The Heart of Jesus

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Date: 01 August 2021

Preacher: Evan Macdonald

[0:00] We have recorded in Scripture many of the sayings of Jesus regarding His mission, His relationship with His Father, His words of love and encouragement to His disciples, to the anxious, to the marginalized, to the rich, to the poor, to the outcasts.

We have recorded advice on how we should pray. And we know that His hatred of all that is evil and hypocritical.
But the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, is recorded for us in Matthew chapter 5. This evening, I would like to consider with you the very well-known words in Matthew chapter 11.
Matthew chapter 11, verses 28 to 29. Really as a result of reading a book recently called Gentle and Lowly by Dane Ortlund.
I'm not sure if some of you have come across that book. It's quite a recent one. Dane Ortlund is an elder in the Presbyterian Church in the United States.
[1:23] And he has subtitled this book, The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers. And as he says himself, it is a book written for the discouraged, the frustrated, the weary, the disenchanted, the cynical, and the empty.

What better way to spend some time thinking about the only place in Scripture where Christ tells us about his heart.
So let's think about the heart of Jesus. Under really sort of one head, I suppose. Two invitations and two promises.
Two invitations and two promises. Invitation number one, we read in verse 28. Come.
Come to me. Come to Jesus. Here is the gospel invitation. Come to Jesus.
[2:40] Three words. To whom is this question or this invitation addressed? It's addressed to all who labor and are heavy laden.

Or as the NIV puts it, those who are weary or burdened. This word labor literally means to be wearied out.
What about us? Is that our experience this evening? Are we laboring and being wearied out with COVID restrictions?
With life's routine? Advancing years, perhaps. Chronic ill health. Perhaps it's our jobs.
Or lack of them. And perhaps we're wearied by trying to save ourselves by works and not by grace.
[3:50] Well, perhaps we are laboring like that. We are weary. And we are heavy laden, as the scripture tells us here.

Or burdened, as the NIV translates the word. Literally, to be heavy. Just imagine being totally weighed down with a burden.
Burdened by the things that weary us. Our health. The health of loved ones. With increased anxiety because of the COVID pandemic.
I was hearing of a statistic recently that anxiety levels. People who were suffering from a mental illness.
The percentage of people in our population before the pandemic was something like 16%. And during the pandemic, that has risen to 66%.
[4:50] So perhaps we are in that category that we are anxious and our mental health is taking a battering. And that is burdening us.

Perhaps it might be stressful family relationships. Pressures of the workplace. Perhaps it might be stressful relationships. Pressures of the workplace. Ongoing difficulties with neighbors. Or perhaps it's a thorn in your flesh.

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Whatever that might be. Or perhaps it's a feeling of guilt that we are carrying and we have been carrying for many, many years. And has become a real burden to us.
The psalmist knew about that. He wrote, Psalm 38, My guilt has overwhelmed my soul. It's a burden. Its burden is a crushing weight.
And the power of sin. That's a burden for us too, isn't it? We would like to do the good thing. But we find we can't. And what we're doing is the wrong thing instead. Well, all Christians carry a burden.
[6:00] They carry the burden of the cross. If anyone would come after me, says Jesus, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

And that can be a burden. But here is an invitation from our Lord Jesus. An invitation which echoes the one that we read in Isaiah 55.
Come, all you who are thirsty. Come to the waters. Come, buy and eat. Come, all you who are thirsty. So that's the invitation.
Come, those who are labor and are heavy laden. What's the promise when they do come? Well, here's the promise.
I will give you rest. Rest. Literally resting up. A ceasing again. Rest, of course, for our souls rather than our bodies.
[6:58] Rest, of course, for our souls. How we need to experience such a physical rest, certainly. We have seen what the pandemic can do to our situation.

We have become more anxious and more unsettled. And perhaps our sleep patterns have been affected. But it's the spiritual rest that Jesus here is addressing.
Because the spiritual anxiety that we have can be at the root of our physical problems. Jesus says, I will give you rest.
We don't have to earn it. It is a gift. And isn't this the case? This is how we receive this rest. We receive it by faith.
Remember what the writer to the Hebrews said. There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Let us make every effort to enter that rest.
[8:00] Yes, we don't sit back. It is a gift, yes. But let us make every effort. We have to work at that as well to enter that rest.

So, come to me, says Jesus, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Have we come?
Have you come? Have you found that rest in Jesus? Jesus. Invitation number two.
Further down in the passage there. Jesus says, take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.
Well, we have already discussed the purpose of a yoke. Usually a piece that was made of wood, been shaped and carved to fit around the neck of two cattle or oxen or other beasts of burden, allowing them to pull heavy loads, carts or wagons.
[9:06] And, of course, the purpose was that they would work together, that they wouldn't do their own thing separately. In the Old Testament, this imagery of a yoke is very often used.

They talked about a yoke of bondage in Egypt, a yoke of bondage to sin. And, of course, we read in the New Testament that the Pharisees, these religious leaders, added laws and regulations to the Old Testament law.
And, indeed, it was a burden to them to keep them. More than that, they forced others to keep these rules and regulations too, giving them burdens that they were found difficult to bear.
In fact, impossible to bear. So, no wonder Jesus criticized the experts of the law for adding unnecessary burdens on the shoulders of others without helping to lift them.
So, when Jesus says, take my yoke upon you, surely this was going to be a heavy, burdensome activity.
[10:21] It was going to be intrusive. We don't want something heavy around our necks, do we? And, spiritually speaking, does that mean that this yoke was going to be a burden?

No. No. Jesus says, surprisingly, his yoke is easy. That means it's useful.
It's good. It's kind. It's gracious. And his burden is light. It is not heavy. It's a yoke of kindness.
Fancy that. His yoke is sweet and pleasant. It's there to refresh us, not to hurt us. Christians are yoked to Christ.
He leads us. He bears the Lord with us. His yoke is easy. And his burden is light.
[11:25] Have you taken Christ's yoke? Or are you struggling with life's problems on your own?

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Here's the promise of this invitation. I am gentle and lowly in heart.
And you will find rest for your souls. Here we have Jesus' description of his own heart.
His innermost being. The central animating locus of all his actions. His motivational headquarters, we might say.
So let's delve into this a little bit deeper. When he says, I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls.
[12:25] This word gentle, interestingly, is mentioned only three times in the New Testament. By that, I mean in the Greek form, it is only mentioned three times in the New Testament.

One, blessed are the meek. In Matthew 5.5, in the Sermon on the Mount. They will inherit the earth. And that word meek could be translated gentle.
Secondly, Zechariah's prophecy of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, which is recorded in Matthew 21. See, your king comes to you gentle and riding on a donkey.
There's that word again, gentle. And thirdly, Peter uses it in his letter, first letter, chapter 3, verse 4, when he says the Christian's character should be of an unfading beauty, of a gentle and quiet spirit.
So there's these three references in the Scriptures, in addition to what we've read in Matthew chapter 11, of this word gentle.
[13:46] And Isaiah foretold the coming of this gentle Jesus. This is what he says, and this is repeated in one of the Gospels.

Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out. No one will hear his voice in the streets. This is the bit. A bruised or fragile reed he will not break.
And a smoldering flax or an oil lamp wick he will not snuff out till he leads justice to victory.
Do you feel sometimes like a bruised reed? A reed that's still fragile and perhaps half broken? Perhaps oppressed by tragedy or by a sense of sin?
[14:53] Gentle Jesus will not crush or condemn. Is the light of your witness, of my witness, for him down to a weak flicker?

He will not extinguish it. Let's consider some other examples of our Lord's gentleness. Christ's gentleness is seen in his compassion.
The scriptures describe him as being deeply moved on different occasions. Deeply moved. For example, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, for they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.
His gentleness, of course, is seen in the way he healed the sick. His gentle touch healing the leper and giving sight to the blind. His gentleness was expressed in his sympathetic nature.
In Hebrews we read, In Jesus we have a high priest who is able to deal, how? Gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray.
[16:14] Since he himself is subject to weakness. We have two instances recorded of Jesus weeping. Such was his inner feelings at the time of Lazarus' death.

Yes, he wept over Jerusalem, but he also wept at the grave of Lazarus, where we read twice he was deeply moved.
Jesus was a gentle savior of compassion. To quote Dane Ortlund, Jesus is not trigger happy, not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated.
He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger, but open arms.
Gentle Jesus. But he's also lowly, we read in these verses. And this refers in the New Testament, not to humility as a virtue, but to humility in the sense of destitution, or being thrust downward by life circumstances.
[17:38] When it describes Jesus as being lowly, we perhaps could describe that as him being socially unimpressive. And what greater description of Christ's humility do we find than in Philippians 2, where Paul writes, your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus, who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. This Jesus, the servant king, is accessible and approachable to those who are weary and burdened.
He is not like a narcissist, bombastic U.S. president, nor a cold, uncompassionate Russian dictator.

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Jesus is gentle and humble. Jesus' way is counter-cultural. It's the meek who are the happy ones, not the movers and shakers and the go-getters.
To quote from Auckland again, You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come.
[19:16] No payment is required. He says, I will give you rest. His rest is gift, not transaction. It's a relationship of grace.

Gentle and lowly. This, according to his own testimony, is Christ's very heart. This is who he is. Tender. Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing.
Here is the gospel invitation. For Christian, for non-Christian, we are wearied by all that life throws at us. Like Christian and the pilgrim's progress, we are conscious of our burden of sin.
And what does Christ say to us? Come. Come to me. And I will give you rest. Christ took our burden as he hung on the cross, bearing away the guilt, the power, and the penalty of sin.
[20:30] What grace. But you might ask, how? How can we receive this? How can we take, how can we get this yoke that Jesus is promising?

He's inviting us to take. Well, taking his yoke involves submission. Submission to the lordship of Christ.
Of putting our will secondary to his. His yoke is kind and his burden is light. We are buoyed along in life by his endless gentleness and supremely accessible loneliness.
He doesn't simply meet us at our place of need, Ortlund says. He lives in our place of need. But don't get confused.
This gentle and lowly Jesus is not a weak savior. Don't confuse meekness with weakness.
[21:38] Our lord Jesus, yes, he is gentle and humble, but he cannot tolerate evil, religious hypocrisy, exploitation of the poor.

His cleansing of the temple on two separate occasions is evidence of a strong character and concern for his father's honor. This is the risen Christ, says Ortlund, the one at whose name every knee will bow.
The one described by John whose eyes are like a flame of fire and whose voice is like the roar of many waters and who has a sharp-edged sword in his mouth.
The lord Jesus is a strong, safe, and absolutely reliable savior. All those that the father will, the father gives me will come to me, he says.
And whoever comes to me, I will never drive away. So what burden are you carrying this evening?
[22:50] What burden am I carrying this evening? What is weighing us down? Is it discouragement, frustration, weariness, anxiety, guilt, cynicism, emptiness?

Well, the gentle and lowly Jesus is for you and for me. He is inviting us to come to him and find rest. Are you yoked to Jesus? Are you united to him? Have you submitted to his leadership and kingship?
Remember, his yoke is easy and his burden is light. In the words of the hymn we sung earlier, are you thirsty?
Are you empty? Come and drink these living waters. Love, forgiveness, vast and boundless. Christ, he is our living water.
[24:01] In the words of the prophet Isaiah, come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come buy and eat, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

the apostle John in that great book, the book of Revelation says this, the spirit and the bride say, come, and let the one who hears say, come.
Let the one who is thirsty come, and let the one who wishes to take the free gift of the water of life, come. I pray that all of us will come to the one who is gentle and lowly.
Amen.

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