

## "I Will Give You Rest"

Matt. 11:28-30

--CEFC 1/3/21

National Geographic Lunchtime Talk—12/10/20

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I think we can all thank God that the year 2020 is finally over!

Having just finished watching “The Crown” on Netflix,

I can’t help but apply the words of Queen Elizabeth which she used of 1992

to the year we have just experienced,

when she said in her characteristically British understated way--

This “is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure. . . .,

it has turned out to be an *annus horribilis*.”

Yes, an *annus horribilis*—a horrible year.

By all accounts, that’s just what 2020 was.

Last January began with an impeachment—that seems like an eternity ago.

In February, that charge didn’t get the votes in the Senate

to cast the President from office,

but the American people decided otherwise in November.

All of this, reminding me of the political turmoil we experienced back in 1974.

In March, we began this awful pandemic—

with its sickness, shutdowns, and social distancing.

pointing us back to the plague of 1918.

Then in April, we began to feel the worldwide economic shock of it—

and the crash of 1929 comes to mind.

Then the unemployment rate rose to levels

reminiscent of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Then in the summer, George Floyd was killed with a knee on this neck,

and protests erupted around the country—

some of which turned violent, with fires burning our cities—

something I remember so well from 1968.

The election in November was actually more peaceful than we feared,

though, unfortunately, it has still not reached a final closure.

We saw most events “canceled,”

leaving little on our calendars to look forward to.

When we entered the Christmas season of advent,

the advent on everyone’s mind was the advent of a vaccine—

which wonderously has come—

but there is an already/not yet aspect to it,

as it may not reach most of us until at least the spring.

2020—it was a tumultuous year, to say the least.

Who hasn’t been wearied by the political partisanship

that we’ve had to endure that election year?

Who hasn't been worn down by the grievous racial issues  
that keeps staring us in the face.

And dominating it all was the cruel invasion of that tiny virus  
that has so disrupted our everyday lives  
and sent hundreds of thousands into the hospital, or worse.

And I can't help but think of all you parents  
who have had to deal with kids at home  
who are stuck in front of computer screens for hours a day,  
emotionally frazzled,  
without the social outlets that make school bearable.

Who isn't tired of mandates regarding masks  
and keeping your distance from other people?  
No handshakes; no hugs.

All of this turmoil of 2020 occurred  
on top of the quite ordinary pressures of our busy lives,  
that were anxiety-producing enough already!

You could say we live in an age of anxiety—  
As columnist Michael Gerson put it recently—  
Anxiety-- "the economy seems to manufacture it.  
Rapid cultural change encourages it.  
The media amplifies and monetizes it.  
Social media spreads it.

[and] Politicians feed it and send it into battle.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s been more than enough of that to go around.

And it’s in this context, as we begin this new year—2021--

I want us to consider afresh one of the most compelling statements of Jesus  
recorded in the Gospels—  
one that contains a glorious promise.

It’s a passage that I have been

trying to take to heart and experience more and more myself.

It’s been called **the Great Invitation**.

It’s the passage we just read from the Gospel of Matthew, chap. 11, vv. 28-30—

There Jesus says, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,  
and I will give you rest.**

**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.” //**

What an invitation this is—

It’s an invitation to find what I’m sure we all long for.

Here Jesus offers something we all need—

It’s an invitation to experience rest for our souls.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-christmas-message-fear-not/2018/12/24>

First, I want you to notice that this is a universal invitation

it is given to **“all who are weary and burdened.”**

Jesus doesn't simply address religious people--

that's a mistake we often make.

Jesus' words come to everybody--

to anybody who has felt weary with life,

burdened by its demands and responsibilities,

or even with its drudgeries.

This invitation is addressed to people like us.

With all that fuels our underlying unease,

as we begin this new year,

doesn't the prospect of rest for our souls sound appealing?

Rest--rest for your souls--

Isn't that what we all really want?

There are times when we are physically beat

and all we can think about is getting some sleep, I suppose.

But more often, it's a psychological rest that we need.

That's why you can go for a vacation and ski or swim or take long hikes--

activities that can be physically exhausting--

and yet still come home emotionally rested and restored.

**“Rest”** is a rich word in the Bible—

It means more than mere physical refreshment.

It is associated with peace and security—

In the Old Testament, the Lord promises to give Israel rest from all their enemies  
so that they will live in safety.<sup>2</sup>

It was associated especially with the presence of God in their midst.

as in that passage we read earlier from Exodus 33,  
where the Lord promises Moses,

**“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest”** (Ex. 33:14).

The Jewish practice of a Sabbath rest was to be a weekly pointer  
to a future human prospering lived in the presence of God,  
free from endless toil and struggle.

We yearn for that rest for our souls--  
that inner harmony and order and security,  
that sense of purpose and direction,  
that brings peace and contentment to our hearts.

That's what we all want,  
and that's just what Jesus promises.

That's Jesus' invitation—and it's a welcome invitation  
that comes to people just like us.

Can you entertain the possibility  
that Jesus could make good on his promise?

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<sup>2</sup> Dt. 12:10; 1Chr. 22:9

But there is a deep paradox in this passage—

in fact, I find two of them, that I'd like to explore.

The first is the paradox of the person who issues this invitation.

On the one hand, look at the way Jesus describes himself--

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,  
for I am gentle and humble in heart.”

“I am gentle and humble in heart”—

We've been looking at the “I am” statements of Jesus in John's Gospel.

Here's one in Matthew—

And what a statement this is,

for or this is the only place in the Bible where Jesus himself opens the veil  
and allows us to peer into the depths of his own soul—the core of who he is.

And as one writer observes,

“We are not told that he is ‘austere and demanding in heart.’”  
nor even that he is ‘exalted and dignified in heart.’<sup>3</sup>

No, he says, “I am gentle and humble in heart”—

This self-description of Jesus is also a popular perception of him,  
and rightly so.

We know he came from a very ordinary family—his father was a carpenter.

And we all know the story of his birth—

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<sup>3</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), p. 18.

His crib was not in the luxury of a palace,  
but in the lowliness of an animal feeding trough.  
He grew up in obscurity in the northern region of Galilee—  
an out-of-the-way, backwoods sort of place,  
far from the center of power in Jerusalem, much less Rome.

The little formal education he had  
was mainly the religious training associated with being a Jew.

We don't know of anything that he wrote.

In midlife, he became an itinerant preacher, though never a proper rabbi—  
but somehow, he taught with great authority.

Addressing ordinary people, he used homey illustrations—  
stories about farmers sowing seed,  
or about women sweeping out their houses,  
but most people weren't quite sure what to make of what he said.

He was friends with the outsiders, the outcasts—  
the tax collectors and prostitutes,  
and he was treated with disdain by the societal elite.

He had a reputation as a miracle-worker,  
and there was no question that he did some pretty remarkable things.

His opponents didn't deny his deeds;  
they just contested the source of his authority.

When he made his final entry into the city of Jerusalem,  
it wasn't on chariot or even a stallion.  
He came riding on a donkey.

He spoke of love,  
but he was intensely hated.

He attracted great crowds,  
and he invited a small band of followers to be in his inner circle,  
but in the end, one of them betrayed him  
and the rest abandoned him.

He died penniless and powerless,  
in shame and disgrace,  
willingly surrendering himself without a fight  
to perhaps the most shameful and brutal form of execution ever devised.

On a purely superficial level,  
there was nothing grand and glorious about him.

“Humble,” “lowly,” “unpretentious”—  
that description fits Jesus pretty well.

But there is more to this—  
Here Jesus is describing not just his outward social status,  
but his inner heart attitude.

His is a “**gentle heart**”—kind, gracious, meek—  
not severe or harsh.

And his is a “**humble heart**”—modest, self-effacing,

not arrogant, haughty, or pompous.

Jesus says, “**I am gentle and humble in heart.**”

As one writer has put it,

If Jesus hosted his own personal website,

those words would provide the prominent line of his “About Me” dropdown.<sup>4</sup>

Come to me, Jesus says, for I am “**gentle and humble in heart.**”

Can any words suggest a more welcoming posture

toward anyone willing to take him up on his invitation?

These are the words of someone with open arms,

not just willing, but eager, to receive us.

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But there is something else going on here—a stark juxtaposition, a paradox.

This man who calls himself “**humble in heart**”

also acts in a way that seems anything but.

Notice, the self-confidence with which he speaks—

“**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,**

**and I will give you rest.**

**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,**

**and you will find rest for your souls.”**

Nothing self-effacing about those words.

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<sup>4</sup> Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, p. 21.

And Jesus had a habit of talking like this.

All other great religious teachers point away from themselves

and direct their hearers' attention to God.

"Listen to him; follow him," they say.

They know themselves to be messengers of someone greater.

But Jesus is different.

All the prophets of the Old Testament said, "**Thus says the Lord;**"

Jesus says, "**Truly, truly, I say to you.**"

The prophets said that the word of God will endure forever;

Jesus says, "**My words will never pass away.**"

There is no mistake, Jesus speaks as more than a mere man.

As we've been expounding over the last month,

Jesus says, "**I am the bread of life**"—

to nourish your souls;

Jesus says, "**I am the light of the world.**"—

to give you spiritual illumination;

Jesus says, "**I am the good shepherd.**"—

to guide you and to protect you;

Jesus says, "**I am the way, the truth, and the life.**

**No one comes to the Father except through me.**"

And "**before Abraham was, I am.**"

What kind of person makes such claims?

He had the audacity to require absolute allegiance to himself—

**"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;  
anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me  
is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37).**

Jesus declared that you must be willing

even to hate your own life for his sake (Luke 14:26).

What sort of person makes such demands?

In a passage earlier in Matthew 11, his words are almost shocking.

We read in in v. 20—**"Jesus began to denounce the towns  
in which most of his miracles had been performed,  
because they did not repent.**

**"Woe to you, Chorazin!**

**Woe to you, Bethsaida!**

**For 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.**

**But I tell you,**

**it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment  
than for you.**

**And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens?**

**No, you will go down to Hades.**

**For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom,  
it would have remained to this day.**

**But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment  
than for you."**

Are those the words of a “meek and gentle” man?

He even declares that a person’s eternal destiny

will be determined by one’s relationship with him—

**"Whoever acknowledges me before others,**

**I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.**

**But whoever disowns me before others,**

**I will disown before my Father in heaven"** (Matt. 10:32-33).

What kind of man would so audaciously insist upon such absolute allegiance?<sup>5</sup>

It is no wonder that he created controversy wherever he went—

and it is no wonder that members of the religious status quo

wanted him eliminated. /

He can make statements like that,

and yet he also describes himself as “gentle and humble in heart.”

How can this be?

But somehow, we believe him.

John makes this paradox explicit in his Gospel

when he tells us,

on the night before Jesus was to die,

how Jesus took the role of a common slave—

John 13-- **“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power,**

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<sup>5</sup>Whereas the first Christians forbade the worship of men or of angels (Acts 14:13-14; Col 2:18; Rev. 22:8-9), Jesus commended the worship of himself (John 20:28-29).

and that he had come from God and was returning to God;  
so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing,  
and wrapped a towel around his waist.  
After that, he poured water into a basin  
and began to wash his disciples' feet" (John 13:3-5).

The Apostle Paul spoke of this paradox as well.

In his exhortation to the church in Philippi,  
written perhaps twenty-five years after Jesus' death—  
he wrote:  
"In your relationships with one another,  
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:  
Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something  
to be used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5-11).

You see, Jesus’ humility was the humility of God the Son  
joining his own will to that of God the Father,  
and pouring himself out in love for us.

And that divine humility,  
which is another way of speaking of that divine love,  
is found supremely in the way Jesus’ life came to an end,  
in his death on a cross,  
for there we see God’s own act of atonement for our sin.

This is the one who invites us to come to him  
and find rest for our souls.

And I don’t think you will ever come to him,  
and discover the rest he offers,  
until you come to grips with just who he is.//

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A first paradox then—

**the paradox of the person who issues this invitation.**

The very Son of God wrapped in gentleness and humility.

And there’s a second—

I call it **the paradox of the demand found in this invitation.**

This promise of rest comes with but one intriguing condition.

Do you see it?—

"Come to me," he says,  
"and take my yoke upon you and learn from me,"

The yoke of Jesus--what is he talking about here?

We in the West immediately think of a yoke

which joins animals like oxen together in pulling a cart.

And some people talk about Jesus as our partner in life,  
helping to bear our load.

But I don't think that is what's in view here.

In Eastern cultures, yokes were stretched across people's shoulders,

and they were, and still are,

used to carry heavy loads.

This way of thinking of a yoke makes much better sense in this context

in which Jesus speaks of taking his yoke upon you,  
and of bearing his burden.

And what does this image of a yoke refer to?

A yoke was most frequently used by servants and slaves--

so that to bear someone's yoke was to be under their command.

Essentially "taking Jesus' yoke"

refers to becoming a follower of Jesus,

submitting oneself to his authority,

learning from him.

Taking Jesus' yoke is simply an act of humble trust—

it is an act of faith in the goodness of the one who offers it. /

Jesus' words here assume that his hearers were already bearing a yoke--

that's why they were weary and burdened.

The Jewish rabbis used to speak of bearing the yoke of the Mosaic law.

Most likely, Jesus' reference is particularly to those

burdened by the load of obligations

laid upon them by their religious leaders. /

I can assume that, in some sense, we, too, are already bearing a yoke—

we have a yoke of some kind already burdening us.

What would that yoke be like for you?

A burdensome yoke of expectations from your boss—

ever demanding more and more of your time,

your energy,

your life?

Or maybe it's a yoke of expectation from your father or your mother—

you can never do enough to please them—or, at least, it feels that way.

Or maybe it's a yoke you put on yourself—

it's what you feel you must do to feel successful, worthwhile, valuable.

Whatever it may be,

Jesus says, "Exchange that yoke for mine--

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me—

follow me, become my disciple.

Come into a relationship with me,

and you will find rest for your soul,”

for, Jesus says, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

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But how can that be?

If Jesus is talking about becoming his follower,

how can Jesus' yoke be "easy" and "light"?

Is it easy to be Jesus' disciple?

After all, didn't he call for an even higher standard of righteousness

than that of the Pharisees.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared,

“You have heard that it was said,

‘You shall not murder, . . .

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister

will be subject to judgment” (Mt. 5:21,22).

“You have heard that it was said,

‘You shall not commit adultery.’

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully

has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:27,28).

There's nothing easy or light about that!

One who learns from him must take on the way of life he calls us to—

a life of self-denial and self-giving,

a life characterized by his humility and love.

We've already said that to become his follower

Jesus says you must be willing to give up your very life for his sake.

How can that be "easy" and "light"?

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It seems a puzzling paradox.

In some sense, you could say it is part of the general paradox of life—

one that Jesus spoke of quite often.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

The greatest among you must be the servant of all.

It is in losing yourself that you find yourself.

It is in giving that you receive.

This paradox reflects a general truth about human nature, I suppose.

A preoccupation with yourself leaves you empty;

real fulfillment only comes with a commitment to something

bigger than yourself.

But there is something deeper here.

I think the way in which Jesus' yoke is easy and light is clarified

only when we understand this invitation in its context in Matthew's Gospel.

You see, it comes immediately after a statement that points to the unique relationship

Jesus has with God the

Father

and the exclusive way he mediates that relationship to others.

Look at v. 27—Jesus says, “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.”**

Isn't that just like what Jesus said to Thomas in that passage we looked at last week—

**“I am the way, the truth, and the life;**

**no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).**

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Do you want to know how the yoke of Jesus is easy and light?

It's not because of its requirement,

no, Jesus' yoke is very demanding.

No, it is easy and light because of its result—

Bearing Jesus' yoke,

submitting yourself to him in this way

brings a person into a relationship with God as their Father.

Jesus mediates the presence of God in our lives—

a presence that gives rest.

the rest that brings security and safety—

in the loving care of God.

This is where rest for our souls comes from, you see--

from knowing the gracious, fatherly love of God.

Isn't that what Augustine discovered, when he confessed,

“O Lord, our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in you.”

And only in following Jesus, in taking his yoke upon us,  
in entrusting our lives into his care,  
and in experiencing what he makes possible--  
only through him can we discover and enjoy this rest—  
the rest that comes in a relationship with God—  
a relationship we were created for as human beings. .

Your see, Jesus allows us to share in what is uniquely his—

**"No one knows the Father except the Son  
and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."**

Following Jesus, being his disciple, may be demanding,  
but it is never burdensome—  
his is not the yoke of the slave,  
but the yoke of the son—  
the son loved by the Father.

One writer put it like this:

“What helium does to a balloon, Jesus’s yoke does to his followers.

We are buoyed along in life by his endless gentleness

and supremely accessible lowliness.”<sup>6</sup>

The one who offers it to us is gentle and humble in heart.

He won't abuse us or misuse us--

he will give us the rest our souls we so long for.

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<sup>6</sup> Ortlund, p. 23.

Jesus blasted the religious leaders of his day--

He said, "**They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders,  
but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them**" (Matt. 23:4).

Jesus doesn't do that--

he doesn't lay his demands upon us and then abandon us—

He gives us freely what we could never earn.

He brings us into a relationship with his Father in heaven--

he comes alongside us;

more than that, by his Spirit, he lives within us.

Jesus Christ offers rest for our souls.

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I don't know about you--

but rest for my soul sounds pretty good!

The desire for rest for my soul

is one of the things that first led me to become a Christian many years ago.

And in my weaker moments I still struggle with a restless soul--

I find myself feeling burdened by a yoke of **pride**--

always wanting to look good, to appear successful,

but always weighed down by a fear of **failure and guilt and shame**--

a fear of not living up to the expectations of other people,

or even my own expectations,

much less the expectations of God.

I have lists of things I feel I must accomplish.

“Why?” I ask myself--

to prove myself?

to justify my existence?

to win the approval of others?

These lists can become a weight upon my shoulders.

I feel myself burdened by a yoke of uncertainty--

as I wonder whether I'm doing it right--

doing life right, that is--

have I got my priorities straight?

have I put first things first?

will I look back and regret that I spent too much time

doing things that really didn't matter?

I feel myself burdened

by worries that plague me;

by opportunities squandered;

by good intentions left unfulfilled.

In my weaker moments

there is a restless striving deep within--

a desire for something more.

We live in a world that burdens us with demands to prove your worth

through achievement—

get good grades,

get into a good school,

get a good job,  
make good money,  
make a good marriage,  
have good kids,  
have a good retirement.

Work hard—it's up to you—  
and tough luck if it doesn't work out.

It's a vicious world, laying a heavy burden on our shoulders.

But Jesus doesn't operate that way.

Jesus offers us a way of grace.

Our worth is not dependent on our merit, our achievements.

Jesus accepts us just as we are—with all our weakness and failure,

for he is gentle and humble in heart.

He calls us to himself—to trust him, to learn from him, to bear his yoke—

and in that state, he brings us into the love of God.

**"Come to me, and I will give you rest—**

**rest for your soul."**

Come and discover the joyful peace and contentment which only I can give.

For if you come to me, Jesus says--

if you take my yoke upon you--

if you trust me and bow at my feet and learn from me--

I will bring you into the presence of your Father in heaven--

and you will know him--

you will know a love that is beyond understanding,

and you will find a joy not based in your circumstances,

and a sense of purpose that can give even the most trying task,  
and even suffering itself, new meaning.

If you come to me, I will bring you home--

home to your Father in heaven.

Like that prodigal son,

you can rest in the restored blessing of your Father,

enjoying the relationship for which you were created.

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But like that prodigal son,

there is only thing that keeps us from coming to Jesus and entering into his rest.

It is our pride.

Jesus points to this immediately after his scathing words

directed to the towns that rejected him—

Look at v. 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.**

**Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do" (11:25,26).**

It's not the wise and the learned—those who think highly of themselves,

but little children—those humble and willing to learn--

those are the ones God is pleased to reveal the rest that Jesus gives.

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What are your burdens?

What sort of yoke are you bearing?

What are you striving for to give you happiness?

What do you have to achieve?

What do you have to accomplish?

What do you have to prove?

Who do you have to impress?

Whose love do you have to earn?

Cease striving for what does not satisfy--

Humble yourself, and come to me, Jesus says,

and discover the new life and love that I can give.

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This Jesus of Nazareth—a man “**gentle and humble in heart.**”

He is a profoundly paradoxical figure

who gives a deeply paradoxical invitation.

He is the one who offers each one of us this great invitation—

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

This is the yoke of the Son that leads us to the Father--

That is where the rest for our souls must find its source.

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Prayer—

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We come now to the communion table--

    this is the place where we receive,  
        individually and personally,  
            the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

We take his life given for us, in the bread and the cup,  
    but at the same time, we give up our lives for him.

Jesus said, Come to me and take my yoke upon you--

    This morning I want you to come to Jesus--  
        by coming forward to take what Jesus offers you—  
            and by faith, experience the rest for your souls that he gives.

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Sermon Response:

## "I Will Give You Rest"

Matt. 11:28-30

- What in your life makes you feel weary and burdened?
- What would rest for your soul feel like for you? How could Jesus give that to you?
- How does your conception of Jesus compare to his description of himself as “gentle and humble in heart”? How ought this description of Jesus’ heart affect the way you approach him?
- How can Jesus describe himself as “gentle and humble in heart” yet also cast the moneychangers out of the temple with a whip?
- What is Jesus’ yoke? What does it mean to take it upon your shoulders? Have you done that? Why would you not do it?
- What is the result of taking Jesus’ yoke? What does he give that makes his yoke “easy and light”? How do you resolve the paradox of the demanding nature of his yoke and it being “light”?

