

Summer holidays; finding rest

Sermon 1 July 2011; Third weekend after Pentecost

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Intro

It is summertime – time to think of holidays, relaxation, rest, both for the body and for the mind. But we all know that it is possible to sit on a beach for days, even weeks, and not be at rest, if our innermost being, our soul, is restless. As long as we are in inner turmoil, no holiday of whatever length and relaxation, is going to help us.

‘Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’, is what Jesus promises. That is what we need. To people like you and I, often feeling overburdened by life and its problems, this is a tremendous promise. Rest!

All who labour and are heavy laden

Now you would expect that if someone makes such a great offer of inner rest, that all people would flock to Him immediately ... but this did not happen. Jesus invited people to follow Him, but most kept Him at a distance.

Because of their resistance to come to Him, Jesus compared his own generation with children who play in the market. Some kids make happy music, but the other kids did not like that. And when they then decide to sing songs of mourning, the other kids did not want to play along either.

When John the Baptist came, many people thought he was really crazy, living the very ascetic life that he did. The same masses were also fascinated by Jesus, but for most, Jesus was too relaxed. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, John Barclay writes:

John was considered *mad* for cutting himself off from the pleasures of human life; Jesus was accused of being *too sociable*, a partygoer, a friend of indecent people. John’s self-denial was seen as *madness*, while Jesus’ sociability was seen as *low in morals*. Some people can never be pleased. [William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew* Vol. II (Louisville, 1957, 2001), p.12.]

For some the Christian faith is too easy, for others it is too hard, for some it is too complex, for others it is too simple.

Even as Christians we often suffer from sentiments of this sort. We cannot take anything at face value, we have this tendency of being critical of everything, we doubt, we reject. If only we could trust as a small child!

Skepticism can wear people out. We, critical people, we accept no authority, and no one can tell us what to do. Many of us have gone through educational systems where this attitude to life has been hammered into us. No to trust, do not follow, do not believe!

By the way, the Bible never criticizes intellectual *power* but intellectual *pride*. The pride that says: ‘I will only believe what I can understand; I only believe what I can see; I only believe what is logical according to the logic of the 21st century.’

The society we live in here in Egypt seems to also waver between deep skepticism about any religion on the one hand, especially among the educated elites, and deep rigid legalism on the other hand, especially among the masses.

What does society need? Less religion? More religion? These are daily discussions among those who effected the fall of the former President Mubarak.

Jesus, in his day, confronted those doubters, cynics, non-believers. He spoke of God, He discussed religious matters *as truth*, He was breathing God all the time. ‘Believe in God, believe in me’, He kept repeating.

But more often and with much more passion He confronted the strictly religious fundamentalist Pharisees, the *salafists* of his days. Their main goal was to have people join their movement and to adopt their yoke.

They spoke of two yokes actually. There was the Yoke of Heaven - the commitment each person had to make of trusting in God. But the related commitment was to the Yoke of the Torah, that is, to all the laws of God. Trusting in God without following all the rules of the rulebook was considered impossible.

In Matthew 23, Jesus says of these Pharisees: ‘They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders.’ That sounds like a serious yoke. In that same chapter in Matthew, Jesus describes these religious people vividly.

He describes a movement of people who dress in a manner that shows their religiosity; they love to be recognized as religious people; they have refined systems for deciding what is right and wrong, a detailed *shariah*; they like to be seen as teachers of that *shariah*; they are very worried about the exact payments of their *zakah* of 10% of their income; they are very interested in the correct washings and ritual purity...

But at the same time Jesus says to these people that they are dead inside; he calls them hypocrites; they shed the blood of the true followers of God. If you suffer from a *sweet-Jesus syndrome*, read that chapter, Matthew 23.

Come to me

Jesus does point a way out from our rationalizations and from our lack of faith. But it is remarkable that He never offered an alternative philosophy to those who doubt, to cynics, to intellectuals who could not figure it out.

And yes, He does deliver us from the heavy burden of the law, from the terror of our sins, from all things that wear us out. But Jesus never countered the Pharisees by giving his followers easier rules, a sort of *shariah-lite*.

The alternative to the rigidity of the legalism of the Pharisees is *not* a sweet Jesus who allows us to do as we please. Liberalism is not the Christian alternative to the yoke of the Jewish law. Jesus offers *another, a better yoke*. 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light', he explains. In apposition to this, the yoke of the law is painful.

For those who desire the Yoke of Heaven, of knowing God as Father, Jesus says: Not the Yoke of the Torah, the law, is what you need for finding God. For knowing God and for pleasing Him, for rest for your soul, you need My Yoke.

A yoke is the wooden piece that is put on the neck of an animal, often an ox, or two oxen beside each other, so that they can be used for ploughing a field. In Palestine, most farmers used two oxen for ploughing. The labor of those animals was heavy because of the rough soil, full of stones.

Yokes for oxen were made of wood; the oxen were brought to a carpenter, the measurements of their shoulders were taken, and in the following days, the yoke was roughly made. Then the oxen were brought back, and the yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not irritate the neck of the animals.

The alternative would be to put a rope around the neck of the animals, and that will definitely be awful, and possibly kill them. The animals *need* a yoke.

Just as we need a yoke; because all of us have to drag our burdens through life, we want to know how to live, how to cope with the hardships of life, we need an instrument that helps us to deal with family-problems, with troubles at work, with matters of life and death, with God. We need a yoke for serving God. St. Augustine, in one of his sermons, said:

Any other burden oppresses and crushes you, but Christ's actually takes weight off you. Any other burden weighs down, but Christ's gives you wings. If you take a bird's wings away, you might seem to be taking weight off it, but the more weight you take off, the more you tie it down to the earth. There it is on the ground, and you wanted to relieve it of a weight; give it back the weight of its wings and you will see how it flies. [Sermon 126]

The Pharisees told the people that the Yoke of the Law would help them drag their burdens through life. But it does not create the rest we desire; it makes us hurt more. The law does not bring us closer to God, but it underlines our distance from God. God disappears behind the horizon, and only the law and our guilt remain. This is because the good law is not a well-fitting yoke; we are the problem; *we are not perfect enough*.

But the Yoke of Jesus is gentle, it fits well. It helps us do the hard work of living in this world and serving God. It makes us the people God wants us to be. It helps us fly and gives us inner rest.

The laws of God did not help people to find real rest for their soul – although of course the Sabbath laws of Israel were helpful. To be forced to do nothing one day each week does not hurt anyone. The commandment to have holidays is nice and good!

3 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me

Interestingly, immediately after Jesus underlines that He gives people rest, he is challenged by some Pharisees for breaking the laws of the Sabbath. In that context Jesus says that He is the Lord of the Sabbath.

The Jewish scholar Rabbi Jacob Neusner wrote a book about Jesus, titled *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal, 2000). In this book he says that the claim of Jesus 'I will give you rest' and the accusation that he does not follow the Sabbath laws, are closely related.

Neusner sums it up: 'My yoke is easy, I give you rest ... because the Son of Man *is now* Israel's Sabbath... *He now takes the places of the Thora* [the laws of God.]' (pp. 85-87)

Not the Sabbath gives us rest; Jesus gives us rest. Our Lord Jesus Christ does not refer us back to a new type of law when He speaks of his light yoke. He only points to Himself. 'Come to me, take my yoke, learn from me.' Jesus is central in all this, and not some external rule of law.

How sad that even Christians sometimes have the impression that our faith is defined by do's and don'ts. In reality – relating to Jesus Christ is the heart of the matter.

The Yoke of Jesus that He wants us to put on our neck, is like the double yoke of the two oxen. We do not carry the yoke on our own, but we carry the double yoke, and Jesus is the other one under the same yoke. That is why He says: 'Take my yoke. Walk with me. Be with me.'

Jesus is inviting us to participate in His work, in his life, in his life with God. He invites you to join Him, to be joined with Him, and to walk your walk beside Him. And while we are joined closely with him, He says: 'Learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls.'

Mind you, Jesus does *not* say: learn *about* me. He says learn *from* me. He does not say that the right theology about Jesus satisfies our need for inner rest. He says that to learn from Him, to have Him be our teacher, *that* gives us rest.

It is the relationship with Christ the teacher that satisfies our soul. Being connected to Him, releases us of our sins. It frees us from guilt. It makes us new people.

While walking with Jesus under His yoke, He teaches us to truly know His Father. This goes far beyond holding the proper theology or rules for living. And this, Jesus says, is where man's heart finds rest.

St Augustine expressed this in words of great beauty and truth, in his *Confessions*:

O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

Rest for the soul, inner peace, is to be found nowhere else. Not in any philosophy, not in perfectly fulfilling a million rules and regulations, not in a perfect theology, not in any religious commitment.

This is the offense of the cross, the scandal of exclusivity, the affront to all religions. Even to a Christianity that focuses on rules or external matters only.

Conclusion

To religious people who believe that only meticulous obedience to a million do's and don't's can satisfy God – but who themselves are never satisfied, He offers this inner rest.

To not-so-religious people who are sick and tired of their own logic that only recognizes as true what is visible with the eyes, Jesus offer inner rest.

To all of us, Jesus holds this simple invitation in front of us.

'Come to me, accept my yoke, and learn from me. That leads to rest for the soul. And the challenge today is for all of us to test this promise of Jesus.

Amen