

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 26, 2017**

REST FOR THE WEARY

Matthew 11:28-30

I'm going to take a temporary detour from Romans today. The reason is that in less than two weeks, our Haiti Mission Team will be on the ground in Gressier, Haiti, about 30 miles west of Port-au-Prince. Some of us will arrive on Thursday, April 6. Most of the rest will arrive on April 8, with the last two members of our team joining us on Sunday, April 9.

That Sunday (two weeks from today), we have been asked to lead a day of ministry for the community of missionaries and missionary families in the area around Gressier. Counting children, there may be as many as 75-100 people joining us for worship, fellowship, lunch, and small group discussions. Our music team will lead worship. I get to preach. We will celebrate the Lord's Supper together. We will have a children's church program for the younger kids. After worship, we're providing dinner for the missionaries and their families. At their request, it will be a traditional Easter dinner with ham and other American favorites. Then, after the meal, we'll have a program for the kids while some members of our team lead discussion groups with the missionaries to give them an opportunity to talk about some of the challenges they face on a daily or weekly basis, including the challenge to stay connected to the Lord in the face of overwhelming and unending need among the people of Haiti whom they have been called to serve in Jesus' name.

By its nature, ministry can be draining. In any context. It is especially true in a place like Haiti. It can consume you. It can wear you out. Burnout is a clear and present danger. Missionaries, you know, are human, just like the rest of us. They get discouraged sometimes. They feel lonely. Sometimes, just like us, they struggle in their spiritual lives. So we want to encourage them. We want to bless them by giving them the opportunity to worship together in English, something they rarely get to do, since church services in Haiti are in the Creole language. We want to bless them by reminding them of Jesus' promise in Matthew 11 to give rest to the weary. It is easy to forget amid the incessant demands of ministry.

One way to find this rest for our souls is to remember just who God is. To contemplate His attributes. To remind ourselves and one another of what God is like.

This is what I have sensed the Lord leading me to focus on when I have the privilege of preaching to these servants of God and their families in Haiti. But I know that they are not alone in feeling weary and needing rest for their souls. They are not alone in needing to be reminded of the unchanging attributes and character of God. Your need or mine may not be as acute as theirs. But maybe it is. Maybe you're in a place right now where your soul is weary and burdened to the point of breaking, and you are crying out for rest and relief. Whatever the case, I want to share with you today some of what I hope to share with the missionaries in Haiti two weeks from today.

God's Word comes to us today from Matthew 11:28-30. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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I love Eugene Peterson's colorful rendering of verses 28-30 in *The Message*. See if you resonate with the way he expresses the offer of Jesus to anyone and everyone who is "weary and burdened" with the duties, demands, cares, and responsibilities of life.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly"
(Matthew 11:28-30, *MSG*).

Does that sound good to you? Can you relate? Is your soul tired today? Are you worn out in your spirit? Are you burned out on all the do's and don'ts of religion, on all the expectations other people place on you, or maybe the expectations you place on yourself? Do you sometimes feel paralyzed by the constant call to do more, to give more, to serve more in the name of Jesus?

That is not what Jesus wants for you. Or for any of us. It is not what Jesus has ordained for you.

I am especially intrigued by what Peterson calls "the unforced rhythms of grace." If he has gotten it right, there is a "rhythm of grace" with which we are to keep in step in our relationship with the Lord and our service to Him. The trouble comes when we get out of rhythm with His grace, or even forget about the air of grace we breathe, grace that is so essential not only to our salvation but to our life as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

NO REST FOR THE WEARY

Have you ever heard of Chautauqua, NY? Ever been there? Chautauqua is a summer cultural resort community. There are daily concerts, drama, classes, and lectures by well-known public figures, and some not so well-known. It is located on the shore of Chautauqua Lake in western New York state, south of Buffalo, about a two-hour drive from my family home in northwestern PA. It was founded in 1874 as a training center for Sunday school teachers. Over the years, its identity and purpose evolved into what it is today. It still gives a respectful nod to religion, but its original purpose as a Christian institution is just a distant memory.

When I was in college, back in the previous millennium, I spent three summers – following my freshman, sophomore, and junior years at Grove City College – working as a bellman at the oldest and largest hotel in Chautauqua: the Atheneum Hotel. It is an old, three-story, wood-frame hotel with a large wrap-around porch on two sides and lots of rocking chairs for guests. Mary Sue also worked at the Atheneum one summer as a waitress in the hotel's dining room.

Among other things, our crew of bellmen operated the hotel's ancient (1924) Otis elevator. This was no modern, state-of-the-art, automatic elevator where all you had to do was push a button. This was a manually-operated elevator that actually required some skill (and practice) to become proficient at stopping the elevator even with the floor, so our guests wouldn't trip and fall if they had to step up or down while exiting or entering the elevator.

When "business" was slow on the elevator, the bellman on elevator duty could sit in a cushioned wicker chair next to the elevator. As guests approached the elevator, they would often say, with sympathy either real or feigned: "There is no rest for the weary." I can't tell you how many hundreds of times I heard that during my three summers at the hotel.

"No rest for the weary." Does it feel like that to you some days? Or maybe every day, as you try to manage all the duties and demands and relationships and responsibilities of your life? Are there days when the weight of all your cares is just overwhelming?

I want you to know that "no rest for the weary" is not the message of Jesus to you. The message of Jesus to every one of us, regardless of our age, sex, nationality, marital status, income, vocation, zip code, ministry involvement, health, political affiliation, or any other descriptor, is that there is rest for the weary. And Jesus invites us all – all of us who feel tired or overmatched, all of us who are needy and know that we are needy – to do what? To simply come to Him. To draw near to Him. To humbly yet confidently approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). To bring our griefs and doubts and fears and insecurities and burdens and cares to Him.

THREE IMPERATIVES

Grammatically speaking, there are three imperatives in these verses. First is the invitation in verse 28 to "come," which is an open invitation for everyone. Which means it is for you and me. It is for everyone who feels weary and burdened. First and foremost, it is an invitation for those who are burdened by their sin and weary of trying to be good enough to win God's favor. Jesus wants us to understand and never forget that salvation is not found in living by a list of do's and don'ts. Salvation is found in a person. It is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is found in a relationship of trust in Him. To come to Him means to trust in Him. Salvation from sin, cleansing from a guilty conscience, peace with God, a changed heart, a renewed mind, a new purpose and power for living – all are found in Jesus and Him alone. As Peter says in Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else."

But Jesus invites us – He invites *you* – to come to Him not only for salvation and forgiveness, but for comfort as well. For encouragement. For counsel. For wisdom. For courage. For strength. For faith. For rest. For relief. For anything and everything you need to live for Him and to serve His purposes in this world. So take Jesus up on His invitation and come to Him. Keep on coming to Him. Keep on trusting in Him. Keep on leaning on Him.

The second imperative is "take" (verse 29). Take what? "Take my yoke upon you," Jesus says. Do you know what a yoke is? According to the *Revell Bible Dictionary* (1043), a yoke is "a piece of wood shaped to fit over the neck of load-pulling animals to link them together."

Yoke can also refer to “a pair of work animals,” such as a yoke of oxen. Used figuratively, it can describe a condition of slavery or a heavy burden of some kind. Or, it can refer to an emotional or relational bond with another person as in 2 Corinthians 6:14, where we are urged not to be “yoked together with unbelievers.”

The yoke of Jesus is not a literal wooden yoke. It is a kind of spiritual yoke or harness in which we willingly submit to His guidance and direction in our lives. While it is different from “the yoke of the law,” it is not freedom to do anything we like. It is freedom, yes – the freedom to follow Jesus and to enjoy the benefits of life under His leadership. With Jesus in charge, it means that the weight we once tried to pull or carry alone is much lighter. Including the weight of ministry or our concerns for family members or others with overwhelming needs.

In Jesus’ day, to take a yoke meant to become a disciple or follower. So, from the moment we come to Jesus and trust in Him, and become followers of Jesus, we are “yoked” to Him. The thing about the yoke of Jesus is that it is “easy” (verse 30). Which is to say, it fits well. It is not too big or too tight. It is not too heavy or too bulky. It is not unmanageable. It is tailor-made for our lives. Because it is made for us by the Master-Craftsman par excellence, the Lord Jesus Himself. To submit to His leadership and direction is not burdensome, especially when you consider the alternatives. Far too many professing Christians and Christian leaders, to their own detriment, to the detriment of their families and of the church and its witness in the world, choose to throw off the yoke of Jesus in order to “enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25), with disastrous results. Pray that none of us will be enticed to do the same.

The third imperative is to “learn” (verse 29). To learn from Jesus. To let Jesus be your Teacher, your Shepherd, your Instructor, your Master in all the ins and outs, the joys and sorrows, the successes and failures, the serendipities and disappointments you will experience in this life. Don’t waste any of your experiences. Learn from Jesus. Learn from His teaching. Learn from His example. Learn from His character. Apply what He teaches you to your own life. To your relationships. To your ministry. Jesus is not an unreasonable, overbearing teacher who takes delight in intimidating or threatening His disciples. To the contrary, He is “gentle and humble in heart” (verse 29).

Jesus promises that when we come and take and learn, we will “find rest for (our) souls” (verse 29). This rest is not inactivity or idleness, or freedom from struggles or sorrows in life. Instead, it is relief from the crushing burdens of anxiety that can cripple you or a deflating sense of frustration and futility, or the misery of unresolved sin and guilt in your life (cf. R.V.G. Tasker, *Matthew*, 132). Sweet relief! And the assurance that Jesus is in charge, not you or I.

“You will find rest (relief) for your souls.” That is a promise you can count on if you will take Jesus up on His invitation to come and take and learn. And keep on taking Him up on it day after day after day. It is a promise you can count on, because Jesus keeps His promises, whether you live in Haiti, or Washington, D. C. or anywhere else.

One way to find rest for your soul, as I said at the beginning, is to reflect on the attributes of God and how those attributes impact your life. Chapter 2 of The Westminster Confession of Faith contains a lengthy list of God's attributes revealed in the Bible, way too many for us to consider today. I want to mention just three attributes or qualities of God that can give rest and relief to our souls.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The first is God's presence with us. The Bible assures us again and again of God's promise to be with us, no matter where we go or what we encounter along the way.

We have the assurance of Psalm 46:1 that

God is our refuge and strength,
an every-present help in trouble.

When trouble of any kind invades our lives, God is always there to help us. Always. We do not always feel God's presence. Nor do we always recognize God's presence with us. But He is "an ever-present help" in times of trouble.

This is what the Lord says in Isaiah 43:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you.
And when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
Do not be afraid, for I am with you.
(43:1b-31, 5a)

God promises His presence with His people in Isaiah 41:10 as well:

Do not fear, for I am with you.
Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Want to hear more? In his farewell address to the people of Israel just before his death, as the people prepared to cross the Jordan River and take possession of the Promised Land, Moses said to them: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of (the people

in the land), for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Following Moses’ death, the LORD said to Joshua: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5).

That the promise of God’s presence is for all of His people is clear from Hebrews 13:5, where it says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money” – a temptation we must fight against daily – “and be content with what you have, because God has said: ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.’” When will God abandon us? Never.

We have the witness of David in Psalm 139, as he prays:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, You are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, You are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there Your hand will guide me,
Your right hand will hold me fast.
(139:7-10)

Then there is the promise of Jesus Himself, when He gave His followers the Great Commission in Matthew 28. He said: “Surely I am with you always” (28:20). Always.

The name given to Jesus in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 was “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). During the days of His incarnation, Jesus *was* God with us. Now, following His death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is “God with us.” At every moment. In every joy. In every pain. In every disappointment or setback. Always. Even when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, as David testifies in Psalm 23, we need fear no evil. Why? *Because the Lord. Is. With. Us.* (23:4)

When you find yourself in a place or situation where God seems absent and you wonder what in the world He is doing, do not doubt that He is present with you. You are not alone. And never will be.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Second, God is sovereign. Which means what? It means that God is in charge. Not Satan. Not “the rulers and authorities and powers of this dark world,” or “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12) with which we must contend. *God* is in charge. The universe belongs to Him.

Yes, we live in a fallen world where evil, tragedy, hurricanes, earthquakes, poverty, hunger, violence, racism, terrorism, wars, hate, greed, sexual anarchy, abuse, corruption, and lies abound. But God is still on His throne. And His redemptive purposes for His people, for this world and for all creation, will be fulfilled. Nothing can happen to us – nothing can happen in this world – that will ever thwart the promises and purposes of God. His purposes and promises will not fail.

The sovereignty of God also means that nothing ever takes God by surprise. He is never surprised by evil. Neither calamity nor catastrophe will ever catch Him off guard. He is never knocked off balance when something bad happens. Pretty much anything in the category of the unexpected can throw us for a loop. But not God. He knows it all. He's got the whole world in His hands. He's got your life and mine in His hands. To quote from Psalm 139 again, "All the days ordained for (us) were written in (His) book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16). And there is absolutely nothing in life or death, nothing in all creation, that can foil God's plan or separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39).

He's got your life in His hands. Your burdens. Your cares. Your tears. Your prayers. Your needs. Your ministry. He's got it all.

I love the words of this old hymn:

This is my Father's world;
O, let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the Ruler yet.
(Maltbie Babcock)

And the day will come when the whole world acknowledges His sovereignty, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

Asaph, in Psalm 73:28, says: "I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge." You and I can't do better than that.

THE GRACE OF GOD

Not only is God present with us. Not only is He the sovereign Ruler of all things. Third, He is gracious. And His grace makes all the difference. Apart from His grace, we have no hope of salvation, no hope of forgiveness, no hope of being reconciled to God, because salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone (see Ephesians 2:8-9). But we need God's grace to live as followers of Jesus just as much as we need that grace for salvation. We can't do it on our own. The Christian life is a supernatural life. A supernatural life requires a supernatural power. It is only by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us that we can live lives that please God and serve His purposes.

If you're trying the DIY method of Christianity (DIY: Do It Yourself), you might as well forget about it.

A common refrain in the Bible is:

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
 slow to anger and abounding in love.
 (Psalm 145:8; cf. Exodus 34:6; 2 Chronicles 30:9;
 Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 111:4;
 116:5; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2)

The word "grace" is often defined as "the unmerited favor of God." By definition it is a gift that is undeserved. If it is earned or deserved, it is no longer grace. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. As an acronym, GRACE means God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Which is what it is. I still like Philip Yancey's explanation that grace is a gift that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you.

God's grace has changed my life. The difference it has made, since I really came to understand it, is huge. The realization that God is gracious, that it is His nature to be gracious, and that His grace extends to me, has radically changed my life.

Embrace his grace in your life. In your circumstances. In your trials. In your joys and sorrows. Preach the gospel of grace to each other. And preach it to yourself. Often. A dose of the gospel, a reminder of God's grace every day, will be good for you.

I know I've gone long today. I thank you for your forbearance. I will close with this, the words to a song sung by the Christian rock band Third Day. It is called "Cry Out to Jesus."

To everyone who's lost someone they love
 Long before it was their time
 You feel like the days you had were not enough
 When you said goodbye

And to all of the people with burdens and pains
 Keeping you back from your life
 You believe that there's nothing and there is no one
 Who can make it right

There is hope for the helpless
 Rest for the weary
 Love for the broken heart
 There is grace and forgiveness
 Mercy and healing
 He'll meet you wherever you are
 Cry out to Jesus, Cry out to Jesus

For the marriage that's struggling just to hang on
They've lost all their faith in love
They've done all they can to make it right again
Still it's not enough

For the one who can't break the addictions and chains
You try to give up but you come back again
Just remember that you're not alone in your shame
And your suffering

When you're lonely
And it feels like the whole world is falling on you
You just reach out
You just cry out to Jesus

There is hope for the helpless
Rest for the weary
Love for the broken heart
There is grace and forgiveness
Mercy and healing
He'll meet you wherever you are
Cry out to Jesus
Cry out to Jesus

(Songwriters: Brad Avery, David Carr, Mac Powell,
Mark Lee, and Tai Anderson;
C2005 Capitol Christian Music Group)

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest.”
Lord, let it be so in us. Now and always. Amen.