

The Burden of Jesus

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday after Pentecost, July 8, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 1:6-14, 22-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 7:14-25a; Matthew 11:25-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

All of us come to worship carrying burdens. We come with smiles on our faces but with our hearts burdened and worried. Some of you have financial burdens. Some are burdened with physical ailments. Some with work. All of us have burdens that we bring with us to church.

Besides all these burdens many people feel their religious faith is a burden. That's the way many Jews in the days of Jesus felt. Religion was a thing of endless rules. That's the way the apostle Paul felt at one time. "I'm sold as a slave to sin." The law of God, like those ancient Egyptian taskmasters, required him to do what he was unable to accomplish. The law of God had become a burden to him.

That can happen to us as well. Some of us labor under a burden of not being able to live up to the law of God. We want to do God's will, but we feel like failures. We feel that we're constantly falling short, never doing enough, and so we become weighed down by guilt. Our religion consists mainly of rules and regulations by which we hope to gain God's favor by obeying. Going to church or Sunday school can be a burden, an obligation, rather than a joy. You say, "My faith doesn't lift me up, it weighs me down."

I think of what happens to so many young people who've grown up in the church. When they're free to do what they want they, so often, get rid of their religion. Maybe it's because they feel that their religion is merely a tradition laid upon them, a burden to be carried, and so they get rid of it when they have the chance.

It's a sad thing to have a religion which is laid upon us unwillingly; a religion that's only effort and struggle. Those for whom religion is a burden can identify with Paul when he said, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?"

1. If our religion has become a burden Jesus invites us to come to him for rest. "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." This is one of the most popular texts in the whole Bible. Nearly everybody hears in it a note of solace and relief. These are comfortable words for burdened people.

I've thought a lot about these words this past week. Two things Jesus says puzzle me. Jesus promises *rest* but he gives a *burden* to those who come to him.

~~a. What kind of rest does Jesus give to those who come to him?~~ It's certainly not the rest of inactivity. When I was in college I'd sometimes ask my friends on Sunday afternoon where they went to church that morning. Sometimes a wise guy would say, "I went to the church of the inner spring", meaning he worshipped on his inner spring mattress in bed. That's not the rest that Jesus offers.

Look at some of the people who've come to Jesus in the fellowship of the Church. Look at St. Paul. He was always on the go. He travelled all over the ancient world preaching the gospel and teaching. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten, hounded from town to town, always on the go. His life can't be characterized as a life of ease and rest and inactivity.

Or look at some of the members of this church who've come to Jesus. I think of parents who get up on Sunday morning *when they could be resting* and go through the hassle of getting their kids ready to go to Sunday School,

always battling the clock, always in a rush. Or I think of single parents who, *instead of resting* on Sunday morning, get their kids and themselves ready and go off to Sunday School. I think of Sunday School teachers and elders and deacons and ushers and members of committees and task-forces and choir members and Bible study leaders, and people who plan and prepare for cover-dish suppers. Their lives as Christians can hardly be characterized as lives at rest. The rest of inactivity isn't the kind of rest that Jesus offers to those who come to him.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he promised rest to those who come to him? I believe that the rest Jesus spoke of was, *first*, the rest that comes from knowing that we're saved by God's grace, not by our own efforts. I don't have to strive and struggle to earn God's grace. "In life and in death,

~~we belong to God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of~~ God and the communion of the Holy Spirit.... The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the church.... With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Believing that removes burdens of guilt and insecurity.

I wonder how many of us are striving to earn our salvation. Religion will never be a joy as long as it's viewed as an obligation. It can only be a burden. When we come to Christ and trust in him alone for our salvation there comes the rest of security and well-being knowing that we're accepted by God through Christ.

b. But I believe Jesus had something else in mind when he promised rest. I believe that this isn't just an evangelistic invitation addressed to those

who've never come to Jesus. It's also a invitation to those of us who've already come to Jesus.

Sometimes I get so caught up in ministry to others that I forget all about Jesus. I spend hours on sermons, visit people, attend meetings, teach classes, do things with my family, read books, do volunteer work for the school and cub scouts, watch television but too often don't take time to come to Jesus each morning and evening to talk with him in prayer and to hear his word in Scripture. It's easy to become a compulsive worker, forgetting that my strength comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Presbyterians tend to be activists. We're involved in the community, in the schools, in politics, in volunteer activities, in our families, in leisure activities as well as our church. That's good. That's part of what it means to be a Presbyterian. But we can too easily lose our sense of dependence on God in our hussle and bustle lives. I wonder if the poor attendance at prayer meeting on Wednesday indicates that we have serious questions about the efficacy of coming to Jesus in prayer or do we think we can rebuild our church on our own. I challenge you this week to spend time in prayer and reading the Bible every day. Sit down and divide the 28 chapters of Matthew into seven sections. Read just four chapters of the Gospel according to St. Matthew each day and listen to what Christ is saying to you and obey him.

So Jesus offers to those who come to him the rest of knowing that salvation is a free gift and, secondly, he offers rest to active Christians who're so busy doing God's will that we forget Christ and don't take time to pray and listen to him.

2. But Jesus not only gives us rest, he gives us a burden. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

a. I think of Mother Theresa. She came to Jesus and Jesus gave her a burden for the poor of Calcutta. When you think of the magnitude of the problem and the depth of poverty in that city you'd think it would be an intolerable burden for her. And yet she never has spoken of that burden as heavy. It's been her joy to bear this burden.

Whenever anyone comes to Jesus he gives them not only rest, but a burden. I think of people in our church who're getting involved in Habitat for Humanity. They've come to Jesus for rest and Jesus has given them a burden for the homeless.

I was talking to a woman last night who's burden with concern for those ~~long-time members of our church like Sybil Pitt, Dr. Johnson, John Ware and~~ Julia Lawrie who have become shut-ins. These people, and others, have given so much of their time and talents to our church and now they've come to a time in their lives where they can't be as active as they once were because of illness and age. Many younger members don't know them or their love for the church. The woman I was talking to has come to Jesus and he's given her rest, but also a burden for these older members who were once so active and now may be forgotten.

A couple years ago a planning task force polled the congregation and discovered that many people in our congregation have a burden for our youth. Others have a burden for members who are becoming inactive and falling through the cracks. Still others have a burden for those who are unchurched and may not have come to Jesus within the communion of the Church. So Jesus gives us, not only rest, but a burden.

b. But the burden Jesus gives us isn't intolerable. Jesus says, "My yoke is easy." The word *easy* in Greek can mean *well-fitting*. In Palestine ox-yokes were made of wood. The ox was brought to the carpenter. Measurements were taken and the yoke was laid upon the ox. It was then carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not irritate the neck of the ox. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

There's a legend that before Jesus began his public ministry at the age of 30 he was a carpenter and that he made the best ox-yokes in all Galilee. From all over the country people came to him to buy the best yokes that skill could make. In those days, as now, shops had their signs above the door; and it's been suggested that Jesus hung a sign above the door of his carpenter's shop in Nazareth which said, "My yokes fit-well."

~~Jesus says to his followers, "My yoke is easy. My yokes fit-well. The~~
 yoke I give you is not a burden to irritate you. I know you. I know your circumstances. I know everything about you. I know what you're capable of. I know your gifts and talents. And I have a yoke that will fit you perfectly. I have a job, a ministry, that suits you perfectly."

c. And he says, "My burden is light." The burden that Jesus gives us is laid on us in love; it's meant to be carried in love; and love makes even the heaviest burden light. When we remember the love of God, when we remember the burden Jesus bore to Golgotha, when we remember the weight of our sin he bore, whatever burden God gives us is light in comparison.

Father Flanagan, Boys Town. *His not heavy. His my brother.*

Let us pray: "Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
 Till all our strivings cease;
 Take from our souls the strain and stress,
 And let our ordered lives confess
 The beauty of Thy peace. Amen.