“COME TO ME AND REST”

Matthew 11:1–30

Key Verse: 11:28

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

In last week’s passage Jesus sent out his twelve disciples for fieldwork training, to help them grow as spiritual harvest workers for his kingdom. In today’s passage Matthew mainly shows us how we should respond to Jesus and the message of his kingdom. Amidst the many poor responses to him, Jesus gives a most gracious invitation: “Come to me and rest.” We want to think about what his invitation means, and what it really means to come to him. May God open our hearts to accept Jesus’ invitation today.

Look at verse 1. After sending his disciples out, Jesus himself also went out and worked, diligently visiting people, as he usually did (4:23; 9:35). Look at verse 2. This “John” is John the Baptist. It seems good to do a little review here. Matthew described John’s ministry back in chapter 3. John began his ministry before Jesus did. John’s mission was simple: to prepare people to receive Jesus as their Savior and King. How could people do that in a meaningful way? First, they had to repent of their sins. John’s message was, “Repent!” Without repentance, nobody can really receive Jesus. John’s mission was hard. He had to confront what most people would rather ignore or gloss over. Not only do people not want to talk about it, they also don’t want to stop sinning. Why? Because people think sin is enjoyable, even normal. What is sin? It isn’t just indulging in illicit pleasures; sin is choosing to live without God. Sin is loving self and the world more than God. Sin makes us hardened. Even though sin leaves us empty and meaningless and weighs us down with guilt and despair, we don’t want to stop. Getting people to really see sin as sin and to turn to God can seem as hard as trying to dig into a cement sidewalk with a dinner fork. God filled his servant John the Baptist with the Holy Spirit so that he could have spiritual power to influence sinful people. God blessed John’s ministry so much. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River (3:5,6).

Look at verse 2 again. It says that John was now “in prison.” What happened? We find out later in chapter 14. With his courageous message of repentance, John told even King Herod that he had to repent of taking his brother’s wife, and for that, John got locked up in prison. Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, for they all held that John was a prophet (14:3–5). So John had been sitting in prison ever since Jesus began his ministry (4:12), for maybe over a year by now. Verse 2 also says that in prison John “heard about the deeds of the Messiah.” What does that mean? The emphasis is not on Jesus’ preaching and teaching, but on what Jesus was doing. What had Jesus been doing? In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew has been emphasizing Jesus’ healing ministry. In welcoming the sick Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. Jesus was with sinful outcasts as a spiritual doctor. In his compassion Jesus saw people as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Through his deeds of healing Jesus was showing people what God’s kingdom is going to be like.

John heard about these deeds of Jesus. How did he respond? Look at verses 2 and 3. John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” It’s a surprising question coming from John the Baptist. Earlier, when he first met Jesus, John said to him, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John had had such an awesome respect for Jesus, he didn’t even feel worthy to baptize him, so Jesus had to press him to do it (3:14–15). But now, is John unsure about who Jesus is? Some people think that by asking this question John was trying to help his own disciples, who were stuck on following John and wouldn’t go to Jesus. That may be true in some sense. Some think John was asking this question because being in prison had discouraged him. But John seems to be tougher than that, to allow imprisonment to make his faith shaky.

Most likely, John had a different idea about what the Messiah would do. John had told people there would be a “coming wrath” (3:7) and “fire” (3:10). He said the Messiah would baptize people not with water but “with fire” (3:11). He also said the Messiah would burn up the chaff, the unrepentant people, “with unquenchable fire” (3:12). He wanted to see God purge sin and judge the wicked and arrogant, and he emphasized how powerful the Messiah would be. But when he heard about the deeds of the Messiah, there was no fire and no judgment. There was only lots of healing and grace shown to sinners. It was miraculous power, but used in a seemingly weak way. It wasn’t what John expected. When God doesn’t work the way we expected, we too can start questioning things.

How did Jesus respond? Read verses 4–6. Jesus is using the old adage, “Actions speak louder than words.” He actually had been doing all the things the prophets said the Messiah would do (Isa29:18; 35:5,6; 61:1; cf. Jn5:36). We should believe in Jesus not just because he spoke so well, but because of his deeds—what he actually did. Jesus did everything the Messiah was supposed to do. In what Jesus was doing, we can see the characteristics of the Messiah’s work. He’s powerful, but he uses his power not to push or dominate or crush, but to heal. The Messiah’s work is to restore, to heal, to give life. How? Mainly it was through planting faith in people’s hearts. Jesus calls us to such compassionate healing ministry today, helping the sick and hopeless to have faith in him.

Look at verse 6 again. This was Jesus’ message to John in prison, and, to John’s disciples. But he uses the word “anyone.” He’s surely talking to the early Christians. They would be pressured to deny their faith, and many of them would be tortured and killed. They did not fall away on account of Jesus. In verse 6 he’s also talking to us. “Anyone.” We, too, should not stumble on account of him. But what does that mean in our day-to-day Christian lives? To “stumble” means to doubt, to lose faith, to be discouraged, to give up, to despair. It’s so easy to stumble. How can we not? Jesus says “on account of me.” It means that when we remember Jesus our Messiah and all that he did for me and for the world, we can be strengthened and encouraged to keep on walking by faith, no matter what we’re going through. Apostle Paul suffered in chains and in prison because of his faith in Jesus. But he told his spiritual son Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ…” (2Ti2:8,9). Read verse 6 once more. May God help us to live as such blessed persons in this dark world by remembering Jesus.

Look at verses 7–9. John might have been weak right now, but Jesus didn’t want people to get the wrong idea. He praises John strongly. John wasn’t a weak person, swayed by people or the situation; he wasn’t self-indulgent, either. John was a prophet, and Jesus says, “even more than a prophet.” What did he mean? Look at verse 10. John was the forerunner of the Messiah. He prepared his way, in fulfillment of prophecy (Mal3:1). We already thought about how he did that, by helping people repent. Look at verse 11a. Why did Jesus say John was so great? What was it that made him so great? It was because he obeyed God’s costly mission for him. He gave his whole life to his mission, holding nothing back. What does it have to do with us? It tells us that true greatness is a life lived for the sake of helping people to receive Jesus. Not personal achievements, not self-promotion, but a selfless life of leading others to Christ. Look at verse 11b. Now Jesus says that even the least in God’s kingdom is greater than John. Why? It’s because, with the coming of Jesus, a new era of God’s amazing grace has dawned. Because of God’s grace to us in Jesus, even terrible sinners can have direct access to God. By God’s grace, though our life record may be so bad, we can be sanctified and glorified sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus. Look at verse 12. Here, the “violence against the kingdom of heaven” refers to John the Baptist being put in prison, and to the persecution Jesus and his disciples faced. Persecution shouldn’t make people think the whole thing isn’t true; it’s evidence that God’s kingdom is at work. When God’s gracious kingdom grows, Satan always tries to raid it through violent people. Look at verses 13–15. Jesus’ point is that John was “the Elijah who was to come” (17:11–13), in fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy (Mal4:15). John had come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk1:17). Like Elijah, he wore a camel’s hair garment and a leather belt (2Ki1:8; Mt3:4). John’s coming as the Elijah promised to come was further proof that God’s Messiah himself had finally come, too.

Look at verses 16–19. Jesus compared his generation to children in the marketplace, because they were so fickle. John the Baptist had come to them. But they criticized him for his austere lifestyle. Then, the very Son of God, Jesus, came to them. But they criticized him because he ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. They were self-centered and childish. Jesus said, “But wisdom is proved right by her actions” (19b). We need God’s wisdom to respond to God’s work in the right way. So why was Jesus talking for so long about John the Baptist? They had followed John when he was popular, but now that he was in prison they’d forgotten him. Jesus wanted them to have a sense of history. He also wanted people to know that he wasn’t competing with John, but carrying on the kingdom work John had started.

Look at verses 20–24. The cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom all had something in common: a reputation for great wickedness, like Las Vegas today. Jesus said the towns where he had worked were worse than the wickedest places around. Why? Seeing miracles only made them proud and self-deceived. It applies to us. How easy it is to take blessings for granted, so much so that we become spiritually blind! When we see God’s gracious work, we shouldn’t become proud but repent. “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do’” (25,26). The “wise and learned” are people who thought they knew the Bible already, and the “little children” are those humble enough to learn and to repent. After being despised by spiritually blind people, Jesus said, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (27).

Read verses 28–30. These verses are unique to Matthew’s Gospel. They’re also some of the most famous, well-loved verses in the Bible. Matthew recorded these words because they’d ministered to his own soul so deeply. As a former tax collector he’d been weary and burdened. He also had made others weary and burdened by squeezing money out of them. His old life must have been filled with hard toil, emptiness, no compassion, and guilt. But in these verses he repeats twice Jesus’ promise that he gives rest.

Why are people weary and burdened? It is because we have to live in a cursed world. We have to struggle to survive. We feel meaningless. We have to suffer the effects of others’ sins and irresponsibility. But mostly, we’re weary and burdened because of our own sins. It’s hard to carry a burden of sin. Jesus was surrounded by childish, indifferent, proud and unrepentant people. But he still invited all those who were weary and burdened to come to him. He was compassionate enough to embrace all kinds of people.

Read verse 28 again. How can we come to Jesus? It’s not just through outward things like going to church or studying the Bible. We come to him when we bring our hearts. We come to him especially when we acknowledge our sins and repent, asking him for his mercy. When we’re weary and burdened, we tend to go many places. Sometimes we just go to bed and hide. Sometimes we complain because we’re weary and burdened. Sometimes we seek comfort from people. But often we’re disappointed by them, or hurt. Trying to find relief from being weary and burdened often leaves us feeling more empty and more tired. Jesus says to each of us, “Come to me.” He also says, “…and I will give you rest.” He’s not talking about mere physical rest; otherwise, all Christians would be sleepy, checked out, lazy people. He’s talking about deep rest in our souls. He gives us such deep rest because he takes away our burden of sin. He renews our souls with his grace of forgiveness. He assures us of his promise of heaven. He helps us reconnect with what we’re really supposed to be doing in life. Worldly things leave us feeling anxious, but Jesus gives our souls true peace and rest. It’s the best, but it’s not all.

Read verse 29. What’s a yoke? It’s not an egg yolk, but a big piece of wood. A yoke ties oxen together to pull a cart or a plow. The yoke enables the oxen to work together. With his words, “Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus is inviting us to be his co-workers, to come alongside him and share in his mission. Taking his yoke is joining in the ministry of healing, saving people and bringing them to God’s kingdom. When we share his yoke, we become coworkers with each other, working not against each other, but with each other closely. If we’re stubborn as an ox and always going in our own way, we can’t work with Jesus or with his people. But how can we take his yoke, practically? We have to surrender our independence and freedom. That’s hard to accept. Tied to Jesus and his yoke, we can’t go off in our own way anymore. Also, we have to make a commitment. Usually we like to receive grace and blessings from Jesus, but we’re not so interested in taking his yoke. But it doesn’t work like that. When we come to him, he always invites us to take his yoke.

He also says in verse 29, “…and learn from me…” What should we be learning? He goes on: “…for I am gentle and humble in heart.” These words should further move our hearts to come to Jesus. Jesus is most powerful. He’s the Holy Son of God, but he’s gentle and humble in heart. Wow! In the Old Testament, it says, “(Now Moses was a humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth)” (Nu12:3). But Jesus is even more humble. Because Jesus is so humble and gentle in heart, anyone can come to him—really anyone! We’re constantly failing and sinning, full of weaknesses and shortcomings, but whoever we are, we can come to Jesus, and he’ll receive us. Certain people may seem great, but we can’t really go to them. It’s sad when children don’t feel like they can approach even their own parents and share what they’re going through. If we haven’t learned Jesus’ humble, gentle heart, people won’t feel comfortable coming to us. They think if they do, they’ll only be judged or get a long lecture. How can we learn Jesus’ humble and gentle heart so that sinners want to come to us? Only as we come to Jesus and share his yoke.

A yoke can be hard to carry. But read verse 30. How can Jesus say this? It’s because he himself is carrying the yoke; he’s pulling most of the load. All we have to do is join him. It’s easy and light because it’s by grace that we’re sharing in his work. If we feel weary and burdened by ministry, it’s time to come to Jesus newly and learn more deeply his humble, gentle heart.

Read verses 28–30 again. May God bless each of us to learn how to really come to Jesus and find rest for our souls.