

SPIRITUAL REST
Matthew 11:25-30
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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/spiritual-rest/>

Sometimes a passage of scripture is so loved and repeated, we think we know what it means. This beautiful promise made by Jesus—the promise of rest—has been interpreted many ways. For example, lots of us are tired. I started writing this sermon during Vacation Bible Camp. Anyone still tired from that? I recently asked a father of three children, all under the age of 10, if he ever got tired. He replied, “Change the question to, ‘Am I ever NOT tired?’” I have also used this scripture at funerals, thinking about the eternal rest offered us in the resurrection life beyond this one.

But note the context. Matthew 12 tells us several encounters in which the Law, rules about Sabbath, become more important than people and more important than our relationship with God (you can’t eat on the Sabbath, 12:1-8; you can’t do good on the Sabbath, 12:9-14). In Jewish custom, the Law was called a yoke and Jewish boys were said to take on the yoke of the Law at bar mitzvah. Over the centuries, 613 commandments had been developed (365 negative and 248 positive). So, the rest Jesus is talking about is a spiritual rest from the burden of laws, from ought-to’s, from legalism and from harsh, joyless rule-keeping.

We have our own 20th and 21st century legalisms. I heard about a deacon who stood at the door as people entered on Sundays, making sure they were using “the correct” translation of the Bible. Someone said that the catalogue of social sins include tobacco, liquor, Coca Cola, movies, medicine, life insurance, public swimming, professional sports, jewelry and makeup [*The Evangelicals*, by Frances Fitzgerald, p. 210]. I have a pastor friend who says that our rules tell us more about us than about God. Amen! Sadly, organized religion can squeeze the life out of freedom. It did in Jesus’ day and it does in ours.

In the midst of this suffocating legalism, Jesus does two things. *First, he invites us to trust.* Our relationship with God isn’t about achieving; it’s about receiving. This is so simple, Jesus says, that wise people stumble over it, yet children can understand it (v. 25). It’s trust, not trying.

As we trust, he invites us into a relationship with God just like the one he has with God (v. 27). We are talking about a connection which is deep and satisfying. And it’s a connection which helps us see the correspondence between relationship and rules, between law and grace. Let me illustrate. A man once told me that he really resented the very low speed limit in a school zone as he drove to work each day. Then, one day, he didn’t resent it anymore. Nor did he try to fudge on his speed. You see, his little girl started school and she crossed the street there. Love became a factor. Now, he understood the rules.

External laws can’t make us do right. Only love can change our want-to’s internally. And we love when we see what Jesus has done for us in his life and in his death on the Cross. Let me ask you. Were you made for rules or for relationships?

The second thing Jesus does is invite us to take his yoke—not the yoke of law, but of a relationship with him. “Come to me...” (v. 28). How audacious! Not, “Go to God,” but, “Come to ME.” He invites us to take his yoke. It’s not an assembly line yoke. It is handcrafted to fit. Can’t you picture the boy Jesus, working in his father’s carpenter shop, filling some farmer’s order, measuring the yoke to fit the animal? So it wouldn’t chafe the neck. His yoke is “easy,” suitable, appropriate, easy to wear. It is good, kind and does not chafe the neck. And it is “light,” meaning not burdensome, never too much.

And note it’s not just any yoke, it’s “my yoke...” Hitched right. He is yoked with us. Does Jesus make demands on our lives? Of course. But he is with us, in us, to empower us. Jesus never asks us to do anything he wouldn’t do.

You see, it’s our relationship with Jesus that changes it from drudgery to joy. There are two kinds of tired. There is the tiredness of religious busyness, rule-keeping, transactional behavior (I’ll be good if you will do this for me), of boredom and emptiness. It just plain makes you tired! But there is another kind of tired. It’s when you get yoked right. You’re in the zone. It’s the tired you have after Mission JC, or a mission trip, or helping in VBC or getting up in the middle of the night to help someone in a crisis. That’s a good tired, because Jesus gives rest. Soul rest. Deep, satisfying rest. Spiritual rest.