

“Rest?”

**Matthew 11:16 - 12:8** 16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 17 "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions." 20 Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 21 "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. {23 Greek Hades} If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you." 25 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. 26 Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. 27 "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. 28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." NIV **Matthew 12:1** At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." 3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread-- which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. 5 Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? 6 I tell you that one {6 Or something; also in verses 41 and 42} greater than the temple is here. 7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' {7 Hosea 6:6} you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

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Dana has plagiarized enough from me this last year in the way of sermon fodder. So, in turn I borrow here a little from her and the sermon she is preaching this morning her opening illustration on how the absurd demands of those in religious authority. I don't know if she will mind me saying, but the little pill that she refers to here is simply a laxative.

So, in Dana's words: "Several years ago I suffered from a very minor physical affliction of a digestive nature. During one of these "digestive episodes" I happened to be working at a Christian camp which was focused on leadership development of young people. I did not require the attention of a medical professional; a trip to the local drugstore would have solved my problem. However, simple relief was not to be had. All I required was a wee little pill which I could easily have acquired had I had a car to drive to the nearest drugstore, which I

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didn't, and so I found myself at the mercy of the well intentioned, though perhaps misguided camp nurse. I had no idea how complicated my relief would become, nor was I aware of the apparent spiritual and religious factors associated with my discomfort. That little innocent but effective pill was not to be had. Instead I was subjected to an interrogation not unlike the Inquisition where I was asked about all of the people I might be harboring a grudge against, whom I hadn't forgiven, past sins that I had not repented of, spiritual demons from which I might need cleansing. When was the last time I had fasted? When was the last time I had devoted myself to several hours of uninterrupted prayer and spiritual study and discipline? I felt as though I had been transported back in time several thousand years and I had been plunked down in the midst of the religious atmosphere of the priests and Pharisees.”

Dana was quite literally in search of relief. I think it is just absurd how that relief, simple to come by, was denied by a “religious authority” who thought that the ill effects of camp food was really a hidden spiritual problem. She believed Dana was backed up because of hidden sin in her life and that if she dealt with the sin according to the appropriate rituals of spiritual warfare she would find the relief.

I use this example to lead into this sermon about an invitation from Jesus to come and find rest or rather relief in sharing his yoke with him. I have heard this passage used often as an evangelistic tool to get people, tired from the burdens of life, to accept Jesus into their hearts and find the rest they so desire only to have that choice met with a list of requirements for Christian living if you want to have that rest.

But, the type of rest that Jesus is offering here really has nothing to do with a break from the tiresomeness of life where you're worn out from life in general and need a break. Jesus is not here saying “come to me all you who have devoted your lives to working long hours in the service to the almighty dollar or some other false god and now you're wore out and disillusioned and maybe you think finding God will help. So, if you will decide to come to me, I'll get your life sorted out for you and you'll have the rest your looking for.” Nor is Jesus saying, “come unto me all you who are feeling spiritually dry, out of touch with God and life and I will take you on a spiritual vacation to a quiet place where you can pray and meditate on Scripture and just relax and be invigorated in 'your' sense of 'your' relationship with God.” As I hinted earlier, I really don't think that Jesus' invitation here has anything at all to do with rest, if rest means a cessation from work. I think Jesus is offering relief to a particular group of people who are trying to serve God but have been overburdened by those in the position of religious authority with rules and rituals rather than grace and mercy. The relief Jesus offers is to personally know God and it comes in the form of sharing his yoke of showing mercy.

The yoke that Jesus is talking about is discipleship, sharing in his work of doing the Father's will which is the work of doing mercy. If you remember a sermon from a few weeks ago (I know that's asking) when we talked about mercy and how mercy is restoring to true human fellowship those who have been outcast by means of touching them at the point of their brokenness and sharing it with them. If you remember the sermon came from a text that began with Jesus sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners and in the midst of the meal the Pharisees, the religious authorities, showed up and looked down their noses at him saying to his disciples “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners”. They really meant, “If your teacher were really the Messiah, the one sent by God to establish the Kingdom of Heaven and save us, he would be fellowshiping with us not them because we're righteous ones.” Jesus in turn quoted Scripture to them, “Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy rather than sacrifice.”

To help them in their task Jesus then spends a day showing them what mercy is. He

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lets a woman who had a menstrual flow for twelve years touch him and she was healed. He touched a dead girl and restored her life. Then, he touched the eyes of two blind men and restored their sight. All three of these people had been declared unclean by the religious authorities because of their ailments, indeed cursed; disallowed to come before God at the temple and worship, disallowed to be a part of community among the people of God. If anyone touched them or was touched by them for a period of time they also shared the curse and the uncleanness and became outcast as well. Showing mercy was to restore these cursed and outcast people to community among the people of God by sharing in their cursedness. Well, it pans out that the Pharisees couldn't learn this lesson because they were religious authorities. If they were to do as Jesus was doing and in turn learn mercy, they would lose the authority to judge others, particularly the authority to set the standards for who could and could not come before God to worship and the boundaries of who was and was not one of the people of God.

The invitation to relief that Jesus extends is to those who have been trying to do the will and work of God, but have had to do it in accordance with the standards and boundaries set by “religious authorities” and were weary because all the rules and rituals were nigh to impossible to keep. Moreover, though they were being taught that obeying the laws of the Pharisaic religion distinguished them as the people of God and made them able to worship at the temple, it did nothing to bring them into the presence of God. They were not really learning who God is as the one who extends mercy and who desires mercy from those whom he establishes to be his people.

When Jesus said “come to me all you who are weary”, the Greek word indicates that it is the weariness of trying to do the work of God but not reaping any benefit. Similarly, the burden these weary people bear according to the Greek word Matthew uses indicates that it is a religious burden placed upon them by religious authorities; the burden which sounds like, “you've got to do this to get God on your side” or “you' can't do that if you're going to be one of God's people.” This invitation to come and find relief that Jesus extends is to those who honestly want to know God but have been misled by those in religious authority who do not understand that God is merciful, that God touches the unclean and makes them whole. It goes out to those who have been unnecessarily burdened with a religion based on rules and rituals that in the end don't deliver God's presence as promised.

If you want to know God, but are tired of duty-bound, merciless religion that is only concerned about sin maintenance then this invitation is for you. Come to Jesus and take up his yoke of discipleship and become part of his mercy spreading ministry that in the end does deliver the presence of God. In fact, it couldn't exist if God himself were not the healing power of mercy behind it. Jesus says that there is rest, relief for the soul that is in pursuit of knowing God, in sharing his yoke because it is at the very root fellowship with him and working along side him in his ministry of building mercy-based and mercy-filled relationships. Touch the unclean. Reach out to the outcast. Regard all people according to mercy. That is sharing Jesus' yoke. In showing mercy we learn we've been shown mercy. In learning mercy we learn the essential nature of who Jesus is as a person. In learning who he is we find ourselves caught up in the mystery of knowing God the Father through Jesus the Son because the Holy Spirit is present. Amen.