

Lighten Your Load: Matthew 11:28-30

Lesson #1: Calling all the Weary

When we set out on a journey, we all pack some sort of a bag. Whether it is a backpack, a gym bag or a nice four wheeled suitcase, our common tendency is to overpack. We jam way too many articles of clothing, personal items and “what if I need these” things in our bag. We are worrying about the unexpected and want to be prepared.

But usually, that overstuffed bag becomes a real hinderance. It weighs too much. It becomes a real burden as we haul it on and off airplanes, trains, buses or cars. Soon, the traveling itself becomes a pain (literally and figuratively).

Let’s take a moment and think about that over-packed bag and the insecurities that nudged us into that packing routine. I think many of us live our spiritual lives in a similar fashion. We “over pack” our hearts and minds with a wide array of anxieties and worries.

We start each day or each week with a calendar filled with obligations and an overextended list of things to do. Some of those expectations are imposed on us by our employers, or our family or even our church, but many of those “requirements” are self-imposed.

We spend way too much time anticipating what “might happen” and so we burden our lives with a long list of things to worry about. Soon, even the hardiest among us becomes WEARY. That is an older term that isn’t used a lot in modern society, but it is an excellent depiction of being overwhelmed.

Jesus had that term clearly in mind when he addressed the Galilean crowd in Matthew chapter 11. He had been speaking to John the Baptist’s disciples and then turned His attention to the group that had gathered. Using the unrepentant cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum as examples, He to urge them to repent of their own sins.

And then He acknowledged that they were “overpacked.” He recognized that they were living overburdened lives. He knew the weight of their fears and the pain associated with their anxious hearts. He knew they were struggling with choices and those struggles were draining them of energy and strength.

Please note that He did not berate them for their lack of faith. He didn’t chastise them for their emotional weakness. Instead, He acknowledged that they were needy and WEARY. He recognized that they were personally, emotionally and spiritually WEARY.

And, He extended a personal word of encouragement as He said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matt. 29:11). As the Lord looks on our lives today, He is making the same assessment. He recognizes that we are WEARY and in need of real rest. He offers to come alongside and “lighten our loads.” He offers us rest.

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. Who do you think Jesus was including when He referred to the crowd as “weary and burdened?”
2. In what ways are you “burdened?” What is weighing you down?
3. When you are “weary,” how does it manifest itself in your life? Who does it affect?

Action Items:

1. Take a look at that list of ways you feel burdened right now. Can you see any similarities within the issues? Do they have a common root like fear? Review each item through the “lens” of II Timothy 1:7 and Deut. 31:8. Any new thoughts about that list?
2. Set up a meeting with a friend and agree to share some of the items in both your “over packed bags.” Can your friend help you with anything? Can you assist them? Agree to pray specifically for each other this week.

3. Find a quiet moment in a quiet place. Imagine for a moment what it must have felt like for those folks in Matthew 11 as Jesus acknowledged their pain. Now spend some time remembering that His same words of encouragement apply to you.

Lesson #2: Come to Me

As Jesus addressed “all who are weary and burdened,” He gave them a very clear anecdote for their struggles. But before we think about what He did say, it might be instructive to think about what He did not say.

He did not encourage them to choose a religion. He didn’t say that they should go to church. He did not suggest that they should join a club or identify with others who have the same worldview. He did not give them a political ideal or a society fix in the form of policies or procedures.

He directed them to a person. He directed them to come to HIMSELF.

Jesus knew that He was the only one who could come alongside us and help us carry our burdens. We don’t need an organizational plan to relieve our stress. Our “overpacked” bags need a servant who can grab the bag and handle the weight. We need a person (a person who understands the difficulties of life) to come alongside us and help lighten the load.

So, Jesus offered Himself as the solution to our problem.

But all too often, we forget that simple truth. We get caught up in the hustle and bustle of normal life. We get absorbed by our families or our jobs. We get overextended at church. We do lots of “good things” at the expense of doing the right things. We get caught up in the “stuff” of being a believer and ignore Him.

I think that is why Ira Progoff wrote his little book, *The Well and the Cathedral*. In that short story, Progoff said, “Long ago people discovered a well and they came year after year to the well to drink refreshing water.

They felt healed, made whole by the water. And then someone said, ‘Let’s build a building over the well. So, they built a building. Years past and others said, ‘Let’s build a cathedral here.’ So, they built it. As the years went by, this institutional church got bigger and bigger.

And the people forgot about the well-the wellspring underneath.”

It's the WELL that we all need, not all the scaffolding around it. It is Jesus that we all need. It is Jesus who calls the weary to come.

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think we wait to bring our burdens to Jesus? Why is He often our last resort, not our first choice?
2. When pressure builds in your life, where do you look for relief? What kinds of "pain relievers" have you tried? Did they work?
3. Matthew 11:29 is the only place in scripture where Jesus describes Himself. He uses the terms, "gentle" and "humble." How radical is it to think that our Savior offers Himself as our servant? How amazing is it to think of Him carrying our burdens?

Action Items:

1. Consider your current list of pressures and burdens. Write them down. Then take a look at the things that you have tried in the past to use as "relief agents." Put the corresponding "reliever" next to each of the burdens. Now ask yourself "Why was that relief only temporary?"
2. With that same list in hand, now consider how Christ might meet all those needs? For example, if you noticed that a special friend was a real encourager for a period of time, but then let you down after a while, consider the fact that Jesus never changes. He is the

same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Can you trust Christ to meet your needs?

3. Make sure that you have a stockpile of recorded music (hymns, choruses, and spiritual songs) that direct your attention to Jesus. Use your commute time, or some of your entertainment time to listen, really listen and turn your eyes to our Savior.

Lesson #3: Rest for your Soul

Scientists tell us that rest is good for our bodies. Specifically, our muscles need rest. When we exercise, we make some microscopic tears in our muscle tissue. Rest allows certain cells called “fibroblasts” to repair our muscles. No rest, no growth.

It is exactly the same for our spiritual and emotional lives. If there is not a specified time period for rest, we will remain weary. God understood our propensity to push at everything. So, He modeled, even in the act of creation, a certain kind of rhythm to life. It was His plan that we work, and then we rest.

Modern society has ignored that pattern at its own peril. In the endless, incessant pursuit of production and achievement, we have largely ignored the necessity of having rest in our lives.

We definitely ignore that principle when it comes to our burdens. We tend to resign ourselves to the reality of carrying the load ourselves. We get up every morning facing the same kind of challenges and we believe they are ours and ours alone to bear.

We desperately need the words of Jesus to penetrate our minds. “Come to me! I will give you rest!”

Jesus wasn’t offering His children a utopia where labor was not required. (Work is not a “dirty word.” There was meaningful work before the fall [see Gen. 2:15] and we will enjoy work in heaven.) But a bow constantly bent will eventually break. Rest and peace for our souls is needed.

Jesus offers Himself as both the source and the means of attaining that rest. When we pursue Him in close and meaningful friendship, He provides Himself as the strength for the journey. Our rest is found in our fellowship with Him.

If we take advantage of His offer and come regularly to be with Him, our burdens are lighter and our struggles seem to be less of an issue. Our proximity to the Son of God gives us a source of comfort, a sense of direction and a companion for the journey.

As we develop our personal relationship with Christ, there is a never ending well that springs up with a very sweet peace for our souls.

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. What does “rest” look like for you? Is it easy for you to take a break? Or do you feel guilty when you pause?
2. What does Jesus mean when He offers us peace for our souls? Is He promising that all our struggles will permanently cease? (Consider John 16:33 and 1 Tim. 3:2)
3. Isn't a burden carried by two less burdensome? Imagine what your life would be like if you actively shared all of your struggles with the Lord.

Action Items:

1. Since Jesus offers Himself as the source of our rest, it would be helpful to get to know Him better. One way to do that might be by making a careful examination of how the Lord spent His time with His disciples. Were they always in a formal teaching setting? When did He talk with them? How did He provide rest for his friends? Read through a couple of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) and take some notes of their interaction. And then invite Him to do those same kinds of things with you.

2. The night before Jesus died, He specifically promised to provide peace for His disciples. And as He did so, He urged them to not to be afraid. This week, make a real effort to memorize John 14:27 and apply it to your life.

3. In Colossians 3:15 , Paul makes a connection between the peace of God (His rest) and the action of our being thankful. To help make that connection for yourself, make a list of all the things you have to be thankful for. Be specific. If possible, consider doing this activity with your whole family or some close friends.

Lesson #4: Take my Yoke

As Jesus promised to provide rest for His disciples, He used an interesting term. He told them to take on His YOKE. Usually in the scriptures, a yoke was a figurative bar or stick that spoke of some kind of bondage or affliction. It referred to being in submission to someone whom you needed to serve and obey.

But it also referred to a literal curved piece of wood that was made for oxen or donkeys. That wooden bar was custom fitted for a specific animal in order to prevent pain or discomfort as they worked. The yoke represented an owner's care for his team. He took great effort to make sure the animals in his charge could reasonably get the job done with as little irritation as possible.

In our passage of scripture, the yoke is referring to the burdens and challenges facing believers. When Jesus clarified that those yokes were meant to be "easy," He was not saying bearing the yoke would be a tranquil experience or something that would be stress free. Instead, He was stating that the experience is meant to be straight forward and that He was designing those circumstances specifically for us.

That yoke is meant to work for us, not against us. When we embrace our struggles as being "Father filtered," we can see them from a new perspective. They are custom made for us. They are meant to help us pursue our "real work" of glorifying God. They are part of our journey.

And interestingly, those ancient yokes were most often made for two animals. They were to be coupled together. The yoke hitched an older, more seasoned ox next to a younger one. Together, they got the job done.

When Jesus makes reference to a yoke in this passage, He is reminding His listeners of the relationship He wants to have with His people. He is the older and wiser part of the team and is there to help his struggling “partner.” As we need help in life, Christ is right there ready to help carry the burden. With His constant help, the burdens are indeed “light.”

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus said, “take my yoke upon you”? In what ways can we see our current burdens and difficulties as part of God’s ultimate plan for our lives?
2. Are some “yokes’ more challenging to deal with than others? What makes them more difficult?
3. Solomon talked about being yoked with others in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. What are some specific advantages to being in partnership with someone else as we labor? How do those advantages apply to our relationship with Christ?

Action Items:

1. If you have been journaling, take a look at some seasons in the past when your burdens were acute. What can you observe by thinking through those experiences? Did God “show up” and help with the “yokes?” Can you expect Him to do so again?
2. Read carefully through Isa. 43: 1-3a. Substitute some details of your own current challenges and difficulties with some of those mentioned by Isaiah (“passing through the waters, passing through the rivers, walking through fire...”) And then finish verse 4 in your own words, reflecting your own situation.
3. Ask a friend or loved one to memorize I Peter 5:6-7 with you. Hold each other accountable.

Lesson #5: Learn from Me

When someone wants to learn a trade, they seek out an apprenticeship program. They find someone who is very good at a particular skill and attach themselves to that seasoned tradesman.

Similarly, in the business world, if someone is desiring a career in finance, or accounting or marketing, they seek out a mentorship program. They are looking to learn their craft by watching others do it well.

Those mentors have a very specific role. They support and facilitate learning. They direct and teach by example. Those mentors are there to listen and act as a sounding board for problems and help direct new ideas.

And along the way, those tutors open themselves up as models for how to get the job done. They are personally committed to the success of their mentees.

And so it is with our relationship with Jesus. He is totally committed to our spiritual “success.” He is deeply invested in our spiritual growth and development. So much so that He directly instructs us in Matthew 11:29 to “learn from me.”

As we apprentice ourselves under the tutelage of Christ, we start by acknowledging that we need Him as a personal coach. We acknowledge our past, our sins, our propensity to wander and ask for His help.

We make ourselves available to Him. We commit to preserving time, energy and interest in His teaching. We commit to do our very best. We offer no excuses. We take responsibility for our growth. We make it a priority. We welcome the constructive criticism and enthusiastically apply what we learn.

The Lord Jesus offers Himself as the ultimate teacher. He actively takes on the role of our spiritual tutor. As He invites us all to come to Him, He is offering to help carry our load and provide rest for our souls. Our job is to lean in and learn.

Reflective Thoughts/Comments:

Discussion Questions:

1. Everyone has a favorite teacher. Think about yours. Why were they so important in your life? Can you see similarities to the way God tutors us?
2. How do you learn best? Are you a “hands on” learner? Do you absorb information best by hearing it? Reading it? Watching it? Seeing it modeled? Consider your best learning environment and make sure you are intentional about ingesting God’s Word in the most effective way possible.
3. How do you track what you are learning about the Christian life? Do you journal? Share your victories and defeats with a small group? Express your adventures with God through music or painting? What is an effective outlet for you?

Action Items:

1. In Galatians chapter 5, Paul urges us to “keep in step with the Spirit.” In that passage, He outlines the acts of our sinful nature and the fruit of the Spirit. Consider using those lists as a kind of spiritual “report card.” Write down both of the lists and do some self-evaluation. Are you learning? Growing? Becoming more like Christ?
2. Take a few hours and find a quiet spot for reflection. What are some areas that you sense God is particularly focused on in your life right now? Write up a simple action plan to ensure that your growth continues in that area. What should you be reading in God’s Word? What other books or material would help you? What scripture should you memorize? Be intentional about following the instructions of your Heavenly Father.
3. Our loads get lighter when we recognize the leadership of God in our lives. Spend some quality time with a dear friend and discuss the details of how God has been leading in your life. Share your observations and conclusions. Pay attention to how He has been lightening your load!

“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.” Matthew 11:28-30