

A Commanding Call to Rest

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

When I was younger, this was a very comforting verse to me. When I was struggling with various challenges or anxious and frightened, it was reassuring for me to read these words and to think about the idea that Jesus was gentle and that He was offering some sort of rest for me. This was a passage I like to copy out to give to others when they were discouraged in some way.

As time went on and I encountered greater and more painful trials, I was drawn back to these words of Jesus. I began to wonder if there was more to them than that they sounded nice and soothing. I found myself challenged by the command I realized Jesus gives here in His invitation.

“Come!” He says, “Come and learn from me.” Jesus’ call here is not a suggestion or a friendly piece of advice. He is not speaking just to sound comforting. It is a command.

Who is Jesus issuing His command to? “[A]ll who are weary and burdened.” Jesus puts no restrictions here on what kinds of burdens or weariness. He calls forth anyone and everyone who is worn down in some way in their lives. The concerns, relationships, circumstances they are carrying are weighing them down. They recognize, in some capacity, that their lives—their plans and their efforts—are engendering weariness.

His command is to become yoked with Him, and in doing that, to learn from Him. Jesus draws sharp contrast between the burdens we bring when we come to Him and the yoke He offers to share with us. The first contrast is seen in His use of the word “yoke.” A yoke is a wooden bar placed on the neck of a pair of animals—enabling them to pull together and thus share the load. We carry our burdens alone, Jesus calls us to share His. Secondly, Jesus describes His yoke as “easy” and His burden is “light.” The word translated easy means excellent, useful, pleasant or kind. In other places in the New Testament it is used to describe the kindness and gracious action of God. Jesus also describes His yoke as a light burden. A light burden is one that is not burdensome. It sounds like an oxymoron, doesn’t it? Isn’t a burden, by definition, burdensome? If not, then how can it be a burden?

Finally, Jesus tells us that taking His own upon us will give us rest. This point seems to be Jesus’ focus point, because He repeats it twice. The second time, He further describes this rest as “rest for your souls.” In other words, what Jesus wants to give the weary and burdened is true soul-rest, rest at the very core of their being. Since we receive this rest in taking Jesus’ yoke, then what Jesus offers is a share in His own soul-rest.

But what exactly is this yoke Jesus wants to share with us? What does it consist of? Why is it easy and how does it provide rest?

From the passage, we can see that the nature of the burden has everything to do with whose burden it is. It is because it is Jesus' yoke and no other that it gives us rest. Notice Jesus says "*I will give you rest*" and "*my yoke*" and "*my burden.*" Also, he tells us that taking on His yoke involves learning from Him. So Jesus' call here is a call into a relationship with Him. We are to walk with Him, continually gain our perspective and cues from Him—in whatever situation we are in.

Jesus tells us to learn from Him "for I am gentle and humble in heart." Jesus is saying here that it is because He is gentle and humble that we should learn from Him and that this is why He gives us rest for our souls. What an unexpected statement! Wouldn't it make more sense for Jesus to say that He can provide rest and an easy yoke because He is strong? What does being meek and humble have to do a light burden?

In order to answer this, we need to look at the verse just previous to this passage. This call is not given in isolation. In verse 27, Jesus says "All things have been committed to me by my Father and no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Before Jesus calls to the weary and heavy laden, He speaks about His relationship with His Father. He states that His relationship with the Father is one of real giving and receiving and mutual, personal, and intimate knowing. We see in Jesus' words that the Father is one who gives freely and fully to His Son. This giving and receiving occurs within an exclusive relationship of knowing between Father and Son. But Jesus doesn't stop at this description of exclusive knowing. "[N]o one know the Father except the Son *and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*" Jesus is given all things by His Father and He is opening a way for us to have a share in this exclusive relationship He has with His Father.

Does this help us understand Jesus description of Himself as meek and humble? Yes, it does. These words both indicate the idea of being yielded to another. Jesus, the Son, is yielded to His Father—not just externally bending to His Father's will, but freely, from His very heart. Jesus knows and lives in the giving love of His Father. Securely receiving all that His Father gives Him, Jesus does not need to grasp for His identity. He is humble, which means He is not self-preoccupied.

Jesus, the Son, is yoked to His Father. And now He is calling others to share in this same yoke. His burden is His wonderful relationship with His Father and this is what He has come to reveal and enable us to participate in. His whole life, death, resurrection, and ascension is what makes it possible for Him to open this exclusive relationship to us. His burden is not easy or light because it is a shorter list than ours, but because it is to partake in the relationship that is the very heart of the triune God.

Who does Jesus choose to reveal this to? Well, we see *who* in verse 25, in His call. He is revealing it to “*all who are weary and burdened.*” Jesus calls all who are already responding to the Father drawing them in the Spirit and are aware of their own inability to give themselves life. He extends the call to *all*. If we come to Jesus, we are at least somewhat aware of the fruitlessness of trying to manage our own identities and lives.

But it is not enough to be aware of the weight of our burdens. The challenge in Jesus’ call to us to share His wonderful yoke is to *let go* of our burdens, to hand them over to Him. Jesus doesn’t offer a burden to add to what we already have and He doesn’t offer advice on how to more effectively carry our current burdens so they seem lighter. He is calling us to an exchange of burdens. To take His yoke upon our shoulders, we will need to give up the ones that currently sit there.

Jesus challenging invitation is a continuing one, because He knows that we are tempted to pick up our burdens again, which seems crazy because we know they weary us. In this invitation, which Jesus extends again and again to us, is the challenge to let them go. What are those things they weary us? What are our burdens? We could be weighted down with anxiety or fear about a health issue, our financial security, a decision that needs to be made. We could be harboring resentment or unforgiveness. Most likely, at the core of our burdens is an effort to try to be in control—wanting everything in our lives and relationships in a certain place before we can be peaceful or joyful. And this desire to be in control is rooted in distrust of our triune God. It is a false view of God and a desire then to have control that is so wearying about our burdens.

I am both thrilled and challenged by Jesus’ words to receive His soul-rest over and over again. I am easily caught up again in the anxieties and struggles of life lived in this fallen world. But Jesus continues to press in with His call to rest. He knows how we struggle to receive and that is why He calls us to learn from Him, the ultimate receiver. He call to us to live under and enjoy His yoke is new again today. He longs to reveal Himself and His Father to us. He longs to give us that deep rest that is His yoke.

When I find anxiety, resentment, fear, etc. creeping back into my life, Jesus leads me to realize that I have taken up the wrong burdens. We are reminded in the Letter to the Hebrews that Jesus has taken a hold of our fallen, broken lives to redeem and heal us from the inside out. The reason we can give up our burdens is because Jesus knows all about them and has made them His own, so now we can make His yoke ours. I am so grateful that this relationship and this rest is what He gives us—every day!