

A correlation between rest and the presence of God is certainly intended in the teachings of Scripture, but I’m not sure that sleeping in church quite captures what Jesus has in mind when He says, “Come to me ... and I will give your rest.” This promise encourages us. Clearly, Jesus is speaking of eternal rest, but, almost instinctively, we sense that He must also have something more immediate in mind as well that ministers to our hearts and minds in the here and now.

There are times that we yearn for rest. In 2005, Maria, a German housewife and mother of three discovered that she faced three months in jail for parking fines amounting to \$5000 racked up by her chronically unemployed husband with a car registered to her. Maria said, “At first I was really worried about it ... but then I looked at it as a chance to get away ... As long as I get food and a hot shower every day, I don’t mind being sent to jail. I can finally get some rest ...” Police reported that when they went to arrest Maria, “She seemed really happy to see us ...”

When we were last together, we began looking at this Bible text focusing not so much on the promise of rest itself as on the One Who would articulate such a promise. Who is Jesus to make such a promise? According to verse 27, there is a mutual and exclusive knowledge between the Father and the Son of one another. Because Jesus knows the Father as no one else does, only He can disclose the Father’s nature to us. Also, the Father “committed” all things to Jesus. In other words, revealing the Father’s intent for mankind is why Jesus came. So, when Jesus makes a claim that rest for our souls can be found in Him, He merits our undivided attention.

If Jesus knows the Father, then He understands the Sabbath-rest into which His Father calls His people. That settled, we can now focus more on that promise of rest itself for those who come to Jesus:

²⁸“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.” – Matthew 11:28-30

I. A Biblical Description of this Gift of Rest

A. Jesus Is Not Primarily Addressing Rest for the Body

It is important that we consider the texts that immediately flank this one. First, Jesus prayed:

... “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the *wise and learned*, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. – Matthew 11:25, 26

Then, the next thing that occurs *after* Jesus spoke of rest was a confrontation between His disciples and the Pharisees over properly keeping the Sabbath, that “day of rest” required by the Law. Those allegedly “wise and learned”, the religious establishment – the scribes, chief priests and, especially, the Pharisees – had many rules for proper Sabbath-observance. However, there were severe contradictions between their institutional notion of Sabbath-keeping and the idea of rest advanced by Jesus, Who claimed to uniquely understand the Father.

Jesus was not speaking to people in need of physical rest, but to those worn down by a taxing religion of works. The way to God promoted by the Pharisees was spiritually draining, for no matter how much a man did, he knew that he could never be holy like God is holy. One day, Jesus soon would blast the Pharisees for placing these heavy burdens on others. For now, “I will give you rest” were words of rescue to a people weary from trying to earn God’s favor.

Jesus was saying, “The Pharisees say that they are teaching you the way to God, but in fact, they are just wearing you out. Their religious rules are not the way to God. They don’t know the Father. I do and I also know His best for your soul. Come to me, and I will give you His rest.”

Note that Jesus says, “I will *GIVE* your rest.” In one brief promise, Jesus undercuts a major premise of pharisaic teaching. A gift is not earned. If it were, it would be a wage, not a gift. If you feel the weight of your sin and the fear of not knowing that you really stand in fellowship with God, then I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that there is not a thing you can do about it. Someone without sin must lift that burden and fear from your back. The good news is that a holy Someone can, and He wants to. His only demand is: “Come to me.”

B. This Gift of Rest Demands a Response

To come to someone is to put distance between yourself and whatever is behind you. To come to Jesus, you must leave your sins, but that’s the part any soul hungering for God longs to leave. To come to Jesus, you must also leave behind all your self-reliant tendencies. To come to Jesus is to rely on Him and no longer upon yourself. This “coming” demands both repentance and trust.

This is why so many people who say they believe in Jesus never feel rested. They have a flawed grasp of what it means to come to Him. The freedom He offers sounds great, but their idea of freedom resists His calls to service and obedience. “That sounds like works,” they say, but their idea of freedom is mere illusion. They do not abandon cherished vices and remain slaves to sin. They do not come to learn of Him. Some avoid baptism not because of any doctrinal confusion on the matter, but rather, because it is such a self-effacing and humbling statement. But, if Jesus can really deliver rest, does He not have every right to define what coming to Him entails?

If the church is to fulfill her task of calling people into the rest Jesus offers, then we need to be unembarrassed in communicating that rest means coming to the Person of Jesus as the Bible shows them how to do that.. The message has to be unambiguous: “Rest is secured by Jesus. You will find relief. You will find forgiveness. You will find newness for your life.” Jesus will give all of this to any sinner who heeds His invitation. Then, once safely inside the fold of grace, there are other dimensions to the rest Jesus gives us that we will begin to discover.

II. The Practical Discoveries of this Gift of Rest

A. For What “Rest” Was Jesus’ Audience Craving?

Jesus offers rest to anyone who is “weary and burdened,” but it may seem strange to our ears that the very next words out of His mouth are: “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me ... and you will find rest ...”? That doesn’t sound like rest. “Take my yoke.” That sounds like work. “Learn of me.” That sounds like ... school. It’s nice that Jesus offers rest, so why this “catch”? But, to those who heard Jesus for the first time, there was nothing objectionable to labor or learning. They were not looking for a “rest” that simply spelled the cessation of activity.

To thoughtful Jews, “sabbath-rest” had to be more than just pausing to catch one’s breath. The various Old Testament words translated “rest” described security, peace and the absence of fear. The true rest God has for us begins internally. A laborer can take a break and be in inward turmoil. Another can take up his plow in perfect peace. Rest is traced directly to one’s standing before God. Jesus was speaking to Jews who yearned for sabbath-rest and must have sensed that the demands imposed on them by the Pharisees could never capture God’s idea of rest.

B. True Rest is Restful Even when We Are Working

Rest is not indefinite idleness. Too much idleness is dangerous to the soul. Jesus lifted a heavy burden off our backs when He freed us from sin. He loosed us from a heavy yoke when He taught us to stop trying to win God’s favor by our own efforts. But, is that the end of the matter? No, we must serve someone. Christ gives us rest from the oppression of sin and legalism, but He does not call us into an endless “sleep-in”. We need a new Master. We need a new King to govern our lives, for self-rule is disastrous. We need a new yoke to bear. Can we do that and still live with our souls at rest? Charles Spurgeon likened our lives to a stream. I paraphrase:

“A little stream flowed through a manufacturing town. It was an unhappy little stream for it was forced to turn huge wheels and heavy machinery, and it wound its miserable way through factories where all sorts of industrial waste were dumped into it. The little stream hated itself for being so vile and polluted.

“A rescuer looked upon the stream and said, ‘I will rescue you and give you rest.’ So he dammed up the stream and said, ‘Just sit in this reservoir where you are safe from defilement.’ But in just a few days, the stream found it had only exchanged one kind of defilement for another. It was stagnating. The nature of a stream is to flow. Every hour the stream grew more restless. In fact, it never found rest until it was permitted to pursue a new course especially prepared for it through the meadows and the cornfields. When it watered the plains and blessed the villages, it was a happy stream, perfectly at rest.”

Our souls were not created to serve evil but neither were they created to be stagnant pools of inactivity. We were created for holy activity. Spiritual rest is not spiritual idleness. In fact, we can never know rest until we are engaged in some holy work for which God has created and gifted us. We find our wholeness as people in Jesus, but we only discover that wholeness under His yoke.

The yoke Jesus gives us is “easy” in that it is well-fitted as opposed to harsh or painful. His burden is “light” in that He calls us to labor that suits us. His yoke is not to be endured, but enjoyed. We must trust that He has gifted each one of us to serve Him and foster spirits that ask, “What can I do?” The Christian is never happier or more at rest than when he is serving Christ and His people as God has equipped him. When Jesus calls us into rest, it is not to spend endless hours in mindless recreation or frivolous play, but to lovingly wear a yoke fashioned just for us.

C. True Rest Is Restful Even when We Are Learning

For some, learning doesn’t sound restful, but stressful:

A young lady reported ill-prepared for a college final, which consisted only of “yes/no” questions. She took her seat, stared at the exam, and then in a fit of inspiration removed a coin from purse and started flipping it – “Heads” meant yes. “Tails” meant no. In no time, she was done while the rest of the class was still sweating it out. But, in the last few minutes, she was desperately flipping the coin again.

The amused moderator, who had been watching, asked, “You finished a half-hour ago. What are you doing now?”

She responded, “I’m checking my answers.”

“Learn of me for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Real rest comes as we grow to understand Jesus and, like true disciples of old, become like Him. He never said, “Learn of Me, because I know how to get things done!” That might impress the natural man, but Jesus promises rest on the basis of His gentleness and humility. To master these traits is the true road to rest.

Jesus calls us into His “gentleness.” Older translations render the word for “gentle” as “meek”. This is a preferable translation only if one understands what meekness is. The Greek word for “meek” or “gentle” was used of livestock that had been broken of any resistance to the yoke, bit, bridle, saddle or other implement needed to harness the animal’s strength for useful service. No man can bear a yoke restfully, not even Jesus’ yoke, unless he does so in meekness.

The Greek word for “humble” was used in the secular world scornfully. In Greek culture, all things revolved around human achievement, so to be low on the social scale, to be poor or to be powerless was shameful. The Bible, on the other hand, measures all things against the perfection of God. That we are humble is a given, but to recognize our humility is virtuous in God’s eyes. It evidences that we rightly see ourselves and that we somewhat rightly appreciate the holiness of God.

Without humility and meekness, even service to Jesus becomes tedious. Pride inevitably gets in the way. We get angry if our service is criticized. We sulk when we are not thanked. We resent others who work less. Without humility and meekness, there is no rest in serving Jesus because we will be trying to serve Him in a very driven, competitive, critical and “un-Jesus-like” way.

But, in humility and meekness, we find His yoke to be pleasant. We do not want it lifted. If we are denied kudos for our service, that’s okay. We long only for praise from Jesus. If we never amass earthly fortune or fame; that is fine, for our hearts will say, “I have learned the secret of being content in all circumstances.” As we learn and reproduce the Person of Jesus in our lives, we will find rest for our souls even in the midst of labor ... even in the midst of trials.

"I am gentle and humble in heart." Whenever we do commit ourselves to learning whatever can make us more fruitful in God's kingdom, these are seldom the traits we pursue. We want to learn how to get things done and make things happen. No one scours Christian bookstore shelves for titles like *How to Be Meek* or *How to be Humble*. Nevertheless, we have it on Jesus' authority that these virtues are basic to our bringing forth spiritual fruit, a fruit which includes rest.

D. True Inward Rest Is Independent of Outward Circumstances

"Learn from me ... and you will find rest for your souls." Hardships may come. Trials may test us, but the ability to rest in Jesus is completely independent of our outward surroundings.

At a Florida nursing home, residents were overheard discussing their ailments:

"My arms are so weak I can hardly lift this cup of coffee," said one.

"Yes, I know, my cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee," replied another.

"I can't turn my head because of the arthritis in my neck," said a third.

"My blood pressure pills make me dizzy," another said. Several others nodded.

"I guess that's the price we pay for getting old," added one old man.

There was agreement and a short moment of silence until one cheerful old woman said, "But it's not all bad. At least we can all still drive!"

We think that if our circumstances were different, our inner peace might be greater. But, if you cannot be at rest in poverty, you likely would not be at rest if you were rich. If you cannot be at rest in your trials, any rest in times of blessing may be unsure. Is your heart in harmony with Him Who is "gentle and humble in heart"? Men have sat on thrones only to find them uncomfortable. Cultivate the mind of Christ and know rest; an abiding rest that is not fickle.

E. Be Still, for Old Habits Die Hard

Dr. Daniel E. Fountain, a medical missionary in Africa recounts the following story:

"One day the chauffeur of our hospital pick-up truck in Africa was driving to one of our health centers. He noticed an elderly lady struggling along the road carrying a very heavy load of firewood on her head. The chauffeur stopped and offered to take the lady and her firewood to her village. He helped her into the back of the truck and then proceeded on his way. However, when he glanced in the rear-view mirror he was astonished to see this lady sitting in the back of the truck with the load of firewood back on top of her head!"

We flock to Jesus because of the promise of rest, but we quickly fall back into patterns of manic self-reliance and the pride that goes with manic self-reliance. People are busy, and sometimes, they wear that busyness as a badge of honor. But, ultimately, such busyness may only betray the fact that they don't really have a sense of the one thing to which Jesus has called them - Himself.

Our constant motion is so self-perpetuating that it becomes harder and harder to just slow down and live as though the relationship with Jesus Himself is the most important dimension of who we are. But, that's where rest is found - not in a constant flurry of doing and not in the eventual refusal to do any more because you're just tuckered out. Rest is found in coming to Jesus.