

“Scents and Sensibility for the Soul-Weary”

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Based upon Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30; 2 Cor. 2:14-17

“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Aren’t these words that we all need to hear? When we are working around the clock trying to cover all the bases, when we are bombarded daily by hundreds of shocking headlines and corresponding calls to action, when we are weary of doing so much for others, and dare I say, even for the Church, our souls can become so strung out that they yearn desperately for rest. When they do, this verse seems like an answer to prayer. But what about the second part? Jesus said “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” How can wearing a yoke be restful, let alone a yoke made of Jesus’ way? Anyone who has ever read anything that Jesus said knows that his way is not easy. “Love God and everyone else including your enemies, live in the world but not be of the world, and take care of the least of these?” Hardly simple stuff to do! Under the best of circumstances living the Gospel is challenging. But these days especially, there are so many people we are supposed to help, and so many problems we need to solve in order for the Kingdom of God to exist on earth, that the challenges can feel overwhelming. I know that just spending two weeks researching the serious problems of sojourners, widows, and orphans has made my cortisol levels rise, and I suspect yours too, after hearing the resulting sermons. I haven’t even addressed the poor and the hungry in my sermon series yet! It reminds me of how Bruce, the main character in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, felt after he found out that in addition to being loaned the powers of God, he was also being given God’s responsibilities. Let’s watch to see how he reacted to having to respond to all the world’s prayers. [*Bruce Almighty* clip shown.]¹

If you have been feeling like Bruce lately, drowning in the sticky notes of the world, you are not alone. In fact, so many people are feeling this way now that psychologists have a name for the overwhelmed, on-edge kind of stressful feeling which can come from being bombarded with the needs of the world through the 24/7 news cycle. It’s called “headline stress disorder.”² I suspect that most people who use social media regularly have this to some degree now. I also suspect that Christians like us, who understand the Gospel as a divine call to share love and fight for justice, are especially prone to this condition. When you’re a Christian, the Spirit enables you to see and feel the injustices of the world acutely. You also have the additional burden of knowing that through Christ, your neighbor’s problems have been made your responsibility. This can make living out the Gospel in our troubled world feel like a heavy burden indeed.

But Jesus said his “yoke was easy and his burden light.” How can that be? In order to understand this, we first need to consider this beloved quotation in context. As we heard in the verses leading up to these lines, when Jesus spoke these words, his ministry was not being

¹ *Bruce Almighty*. Directed by Tom Shadyac. Los Angeles: Universal Studios, 2003. Video legally shown per CVLI License #504082972. To see the scene shown go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0cG11ITS1E>.

² See Spector, Nicole “‘Headline stress disorder’: How to cope with the anxiety caused by the 24/7 news cycle,” nbcnews.com, posted Dec.16.2017, 4:54 PM ET, Updated Jun.20.2018, 5:38 PM ET; retrieved July 10, 2018 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/what-headline-stress-disorder-do-you-have-it-nca830141>

well-received by all of the people in the religious establishment. They had whined that John the Baptist was too much of a spiritual buzz kill, what with his eating bugs and condemning people all the time. But when Jesus came eager to drink wine with those in need, and preaching love, the authorities condemned him too for being a party-boy and rule-breaker. Jesus' point in noting this was that they had such narrow expectations of what was acceptable to God, that they were making it virtually impossible for people to feel close to God, let alone saved by God's grace. The Torah in those times was often referred to in Jewish circles as "the yoke of wisdom." But the religious authorities had used God's Law to straightjacket people's behavior to such a degree that they lived in fear of God's wrath. They had made God's covenant of love and promise into a very heavy yoke around people's necks and souls.

When Jesus said that his yoke was easy, therefore, he was comparing his way of knowing God to their way. "If you want to know God and be saved by God, my way is far less stressful," he effectively said. "I'll share God's wisdom with you, and I don't care who you are, what you're wearing, what you ate for breakfast, or how late you were out last night. I will give you God's saving grace so you don't have to earn it. All you have to do is know and follow me." When he said this, Jesus wasn't implying that his way was free from challenges. He had already preached the Sermon on the Mount at this point, so the challenges were clear. But Jesus was offering his followers release from the burden of worrying about their souls. Theologian Lance Pape put it this way: "What Jesus offers is not freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labor. Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of all work, but rather of work to which we are ill-suited, of work extracted under compulsion and motivated by fear, or of work performed in the face of futility. The easy yoke... means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God's kingdom realized. It means work toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true."³

Compulsion, fear, futility—these are the stress-inducers of life. No one wants to feel that they "have to do this or else," or that "we're all doomed no matter what." That's why it's good news that the Gospel inspires the opposite feelings. God's love in Christ reminds us that walking with God is more about "want to's" and "get to's," than "have to's." In Christ, God saves us by grace so that we are not compelled to serve God to save our souls. Furthermore, through Christ, we also know that God's way will win in the end. So the fate of the universe does not hang on our shoulders either. We do not have to fear that if we don't fight for the good fiercely enough good will disappear or feel that all of our efforts to build up the kingdom are futile. God's way is never futile. God's kingdom will come, and God's will shall be done because nothing in the universe is more powerful than God, and God is determined to transform us and the world through Christ. Submitting to the yoke of Christ is not a punishment; therefore, it is a way for us to remain eternally connected to God. It is also a way for us to find help for the journey by linking ourselves with a source of strength. Christ is always in the other side of the yoke, carrying the weight along with us. Not only does that make the yoke lighter, it ensures that even peril, famine, or sword can separate him and his love.

³ Pape, Lance, "Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30," *Feasting on the Word*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., Year A, Vol. 3, 217.

If we are feeling soul weary, therefore, it is usually a sign that we have either lost track of these truths because we have slipped out of the yoke and let scary headlines rule our hearts, or a sign that we have convinced ourselves that it is up to us and the Church to save the world by ourselves. In other words, instead of drawing from our source of life and strength, we are trying to go it alone. When that happens, in order to restore the balance and truth our lives lack, we need to refocus our tired souls on Christ, and strive follow his example as closely as if we were physically yoked with him.

If you do this, using the Bible as a tool to help you cling to Christ, the first surprising thing you'll discover is that Jesus rested a lot. (See Luke 5:16). Incidentally, this is just what today's psychologists say you should do if you have headline stress disorder. You're supposed to take a step back, unplug or skip reading the paper for a while, and focus on self-care and good things. Jesus did this all the time. He would heal some people, and then when the demands upon him became too great, go off and rest for a while. He would give a moving sermon, and then slip out of the crowd to go off by himself to pray. Even in the *Gospel of Mark*, which moves at a frenetic pace, Jesus goes off to pray and rest repeatedly. As much as he loved people, he seemed to find the crowds draining too, like a classic introvert. So he made sure to allow time for solitude and communing with God.

The second thing you'll discover if you yoke yourself to Christ is that Jesus approached his ministry more from the standpoint of personal encounter than global initiative. His dying on the cross was certainly for the whole world, as was his commission to us was to share the good news. But during Jesus' ministry, he invested his time in the people he encountered along the way far more than in global politics. He didn't campaign to overthrow Rome, even though people wanted him to do that. He lived the Gospel locally. This means that instead of saving all widows, he helped those he encountered. Instead of making bread for the whole world, which he was tempted to do, he fed those he saw around him that were hungry. Like the prophet Jeremiah, who advised his followers to "look for where the good way lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls," Jesus followed the good way wherever he was, regardless of what was going on around him, and in doing so he found rest for his soul. (See Jer. 6:16).

His example teaches us that being faithful does not require us to live frenzied and stress-filled lives trying to have it all and do it all. It doesn't require earning points or saving the world. All we have to do is find his good way and walk in it consistently. If you have the means to help others, then help them. If you are given the opportunity to speak out against injustice, do that. Strive to embody the way of the kingdom in how you live, more than to build the kingdom singlehandedly, and you will find rest for your soul because the knowledge of Christ's way, and the experience of his love, inevitably lead us out of compulsion and futility and into grace and hope.

In our epistle lesson today, Paul describes this way of living in terms of scent, as living in such a way that we spread "the fragrance of knowing Christ," or "the aroma of Christ." Paul said that when we take Christ's way to heart it changes the way that we live so that it is instantly recognizable like a perfume. His words make me think of a woman I knew in another church I

served. She wore so much perfume that if she hugged you, her scent would last on your clothes for the rest of the day. Everyone knew this about the woman, so I could be walking around the office at 3 o'clock in the afternoon after having visited her in the morning, and someone would say to me, "You visited 'Marilyn' today didn't you?" I think Paul was suggesting that we all should be spiritually like Marilyn. We should spend so much time clinging to Christ that his scent lingers on us and those we encounter. It lingers in the way that we spend time listening to people in trouble. It lingers in the way we give generously to those in need instead of making our own lives about accumulating stuff. It lingers in the love we show to strangers and the letters we write to people in power asking that they take care of the least of these. It also lingers in the way that we make sure to take time for rest, self-care, and prayer.

Paul was speaking metaphorically about the aroma of Christ, but his choice of words also reminds me of how I feel after I have baptized someone, as I did last Sunday. After I put the water on the person's head, I make the sign of the cross on his or her forehead using oil which is scented with frankincense and myrrh, to remind us of the gifts that the magi gave to Christ. The baptism only takes a few minutes, but for the rest of the day, even after I have washed my hands, my fingers smell like frankincense and myrrh. So for me, that particular smell has become more literally "the aroma of Christ." It reminds me why I do what I do, and that I do not do it alone. It reminds me of the saving love and grace of God, and the strength that comes from being in a community of faith. It gives me hope and makes me feel at peace.

Well, as it turns out, my reaction to breathing in frankincense is probably not just grounded in my love of Christ. It's also grounded in the scent itself. In aromatherapy, I have recently learned, frankincense is used to relax breathing, reduce stress and anxiety, reduce pain and inflammation, and boost immunity. It has those medicinal properties within it. Some people even believe then when frankincense is applied topically in an oil, it can minimize the appearance of wrinkles.⁴ Talk about literally erasing your worry! This means that when you take in the aroma of Christ spiritually, you find rest for your soul, and when you take in the scent of Christ in frankincense physically, you find rest for your body and mind. Isn't that wonderful! I think so, so I want to share the experience with you. During the offering after the ushers pass the plates for your tithes and gifts, they will also pass little blue vials of oil scented with frankincense and myrrh. You can just smell the bottle and pass it on, or if you like, you can put a dab of oil on your wrist or temple. If you are sensitive to perfumes, you don't have to do either. But if you're like me, you may find the scent to be a gift to you in more ways than one.

"Who is sufficient?" Paul asked the Corinthian Christians in today's epistle lesson when contemplating the enormous task of being the aroma of Christ for others in the world. It's reassuring to know that Paul experienced the stresses of doing ministry in a world plagued with problems and needs. But his question was really meant to be rhetorical because his point was that no one is sufficient in and of himself. We cannot change the world alone. That's why it is good news that we don't have to do so. All we have to do is follow Christ, who makes sure that we

⁴ See e.g., "What Is Frankincense Good For? 8+ Essential Oil Uses & Benefits for Healing," Dr. Axe blog, retrieved July 10, 2018 from <https://draxe.com/what-is-frankincense/>; Keville, Kathy, "Aromatherapy: Frankincense," How Stuff Works, retrieved July 10, 2018 from <https://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/natural-medicine/aromatherapy/aromatherapy-frankincense.htm>.

never carry the weight of the yoke alone. He helps us when we serve. He tells us when to pause and retreat. He shows us the good way and invites us to follow. In Jesus and his way, we can find rest for our souls. Thanks be to God! Amen.