

Do You Serve a Gracious Christ?

Matthew 11:28-30 *Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ "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. ³⁰ "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light,*

Dear Pastor,

I am one of those Christians who smiles at everyone at church and says I am fine when asked how I'm doing, but the reality is very different. I feel like the Christian life is an unbearable burden. Every time I try to do something different, I fall and feel even more guilty. I am forever trying to keep up with my responsibilities and forever falling behind. To be honest, I don't know what you mean by enjoying God because He is the last person I think I can enjoy. He requires so much, disciplines us when we fail, and keeps expecting more. I am exhausted and wondering how much longer I can go on. What makes it worse is that everyone else seems to be coping. I sometimes wonder if I'm actually saved. I feel like I'm stuck in a cycle I can't break out of. I am even scared to ask for advice because it will be one more thing I have to do. But something needs to happen before I break down altogether.

Anonymous.

I think that letter represents a common experience for many, many Christians. The good news is the Scripture we are looking at today has just such people in mind.

Jesus calls a particular kind of people to Himself. *Who are they?* They are "All you who labour and are heavy-laden". The word for 'labour' means those who are wearying themselves; those who are struggling, toiling, striving in life and are growing increasingly exhausted. If your body and mind had a fuel gauge, you are on the reserve tank, and there doesn't seem to be a filling station for another 200 km. The pressure of trying to live this Christian life, along with family, work, finances, health, education is making you feel like too little butter spread over too much bread.

I think particularly of our Christian lives. For many Christians, this Christian life just seems like a treadmill of works and responsibilities to perform, and though you are pushing until you are gasping for breath, it feels as if you are getting nowhere. Worse, you come to church, you read Christian books, you listen to sermons on CD or mp3 but it seems as if the treadmill is set a little faster each time - more responsibilities, more duties, more things to remember and do, and keep up with. You can't get off this treadmill, but you know you also can't continue like this. Despair is setting in, especially when it seems all the other Christians are doing just fine with their treadmills. If that's you, then Jesus has just issued a call to you.

The word for 'heavy-laden ' means someone who has been loaded down with burdens they can barely carry. The backpack of your life has too much in it, and it is getting heavier by the day. Every problem at work, every financial problem, every family issue seems to add another kilogram to that back pack. And if the struggles of life weren't heavy enough, you have a 20kg weight in there called 'guilt'. Sometimes that weight gets heavier with every sermon, heavier with every page of Scripture you read, heavier with every sin of omission.

It is interesting, that the only other time in the New Testament that this word for heavy-laden is used is in **Luke 11:46**. There Jesus speaks of the Pharisees – who had turned the life of loving God into a burden that men could not bear.

And He said, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers."

Matthew 23:4 *For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will*

not move them with one of their fingers.

These were the people Jesus was talking to: people laden down with rabbinic Judaism, which was just crushing them.

Perhaps, like the Jews of Christ's time, your Christian life has become a life of bondage again to a cruel and unyielding master – the Law. Not the Mosaic Law, but the law of pleasing man, or the law of perfectionism, or the law of earning God's love by works. It is the law of self-made religion and it has no mercy on you.

Your back pack is so heavy you can barely straighten up, and each step almost causes you to stumble. This is the life of the labouring and heavy-laden one. In fact, this is the life of anyone who tries to make life work their own way.

It is the life Solomon described: **Ecclesiastes 2:22-23** *For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? ²³ For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.*

Do you know something? The heaviest burden to bear is a God who is impatient and impossible to please. He expects everything and gives no assistance, and punishes failure. He is stern and exacting, and therefore mostly displeased with your life. Let me tell you, that god is a soccer ball of pure, solid lead in your back pack. But many Christians have packed him in, and do their best under his weight.

In fact, one of the greatest Christians ever – Martin Luther - battled with this kind of god. He said the following:

“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, ... I was angry with God...”

Luther said, in essence, as if it is not enough that God allows us to be born sinners, he crushes us with the ten commandments and then adds more pain by threatening us with hell.

Luther was carrying the lead ball of a God without grace.

The question is, is that the Christ of Scripture? Is that the Christ seen in this passage?

I call your attention to the fact that the Christ of this passage does not burden you further, but makes an offer. In fact, it is more than an offer, it is a promise.

What is that promise?

The Promise of Rest

Twice in this passage, Jesus promises rest. In verse 28, he says that if you come to Him, He will give you rest. In verse 29, He says if you take His yoke upon you and learn from Him, you shall find rest for your souls. There is no doubt here, no chance of this not happening. Jesus promises rest to the labouring and heavy-laden who come to Him and follow His instructions.

What is this rest Jesus promises?

This word means to be refreshed, relieved, eased, strengthened. Jesus is not saying that when we

come to Him we will get a permanent holiday from responsibility. He is not saying that He will give us a permanent break from service or activity. He is not saying that He will no longer require us to obey Him.

He is saying that He is going to give us something that will motivate, empower, and strengthen like an injection of new life and energy in the legs of the marathon runner in the middle of the race. Something about the person of Christ will lift the burdens and make them light. Something about Christ will provide strength and refreshment so that the work itself becomes invigorating, not exhausting. Your Christian life becomes a fountain overflowing into others, rather than a dry river bed crying out for water. Jesus is offering rest *in* the activity and the service. He is promising to refresh us in the work.

There will be rest in your *conscience*. Instead of your conscience being like a security alarm that won't shut off, there will be the sweet calm of a conscience at rest in Christ.

There will be rest in your *mind*. Instead of continual anxiety, worry, lists to complete, things to control, there will be peace.

There will be rest in your *will*. Instead of push, push, push, to live the Christian life, there will be a calm co-labouring with Christ.

More than anything, you will be relieved of this burden of a god you cannot please. You will have a lead ball in your back-pack replaced with spring under your shoes. You will find rest in the kind of God He really is.

To a person labouring and heavy-laden, Christ's promise should seem like the smell of a bakery to one who has been fasting non-stop for a week. It should be like the sight of crystal clear pool when it is 36 degrees Celsius in the shade. It should be like the sight of an approaching coast guard to one struggling to stay afloat in rough seas.

So then, what is the condition that Christ gives us to receive this rest?

The Condition

Jesus gives us three commands which are really one response. In verse 28 He tells us to come to Him. Once we have stopped going our own way and we come to Him, we must do something - In verse 29 He tells us to take His yoke upon ourselves and to learn of Him.

What does this mean?

Jesus is using an image. A yoke is a large wooden device that goes over the necks of oxen that put them together and enable them to plough or do other work. Now this image was often used to refer to slavery. God spoke of Israel as under the yoke of Egypt. Paul said in I Timothy 6:1, that slaves under the yoke of their masters should act in a Christlike way.

The yoke always meant coming under someone or some thing, and being obligated to serve. It was also used in the time of Christ to speak of pupils who came under a rabbi.

Jesus is saying, come to Me, take upon you the yoke of discipleship.

What does it mean to be Jesus' disciple? It means obeying Him in all things (Matt 28:20). It means loving Him supremely, and flowing out of that, obeying Him in all things (Jhn 14:15).

The yoke is the Christian life. It is becoming like Christ.

To take His yoke then means to submit entirely to Jesus Christ. It is voluntarily coming under Jesus

so as to learn from him and obey Him.

What is interesting is that the word for 'take' the yoke is the same word Jesus used when He said 'take up your cross'. What did He say then?

Luke 9:23 *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."*

Stop living life your own way, deny yourself, submit and surrender to all that I tell you to do. Obey Jesus in every area you know. Apply His Word to every detail of your life. Follow Him single-mindedly.

That is what Jesus is telling us to do.

Now, what's wrong with this advice?

Jesus is addressing people that are labouring to exhaustion and burdened down with crushing weight, and His advice is, come and be burdened with me. You who are barely making it, come and take my yoke. Now at first, that seems absurd. A yoke is a large, heavy, wooden thing that brings an animal under its weight. This is not what burdened people want to hear.

Come you tired people, and begin my exercise regimen. Come, you overheated people, come and walk in the desert with me. Come you wounded-in-the-feet people, come run with me. Come, you bankrupt people, come and spend with me. Funny, that's exactly what God said in Isaiah 55.

Isaiah 55:1-2 *"Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. ² Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance."*

Why does God ask the penniless to come and buy, and the bone-weary to come and work?

When God gives us these paradoxes, He is deliberately causing us to come to the end of ourselves, and fall totally on Him. He is forcing us into a corner, to where we fall entirely upon the yoke of Jesus, or keep doing things our own way.

Yes, you have been spending on yourself, and it hasn't got you anywhere. Yes, you have been working, labouring, but you are only getting exhausted and despondent. So now, stop doing it your way, submit entirely to me. Stop trying to carry things in your own strength.

God is saying, *"It's either me alone or not at all. It's either my yoke or your own."*

The paradox is – as exhausted as you are because of living life your own way; if you submit to Jesus Christ, you will find all the strength and refreshment and motivation you need.

But eyes of unbelief can't see it. We come to prayer, and we say, "Not today, I don't want to." We think of another sermon, and we say, "I'm already battling with guilt – not more." We come to the Word and we say, "I am so far behind in my quiet time, it is too much to try and start it now." We come to a specific act of obedience, and we say, "I just don't have any more energy to fight that temptation, or to obey the requirement."

And when we do that, what we are saying is this: 'Jesus' yoke is like all the others. There is nothing unique about the yoke of Jesus.'

But Jesus says, 'Trust Me – submit to my yoke, and things will get easier.' Jesus' yoke comes with

a built-in promise. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light. You may work harder, but the harder work will seem easier.

Now we come to the big question: Why? Why will coming to Christ, submitting to all His commands relieve my burden instead of increase it? Why will it give rest instead of more exhaustion? What is it about Christ's yoke that is any different from all the other ways I have tried to make life work?

Here is the answer that we must see and internalise, and know. The kind of master determines the kind of service. Hard masters exhaust; gracious masters refresh.

You think of Israel under the Egyptians, as opposed to Israel under King David. What was the difference? The one they were serving. The one you are serving determines the kind of work, the motive, the reward.

You can think back on your own experience of authority. Some of you had gracious parents, who made obedience easier. Some of you had parents who made obedience harder than it already is. Think of teachers. Which teachers were the ones hardest to obey? Was it the kind and gracious ones, or the proud and hard ones?

Think of managers, supervisors and bosses. What kind of managers motivated you, made your work something you looked forward to?

You see when the one you are following, submitting to, and obeying, is gracious, life becomes easier, lighter, refreshing.

I think of that Scripture we often reference – Exodus 21, where a Hebrew servant could choose to remain with his master if he had come to love him. What kind of master would cause the love and voluntary slavery of a person? A gracious master would.

Now stop and ask yourself: what is your view of Christ at this very moment? Is He rigid and exacting? Is He impossible to please? Your view of Christ is going to determine your service.

Let me ask it another way. What is your motive for doing what you do as a Christian? Is it fear? Fear of judgement? Fear of failure? Is it guilt? Is it perfectionism? Is it man-pleasing? Fear, guilt, pride do not fill the soul with enthusiasm and joy. Grace does that.

Christ is Gracious. In fact, the apostle John said, 'Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth.' Christ is full of grace.

Titus 2:11 – *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men – that's Christ Himself.*

Christ is a Gracious Master. Service to a gracious Master seems like a light burden, it seems like an easy yoke. Service to a master filled with grace motivates, energises, empowers and enables. Service to a gracious master is the kind of service in which a slave says, "I love my master, I will not go out free."

Notice something else. Jesus does not say, 'I will send you rest.' Jesus is not going to give rest via an angel or anyone else. *He* is going to give that rest. In fact, in the original, a word is inserted to emphasise, 'I myself, will give you rest'. This kind of rest comes straight from the Person of Jesus Christ to you.

Consider three ways that we see Jesus is gracious.

1) Jesus, full of grace, invites you in success or failure.

How do we know that Jesus receives us in success or failure? We know it because if we are labouring and heavy laden we have already failed, and yet He is inviting us.

He says – 'come'. Who is He calling to come? He is calling people who have got themselves in their predicament by disobeying His Word; people who have exhausted themselves by living life their own way, without trusting Him; people who have failed to believe Christ, and are now almost collapsing. To them, Jesus says, 'Come'.

No 'I told you so' here. No 'Well that's what you get when you live independently' here.

He is inviting us, although He is the last one we turn to.

What is Jesus' attitude to His being our last resort? Is He resentful? Is He bitter? Is He spiteful? No, He graciously invites. In fact, right through His ministry He was inviting.

'Come to me'. 'Come to Me'. (John 7:37, 6:37, Luke 18:16)

Even after His resurrection, he invites – Rev 3:19-20 (even when we have shut Him out) – Rev. 22:17.

Maybe you are the sort of person who goes to Christ when you have done well, but avoids Him when you have not done well. Ask yourself – what Christ is that? What Christ is it that can only be kind when I have succeeded?

Does the Christ you worship give you rest, because of His gracious Spirit?

2) Jesus, full of grace, is patient with weakness and forgiving of sin.

What does Jesus say of Himself here? 'I am gentle and lowly of heart.'

The word gentle means mild, calm. It means our Lord is meek – His power and wrath are under serene control. He is not going to flare up suddenly, or unexpectedly explode on us.

Meekness means patience with weakness.

Did you ever think of how meek Jesus was with His disciples on earth? When they asked ignorant questions, when they misunderstood his meaning, when they couldn't figure out the parables, when they failed to cast out a demon, when they argued about who would be the greatest in heaven, when they denied him, and forsook Him. What was His attitude? He died for them. And then, He sent them His Holy Spirit, and He ascended to heaven to begin praying for them.

What will His attitude be when you fail to pray as you ought; fail to seek Him as you ought? His attitude will be one of meekness. He will handle you gently.

Matthew 12:20 *A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench,*

Think about that illustration for a moment. A reed that is bruised is not strong, firm or useful. A smouldering wick is hardly providing light or heat for anyone. But he doesn't snap the reed or snuff the wick. Meekness handles weakness gently and coaxes it back to strength.

Consider the examples of men in Scripture, and the mistakes they made which God recorded for us – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Samson, Gideon, David, Solomon, Uzziah, and

Peter.

Psalm 103:13-14 *As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. ¹⁴ For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*

Consider the incident with James, John and the Samaritans. They lacked meekness; Jesus was gracious.

That means He is easy to please, though He may be hard to satisfy. He marks our simplest efforts to please Him. He overlooks imperfections when He knows our love for Him.

He also says He is *lowly in heart*. The Bible says that not many wise or noble are called. But God instead says - **1 Corinthians 1:27** *But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;*

Isaiah 57:15 *says, For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones."*

When Jesus wanted disciples, who did He call? Princes? Learned rabbis? Noblemen? Soldiers? He called the ordinary, because He loves to use those who do not trust in themselves. He loves to turn doubting Thomas's and denying Peters into pillars of faith. He takes the humble and exalts them. He has called you. Not for the great success you bring to the table at your conversion, but for what He will yet make of your life. Christ's grace sees you already seated in the heavenlies, glorified. He is patient and forgiving.

I can rest because Jesus knew what He was getting when He saved me. He is lowly in heart and chose me. He who began a good work in me will perform it to the day of Jesus Christ.

Here is the test. Can you come and enjoy Christ, and be at peace in His presence, when you have not done all the things you wish you had? That kind of grace motivates.

The Christ you serve: is He patient and forgiving? While calling for perfection, does He give up on you when you fail? A master like that is a heavy-burden. A patient and forgiving master is one in whose presence you can rest. Patient and forgiving masters give strength.

3) Jesus, full of grace, enables true obedience.

Why is the burden light? Answer: because He is carrying most of it.

Not many masters help their servants with their burdens. Jesus is so gracious, that He carries most of ours.

A man was out walking when he saw a farmer ploughing a team of oxen. But something was odd, because the one animal was a huge ox and the other was a small bullock. The animals seemed so unequal that the man called to the farmer and asked him why he was ploughing with such unequal animals. The farmer replied, Look closely at how they are hooked up to the yoke. The large ox is basically pulling all the weight. The little ox is being broken into the yoke, but he is hardly pulling anything.

To be yoked with Christ means He bears the load. We share in the labour and in the joy of the accomplishment, but the truly hard work has been done by Christ, and continues to be done by Him.

This is why the burden of discipleship, when we take it, is light - because Christ does it through us. Phil 4:13, 2 Cor 12:9.

Whatever He requires, He enables. You needn't faint at the task, because Jesus never tells you to do something without supplying all that you need to accomplish it. Set your heart to obey, and according to your faith be it unto you.

Sometimes Jesus assists us by unloading some of the burdens we have taken on. Sins we struggle with, guilt we own; responsibilities we shouldn't have. The word for 'easy' actually means well-fitting, or tailor-made. The yoke of discipleship Jesus has for you will fit your gifts and abilities perfectly. No other yoke will fit like Christ's.

The yoke is easy, and the burden is light.

See, the fact is – we are all serving someone or something. The master of the flesh wears you out. The master of materialism keeps you running. The master of legalism keeps you afflicted. The master of an unforgiving god keeps you in fear.

Christian, if your Christian life has become weary and burdensome, I ask you, who are you serving? The Gracious Master Jesus Christ refreshes His servants. They are always welcome. He is patient and forgiving, which makes them want to do their best. And when they labour for Him, He helps them to where they know He is carrying much of the burden.

Do you serve a gracious Christ?

There was a certain man who was the loyal servant of a wise and powerful king. He was so loyal to the king, that he chose one of the hardest tasks to display his love - to work in the mines of the king. The king would often come down and watch and show his delight in his servant. But as time went on, the work got harder, and the servant found he had less time to acknowledge the king's presence. As the mine got deeper, all he could now see of the king was his shadow reflected on the wall. He would glance at that shadow now and then, and keep on working. Over time, as he would look at that shadow, it seemed the king's appearance was changing. His dignified body now seemed to be bloated. The servant began to wonder if the king wasn't getting fat off his hard work. Worse, it seemed as if he was now wearing an obnoxiously high and arrogant crown. There he would be, with his hands on his hips, expecting all this work, while he stood there, fat, arrogant and lazy.

He now came to hate the times when the king's shadow appeared. He hated the work he was doing. He became bitter and even rebellious at times.

One day, he had come to the end of himself. He was spending all his life in a mine, for someone he didn't love. He chose to give up and face the king.

When he came to the king, he was shocked. The king's body was as stately and strong as he had remembered it. His face was still wise, kind and filled with gratitude, though his eyes were tinged with sadness for his servant. Where the servant thought he wore a high crown, he saw the king's great grey hair, tied up, like a humble servant.

The servant had been serving a shadow. The shadow had warped the king's true image. The shadow was a distortion of the true.

How many Christians are serving a shadow of the gracious Christ of Scripture? Serving a Christ of their own making, while the real Christ still stands, inviting you to come and be refreshed in Him?