

“I Will Give You Rest”

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:29).

What does it mean to be a Christian? According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of American adults call themselves Christians, and yet what people actually mean by this label varies wildly. The definition in the Catechism tells us that Christianity is, “the life and salvation God has given in and through Jesus Christ.” But, if you asked this question to a random stranger on the street, you’d probably hear an explanation largely based on behavior. Even those of us who worship each week and incorporate the Bible into daily life, often find ourselves focusing on how we should be living or what we should be shunning rather than on the person and work of Jesus.

And, in some ways, this confusion is understandable because, the truth is, the Bible does contain a lot of rules. In fact, there are entire chapters which feature instructions on how to live and how not to live, and because we know these rules, we also carry the burden that, if we are in fact Christians, we need to keep the rules; that we need to obey God’s commands; that we need to show our faith with our lives. But the reality is...we don’t. And the most terrifying truth in Scripture is that we can’t!

If behavior is the measure of our faith, then we are all in big trouble, and in today’s Epistle reading from Romans, Paul wrestles with this sobering fact of life when he writes, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Romans 7:15-19). And the spiritual duplicity described by Paul is a struggle for every believer. It is a serious spiritual crisis, and the burden created by this chronic condition is crushing. We say we are Christians and yet we can’t even keep the most basic commands of God. These frequent failures can leave us embarrassed, ashamed, and hopeless, yet instead of acknowledging the weight of this burden and asking for help, we avoid it at all costs. We come to Church with a smile on our face and we hide our sinful hearts and broken parts because we’re sure that if any real Christians ever saw what we are really like, they’d never speak to us again. And once we believe this lie, the Christian life becomes nothing more than an exercise in how well we can cover up our sin and keep everything on the surface looking good.

My friends, in these moments of denial and deception, we have lost sight of what it means to be Christian. We’ve redefined Christianity as a system that rewards the good and punishes the bad, and we’ve blindly branded the Church as a place where sin dare not be spoken or seen. In doing this, we’ve bought into the idolatry that we just need to be more disciplined and work a little harder, and yet when we try to employ this formula for self-improvement, the burden only grows. So, we pull ourselves up from the dust, and we pile on the guilt of our latest failure, and we pledge that this time things will be different. And it might even work for a while, but any progress in this self-centered theology quickly falls apart, and we find ourselves right back in the same spiritual mess where we started and our hopelessness only becomes more suffocating.

You see, when Christianity is defined by what we do, or by what we do not do, the burden is impossible and completely overwhelming. So, we either lie about our condition or we simply give up, because the truth is we can't change ourselves. We do the things we know we shouldn't do, and we don't do the things we know we should do, and when we can't stop this cycle of sin by our own reason or strength then we start comparing ourselves to others or simply conclude that we are beyond saving and walk away from the fight.

And it's into this abyss of delusion and despair that Jesus speaks. And, instead of telling us to get serious and do better, this is what He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." You see, at its core, the Christian life is not about being a better person *and it never has been!* In fact, one of the signature slogans from the Reformation is the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which simply means that we are, "at the same time both saint and a sinner." And we are! And there's great freedom in recognizing and owning this truth. We don't have to pretend anymore. Like St. Paul, we are real, true sinners who have been saved by a real, true Savior!

We *will* fall short, and we *will* fail! And as damaging as this is to our pride, deep down we know it's true. Until the day we go to be with the Lord, sin will be present in us, and yet the solution to our sin can't come from inside of us, because no matter how much time and energy we invest in trying to eradicate our sin, anything that comes from us is doomed to fail. The essence of the Christian faith, and the reason Jesus went to the Cross, and the assurance the Bible was written to deliver is that that burden of our guilt and the yoke of our sin have been carried *for us* by Jesus. The burden of every flaw and every failure, and the weight of every bent rule and every broken promise have all been placed on Christ Jesus. He wore the yoke of obedience that we constantly seek to shed. And the amazing grace that justifies us before God is that this perfect obedience of Jesus – His keeping of every single law – is *counted as ours!* He took the burden of the world's sin to the Cross, and now – *by faith* – we wear the yoke of Christ. *And it is easy!*

That is what Christianity is all about, and that is what Jesus promised to us, and that is why we come here week after week after week. Because the truth is that we forget what it means to be a Christian. We say "amen" and we sing the last hymn and we walk out into the world and immediately start living again as if it all depends on us. And so today, you need to hear the promise of God that, "it is finished." And today, you need to be reminded that your burden has been lifted, and that your guilt has been removed. And today, you need to know again from God's own Word that He loves you, He is for you, and your future is squarely in His hands.

So today, my fellow saints and fellow sinners, in case you've forgotten, this is who you are: You are cherished by the Father! You are redeemed by the Son! You are alive by the Spirit! And *you are saved*, not because of what you've done, or by what you can or will ever do. You are saved because the God of the universe has claimed you in the waters of Baptism and invites you to come with empty hands to receive His own body and blood. Today, you are saved – not because you've done it right – but because of what Christ Jesus has already done for you. He has taken your sins away. He has died your death. You do not have to toil, you do not have to strive, and you do not need to pretend anymore because today, Jesus says to you: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:29). Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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