“COME TO ME”

Matthew 11:25–30

Key Verse: 11:28

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Do you feel tired? Most of us do at some point; others, maybe more often. There are various aspects of exhaustion. It can be a physiological problem—there’s actually something wrong going on in our bodies. It can be a mental issue—our minds can get overworked by our studies, our jobs, caring for children, or other stresses in life. There’s also emotional exhaustion, which builds up over time until we feel too worn out and drained to experience or show any emotions anymore. Then there’s spiritual exhaustion, which comes from the seemingly endless demands of ministry, and results in our having a hard time even to pray. We’ve all been experiencing pandemic exhaustion and just want to get back to normal. These days, students, even though they’re young, are exhausted from all kinds of demands and pressures they’re facing every day. Being constantly exhausted is not a good thing. It deteriorates us—our performance, our relationships, our basic quality of life. We can learn how to improve our sleep, better manage our work/life balance, or seek out some good counseling. But at a deeper level, our exhaustion needs healing. Where can such healing come from? Today’s passage tells us that Jesus is the one who can heal it. How does that work? What does it mean that he gives us rest? How can we experience this? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Last week in chapters 8 and 9 we got a glimpse of Jesus’ healing ministry, especially for those who were spiritually sick. In our recent study of chapter 10 we saw how Jesus sent out his disciples to do the same work he did. Now in chapter 11 Matthew begins recording negative responses to Jesus’ ministry. In verses 1–19 we see how the crowds were uncommitted both to John the Baptist and to Jesus. In verses 20–24 Jesus pronounces “woes” on places where he had done mighty works but whose people refused to repent. Now, at the end of the chapter Jesus concludes his comments and, surprisingly, he still gives such a gracious invitation. The words in today’s passage are some of the most loved in the whole Bible. But what do they mean?

Let’s read verses 25,26. Who is Jesus talking about here? “The wise and understanding” most probably refers to those “who are wise in their own eyes” (Isa5:21). They are people who think that, for whatever reason, they know better than Jesus (and everyone else). The “little children” is a reference to people who are *like* little children—simple, humble, trusting and willing to learn. It reminds us of the repeated words in the Bible, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Jas4:6; 1Pe5:5). Despite people’s poor attitudes toward his teaching and ministry, Jesus was sure that God was still working. We also learn from his words here that God is the one who “hides,” and, the one who “reveals” (1Co2:10). Human reasoning is actually very limited. If we’re going to open our eyes to see the good news that Jesus is our healer, God has to help us.

Jesus goes on. Let’s read verse 27. Again we see the word “reveal.” And in this case, what’s being revealed is perhaps the greatest privilege there is: the privilege to really know God. Just as they do today, many people of that time had difficulty accepting Jesus. Mostly it was because he didn’t fit in to their preconceived notions. But regardless of people’s ideas, God the Father has handed all things over to Jesus the Son. All the people who heard Jesus speak and saw what he did still didn’t really know him. But God the Father did. And despite people’s negative ideas about him, Jesus alone knew the Father in the deepest and truest sense. Jesus shared these words with us to show how he overcame the resistance and rejection that could have discouraged anybody. As we follow him and participate in his work, his words and his experience can become our own.

Verse 27 actually alludes to the main thrust of Jesus’ ministry. What was it? It was revealing God the Father to people. Jesus came to make God known (cf. Jn17:26). We’re living in a world that has turned away from God. To be sure, God still reveals himself in all the beauty and wonder of creation. We’re also born with a certain innate knowledge of God. But our knowledge of God is so dim, so limited, and even worse, sometimes badly skewed. We can think of God as oppressive, or mean, or scary, or indifferent. But why is knowing God so important? It’s because it’s the foundational truth of all that is. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” We can’t even begin to understand what life is all about, or the world we live in, or ourselves, or what we should be doing, if we don’t know our Creator, the one who actually made us. In his book *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.” Despite the poor responses, Jesus stayed focused on the task the Father handed over to him, the task of revealing God to people.

Let’s read verse 28. These words of Jesus are like cool water on a parched land. Those who labor and are heavy laden are not elite, sophisticated people, but all the people out there who are struggling in life. Those who work hard, doing all the menial tasks nobody else wants to do, are so often ignored. They tend to be used, abused and abandoned, seen as inferior and unimportant, and asked to disappear. In history, working class people have always been looked down upon. But Jesus never sees people that way. He invites all people, rich or poor, from the top of society to the bottom, all who labor and are heavy laden, to come to him and find rest. The word “labor” in Greek literally refers to being exhausted due to overuse, great strain or stress—or as we say today, “toasted.” “Heavy laden” in today’s terms means “dumped on.” Sometimes in life we can feel so tired, so overwhelmed, so crushed, and we’ve got nobody to turn to. But we do have someone. Jesus says, “Come to me.”

But what does this mean? He was talking to the crowds of people in his day. But how can we “come” to him when he’s not here anymore, when he’s invisible to our eyes? It’s not just a mind game or an emotional experience we conjure up. We simply need to accept his words by faith. In fact, the whole Bible, if we would just read it, is pointing us to Jesus. We can come to him meaningfully when we accept the words of Scripture that point us to him (Jn5:39,40). We can come to him as we develop a personal devotional life of Bible reading and prayer. We also can come to him as we come to where he is now, present among a fellowship of people who come together in his name (Mt18:20).

If Jesus is the only one who can help us, why don’t we come to him? Partly it’s due to our unbelief. But also it’s because we stubbornly want to do things on our own. We want to be in control, to manage everything and be free to pursue our own goals and desires. Coming to Jesus involves surrendering not only our self-sufficiency but also our own plans and agenda. It means learning to entrust our entire life to him as our Lord. We can’t come to him only once in a while, when we feel like it, or only in emergencies. He’s not our “genie-in-a-bottle.” We’ve got to learn in practical ways to make him most important to us.

He tells us more about what it means to come to him. Let’s read verse 29. When we come to Jesus, he gives us his “yoke.” What’s he talking about? At that time a yoke was a familiar image: a piece of wood that bound two oxen together to pull a heavy load. When Jesus says “Take my yoke upon you,” he’s inviting us to personally join him in his work. Coming to Jesus means there’s more work to do. No wonder we may not be all that eager to come to him. The New Testament explains in many other places that to “take my yoke upon you” means to share in suffering for the gospel (2Ti1:8b; 2:3; Ro8:17b; 1Co4:12,13; Php1:29; 3:10; 1Pe4:13; Rev1:9a). It’s similar to his words, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24). Our sin is our other “yoke” and the only other alternative. It’s a miserable bondage and burden that makes life meaningless. Jesus’ yoke is so much better.

What happens when we take his yoke? He says next in verse 29 “and learn from me.” As we may have experienced, if we’re just spectators or auditors, we don’t learn nearly as much. Learning about any subject is accelerated rapidly if we interact and participate. We learn from Jesus as we observe his life and ministry in the Gospels and listen to his words. But we learn from him so much more deeply as we take his yoke, share the burden and suffer with him.

What does he want us to learn? He says “for I am gentle and lowly in heart.” These words are profound. Jesus is inviting us to learn his heart. An animal yoked with other animals and being led by a human to do some task needs to be gentle and lowly to respond to the push and pull of the work and to cooperate. If it’s stubbornly going its own way or refusing to speed up or slow down when necessary, it makes the work so much harder. It’s the same in taking Jesus’ yoke and working together for the gospel. When we’re working really hard and suffering in any task, we tend to get angry and burdened, especially when we see other people not working as hard as we think we are, not suffering as much as we think we do. But as we come to Jesus, take his yoke and learn from him, we don’t become more self-righteous, proud and frustrated with those around us; we become more gentle and lowly in heart like him. It’s a process.

Jesus concludes “and you will find rest for your souls.” It’s the second time he mentions rest here. What is rest? In the Bible we learn that God wants us to work, but he also wants us to find rest (Ge2:2–3). We all need a good night’s rest. After an intense work week, we need a day of rest, a Sabbath. We may need a Sabbatical year to recuperate after many years of hard labor. Heaven is referred to as our “Sabbath rest” (Heb4:9–11). But where is real rest? Lots of sleep might only make us feel more miserable. A vacation may leave us more stressed and burdened. Why are we so restless? As we thought about earlier, it’s because our souls find rest only in God. In the Bible, David was a man who had to fight many battles. He wrote, “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God” (Ps62:5–7). It was a kind of prophecy of Jesus. Jesus is the only one who can give real rest to our souls. As we come to him, take his yoke and learn from him, we find what God wanted us all along to be doing with our life. We find true satisfaction, real contentment and lasting peace, unlike any peace this world may promise (Jn14:27).

Let’s read verse 30. We’ve thought about taking Jesus’ yoke. The struggle is real. So what does he mean here? It may mean that he’s carrying most of the load; when we join him instead of trying to do things on our own, it’s actually easy and light. His presence changes everything. He makes it meaningful and joyful.

Let’s read verse 28 again. May God help us to experience Jesus’ healing for our weary and burdened souls as we learn to come to him each day.