

It's Easy Matthew 11:25-30

While I was working on this sermon, I noticed a book sitting on my bookshelves. Titled “Addicted to Busy: Recovery for the Rushed Soul,” it has ironically been sitting on the shelf waiting for when I wasn’t too busy and could read it. As the back of the book describes it, “We are all spread too thin, taking on more than we can handle, trying to do so much—almost as if we are afraid that if we were to take a moment of rest, we might discover that all our busyness is covering up an essential lack in our lives. But God never meant for us to be so busy. God desires for us peace. God desires rest.”

The summer is supposed to be a time when we can rest. Summer time, and the living is easy, after all. Yet it doesn’t seem to be a time to rest. School may be out, but then other activities need to take the place of school for keeping the kids entertained and occupied, and weekend sports competitions and weekly camps still leave us shuttling from place to place. It may be a good time to take a vacation, but it sometimes feels like more work to get ready to be gone for a vacation, working ahead before leaving and catching up after returning. And if you’ve traveled with small children, you know that even if you call it a vacation, it usually isn’t restful.

And all of this has taken a toll on us, as we resort to sugary, caffeinated drinks from across the street and other stimulants just to stay awake. Our bodies are tired. We are worn out because of the pace at which we sprint through life, “chasing after the wind,” rushing from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, and week to week. Our workaholic and play-hard attitudes have robbed us of the abundant life God wants us to experience. As Solomon declares, “In vain you rise early and stay up

late, toiling for food to eat—for [God] grants sleep to those he loves” (Psalm 127:2). Scientists estimate that entire months and years of our lives are gone because of the stress we endure from lack of sleep. Our violation of the need for rest is sinful, and we bear the judgment for it in our bodies. But sleep is not the only rest we need, nor is it the most important.

Crops need to be rotated. Land needs to lay dormant from time to time. A forest cannot grow forever, or it will choke itself by its intertwining roots. Trees grow old and fall, beetles eat their bark, and fire eats what is left. And then years later, after the land has lain dormant, new life springs up and saplings sprout again. Work and rest are built into the rhythm of creation. God has ordained it for all his creatures. Polar bears and frogs and even the busy bee hibernate for the winter before rejoining the ranks of diligent doers in spring. God rested, and the earth rests. And so should we.

Our devices remind us to rest. They have to be recharged and restarted periodically. If something starts going wrong with a piece of technology, the first thing any tech support worker will tell you is to turn it off and then on again, often letting it stay off for a bit before turning it on again. Our devices need to rest, and so do we.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples are struggling with their need to rest. They’ve been sharing the good news for a while now, but don’t seem to have much to show for it. They are tired, they’re tired of trying. It seems like they’ve taken on too heavy a load by themselves.

Others in Jesus' day suffered under the yoke of the law. After the people of Israel had returned from the Babylonian Exile, they added rules to keep themselves from breaking God's commands again, but those extra laws became more burdensome. Just looking at the rules around the Sabbath, around a day of rest, can be exhausting. Over the years, teachers of the law had to clarify what exactly rest was and what work was. Rabbis eventually came up with 39 different categories of actions that were forbidden on the Sabbath. As times changed, they had to clarify what that meant. If kindling a fire counted as work and could not be done on a Sabbath, could you handle matches? The rabbis answered no. How far could you walk before it became work? The rabbis came up with answers to that question, as well. While these decisions were meant to help people, the yoke of the law weighed people down.

The people of Jesus' day were also weighed down by the yoke of Rome. They looked to the promises God had made to their ancestors, and saw they hadn't come true. They suffered under oppressive taxation with no hope of representation. They were not free, and had no hopes of being free, even with protests and rebellions. Unlike the Massachusetts colonists who protested the Stamp Act as a yoke too heavy to bear yet were able to declare independence from the British Empire a decade later, the Jews couldn't make themselves free.

And so, when Jesus starts to talk about yokes, his hearers would have started to get worried. Yokes weren't a good thing. In Isaiah 9 and 10, the yoke is a metaphor for the burden and oppression placed on the necks of God's people. Isaiah 9:4 says, "For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken." And Isaiah 10:27 says, "In that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your

neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat." During Solomon's reign, he overburdened the people, and after he died, his son Rehoboam reported what the people said: "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you" (1 Kings 12:4). Solomon himself had "laid heavy burdens" on the people (1 Kings 12:11). He had, quite literally, put a yoke upon the necks of his people. Throughout the Old Testament, the yoke is not a positive image.

So, when Jesus first says, "Take my yoke upon you," we might think, "Oh great, here we go again. More burdens. More oppression." But Jesus turns the image upside down. He says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). Jesus does not come to burden us with even more laws, oppression, and domination. He comes to free us.

The yoke of Christ is easy, and his burden is light, because it brings love and rest and peace and mercy. Jesus' yoke was light because he carries it all. Jesus is the only source of true rest, true peace. That's the message he came to share and sent out his disciples to proclaim.

Jesus headed to the cross to overcome sin and sickness and selfishness once and for all. He headed to the cross to lay down his life for all of us weary and worn people. He gives his life for all of us unworthy people. He gives his life for all of us ungrateful people. Jesus gives his life out of compassion for you and for me.

Jesus has already born the burden of your sin and shame to the cross. All your feelings of failure and hopelessness were nailed to the cross. Jesus took up the yoke of the cross; carrying it on his back, so that you would never carry it alone, because you could never carry it alone.

He forgives us for all the time we've wasted, spent, and squandered, and all the ways in which we've abused our bodies and misused the days. Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). Jesus gives rest to all who call on him.

The good news, then, is that you and I can take a break at times. Rest, relaxation, vacation, is not only a God-given gift; it is a God-given necessity. And then there is the other part of Jesus' words – that he invites all of us to come, whether we are aware of our vulnerability and need or not. Because, the thing is, we all carry heavy burdens. It's only when we realize that we are heavy laden, that we carry heavy burdens, that Jesus' invitation makes any sense and suddenly is no longer hard but easy, even welcome. When we give our burdens to Jesus, when we take them to the Lord in prayer, we're freed to help those around us carry their burdens to the cross, as well.

As we celebrate the Fourth of July weekend this year, we may remember some of the promises of freedom that come from our country and our founding fathers. The Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor bears the inscription from Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." But that promise didn't give rest to the tired, only the hope that in the land of the free those who are tired by hard work will be rewarded for their labors.

Jesus calls the tired to him, but not to put them back under the yoke of the law. Jesus calls the tired to rest. When you are tired and heavy laden, and feel like giving up and giving in, give it to God. Turn over your burdens to Jesus

and turn to him. "Come!" Jesus says, "and I will give you rest." What a wonderful promise.

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