

The Greatest Invitation

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[0 : 00] So we come to the end of this section in Matthew, the end of chapter 11, and this has to be one of the best known and best loved statements in all the Bible.

Every Anglican knows this statement, an invitation from the lips of Jesus we hear at every communion service. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. It's the clearest, sweetest, most direct and personal, practical invite from Jesus, penetrates right where we are, reveals Jesus' heart to us and exactly what we need to hear.

The only problem is that we're so used to it, it's become worn smooth like a coin. And all of us, when we hear it, we are moved and none of us really understand it.

And worse, we're so used to just hearing it on its own, taken out of its context, it is possible when we do that to reduce it to something just a little bit sentimental.

[1 : 06] A kind of a spiritual hallmark card from Jesus making us feel better about our weaknesses and our difficulties, an emotional pick-me-up or when I'm feeling low.

But any way you look at it, it is an astonishing offer. It's personal. Jesus says, come to me. It's universal. All who labor and are heavy laden.

And it's just so remarkable. He offers to give us what we can't give ourselves. I will give you rest. But when we put this invitation back into its original context, it comes with greater power.

And it shines with this kindness and truthfulness and hopefulness that I hope we'll see together. So I'm going to do three things. When did Jesus say it? I'm going to try and put it back in its context.

Secondly, who is Jesus to make the offer?

A very brief point. And thirdly, what is the invitation itself? We'll spend a few moments on it. Is that okay? Okay. All in favor? Just kidding.

[2 : 09] So number one, when does Jesus make this invitation? We're in chapter 11. He makes this invitation after he's preached the Sermon on the Mount.

He makes it after he has done miracles, dozens of miracles, in these towns around the north of the Lake of Galilee. Miracles of power and compassion and authority.

And when we came into chapter 11, we saw there are a variety of responses to Jesus. And now at verse 10, in our passage, we see the effect of these responses on Jesus himself.

And it's the only time in all the Gospels, in all the Bible, Jesus tells us what is in his heart. This is what my heart is like. And there's a stunning contrast in the context between verses 20 to 24 and 25 to 26.

First, Jesus speaks to the towns that have rejected him. And then he prays to God the Father.

Notice, at the same time, he moves from woes to worship, from grief to gratitude.

[3 : 17] You see, 20 to 24, it's all to the cities of Galilee here on earth. And then he turns and addresses his Father who is in heaven. When he's speaking to the cities on earth, he's close to tears.

With deep sadness, when he turns to his Father, he's full of delight and serenity and submission to the will of the Father. This is the context for this marvelous invitation from Jesus.

It is the utter rejection of Jesus. And the words in 20 to 24 are the most searing, severe pronouncement we have from the lips of Jesus.

He speaks to those towns where he grew up. The towns where he did all these mighty miracles.

And there are many more miracles than the Gospels record, the Gospels tell us.

Capernaum, which was his home base. Chorazin, Bethsaida. All the miracles of chapter 8 and 9 take place there except for one of them. Verse 20.

[4 : 18] Then he began to denounce the cities where he did most of his mighty works because they did not repent. Woe, alas, for you, Chorazin.

Woe to you, Bethsaida. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

The people in the villages in Galilee had seen more miracles, better miracles, more stunning miracles than any place on the planet since creation.

And every miracle that Jesus did was a blaze of spiritual light, revealing him to be the Son of God and showing the kingdom of God. And the response he's now saying is that they did not repent. They had so much light. They had the Sermon on the Mount. They heard it from his lips. They saw Jesus raise the dead and drive out demons. They had him, the purest, clearest, sweetest revelation of God.

[5 : 30] With breathtaking tenderness, they lived for a period in the intensity of this spiritual life. And what was their reactions? Well, some of them were quite enthusiastic, especially when they brought a family members to be healed by him, right?

We read that they were astonished and they were entertained, but they entirely failed to see the kingdom of heaven and they would not repent. And what is their great sin?

What is the crime Jesus charges against the villages in Galilee? It is that they did nothing. There's no evidence they hated him or persecuted or mocked him.

They weren't angry or antagonistic to Jesus. But in the glare of the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, they were apathetic and indifferent. And Jesus takes them, therefore, forward to the day of judgment and compares their fate with the fate of famously corrupt and violent and greedy cities, Tyre, Sidon and Sodom.

And he says to the villages in Galilee, it'll be worse for you on that day than those cities. Just think about this for a moment. The cities in Galilee, the cities in Galilee, the towns in Galilee were more moral than Tyre and Sidon and Sodom.

[6 : 50] But you see, with all the light of the gospel of the glory of God shining on them, they were indifferent, they were apathetic, and their judgment will be more severe because we will all be judged according to the measure of the light that we have received of revelation.

The measure of light you have received and I have received is the measure of our responsibility. And if you have heard the gospel of Jesus, indifference is the sin of sins.

It's not enough to just hear the gospel, to enjoy the gospel, to like the gospel. We have to repent. I want to read you a quote.

There's about 100 years ago a preacher, Scottish preacher. I won't do it in a Scottish accent, but he's preaching to his very large church. And he says, he talks about a gelatinous kind of indifference.

That's a jello kind of indifference. And he says, The place that's found most deeply seated, and I'm quoting, and hopelessly amongst, shall I venture, amongst people like you, who've been listening, listening, listening, until your systems have become so habituated to this Christian preaching that it does not produce the least effect.

[8 : 09] It all runs off you like rain off waterproof. You've waterproofed your consciences and your spiritual susceptibilities by a long habit of listening and doing nothing. Thank you. If you're someone who hears the word of God and listens to the preaching of gospel, and it does not lead you to ongoing repenting, and it makes no real change on you, you need to hear this warning from Jesus.

It's very serious. Each of us, all of us have to repent from our indifference and apathy. We have to come to Jesus and take his yoke and learn from him, as we'll see in just a moment.

And we need to listen to the word of God because our lives depend on it. But it's a warning of sorrow from the judge of the living and the dead.

And Jesus speaks with complete confidence. He knows, he says, I'm going to decide the comparative guilt of people in that day. He alone knows what's going to happen on the day of judgment.

And he doesn't need to warn us about it. He didn't need to warn these villages about it. The fact that he does, the fact that he warns them, I think, is another kindness and another opportunity to open the door and invite them to follow him as he does in verse 28.

[9 : 26] And suddenly at verse 25, the mood changes. Notice, at that time, it's exactly the same time. Jesus is still thinking about the rejection of the villages.

And now he preys aloud. At that time, Jesus declared, He said, So listen to this.

It's the perfect combination of human responsibility and divine sovereignty because the Bible teaches both.

It is a mystery beyond us. God hides his revelation from the wise and understanding. He's not talking about intelligence and IQ as though you need to have a low IQ to repent.

He's talking about religious know-it-all. Those who are wise in their own eyes. Those who are proud. Those who think they've got nothing to learn or little to learn and nothing to change about themselves.

[11 : 36] He's talking about those who can hear the words of the gospel and remain indifferent. But it is God's gracious will to reveal himself to little children. Not literal.

Not literal. But simply those who know they need Christ. Receiving the revelation of God has nothing to do with human cleverness or achievement or education or ability.

It has to do with knowing Jesus is the one who does the saving and looking away from ourselves to him. And this is the context for the invitation. The complete rejection and hardness of heart and Jesus' confidence in the gracious sovereign purposes of God his heavenly father.

So that's the first point. When did he say it? Secondly, very briefly, who is Jesus to make this invitation? Can he pull it off? And that's the purpose of verse 27.

All things have been handed over to me by my father. And no one knows the son except the father. And no one knows the father except the son and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him.

[12 : 47] It's breathtaking qualifications, isn't it? All things. No one knows. No one knows anyone to whom I reveal it.

All things have been delivered to me by my father. Everything about God the father. All knowledge and understanding about God the father. All revelation of God to others has been given to this person, Jesus Christ.

He didn't give a little bit to Muhammad. He didn't give a little bit to Buddha. It's all in the hands of Jesus Christ. He knows all that God knows. He alone has access to God as he really is.

Jesus alone decides our destiny. Jesus decides who to reveal it to. Which is why only Jesus can reveal to us the knowledge of God. And that's why if you want to know God, we have to come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you want to enjoy that ongoing saving knowledge of God the father, it's Jesus who opens the door. And that's why he is able. That's who is it that gives the invitation.

[13 : 55] But thirdly, what is the invite? What's the invitation good for? And here we come to verses 28 and 29. And I want to point out that it is a two-part invitation.

And the first part is verse 28. Come to me, says Jesus, all who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest. It's very personal, very simple.

Come to me. Not a religious institution or a set of rules. Come to me. And then Jesus says, I will give you rest. Rest is a very big Bible word.

And it refers to the life to come, everlasting life. The Old Testament picture is the land of Canaan after Israel has been pilgrimage for 40 years.

In the New Testament, rest is the goal of our human existence where we live forever with one another in love with God in glory forever. You might substitute the word restoration.

[14 : 56] It's the gift of the future. And Jesus invites all those who labor and are heavy laden. And I think we often take this to mean our own anxieties and sufferings and struggles and restlessness that we have week by week and day by day.

And it is true. Jesus wants us to bring these to him. He wants us to bring all of ourselves to him and not to pretend we have it together. And he does promise elsewhere to help us with these things.

But that's not the primary meaning of verse 28. The primary heaviness and the primary ladenness is the burden of religion in Matthew's gospel.

In chapter 23, describing the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says, they tie heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they don't lift a finger. So when Jesus invites us to come to him being weary and heavy laden, it's the crushing weight of trying to please God and make ourselves right before God by our own obedience.

It's the weight of the wrongs that we've done and the rights and the goods that we fail to do. Verse 28 means, come to me with all your sin and lostness and evil.

[16 : 11] I'll take it away and I'll give you the eternal rest of God. But the second part of the invite has to do with here and now. And it speaks about a different kind of rest.

If the first part of the invite speaks about eternal rest, this part, verse 29 and 30, speaks about the rest that we experience now.

Now, it's at this point at the nine o'clock, I lost everyone. And I had to tell them this story, which I'll tell you. I once, when I was in seminary, I preached a passage, Romans 6, I think it was, to the congregation I was working at.

And I didn't understand it. It's a very worrying thing to get up in the pulpit without understanding a passage, without understanding really anything about the passage. And I've thrown together a sermon with some, what I thought was some fond and devotional thoughts.

Anyway, about halfway through the sermon, people had this look on their face like, are you sure about this? So I stopped and I said, am I making any sense?

[17:17] And they all said, no. So I had another go. And I went through the points that I'd made. And I said, is that any clearer? And they all said, no.

So I stepped aside from my notes. And I tried to explain as best I understood it. I didn't understand it. And I said, is that any better? And they said, no. So we said the grace and we went home.

This is really important. If you've got the Bible open, look. In verse 28, Jesus gives us rest.

But in verse 29, we have to find it. We have to pursue it. Verse 28, it's the future rest of heaven.

Verse 29 is my experience now.

Take my yoke upon you. Here are two commands. And learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls.

[18:16] For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. So we come to Jesus and he gives us the eternal rest. But the Christian life is not just about the future.

It's about the now. And if the eternal rest that he promises us finds us, because he gives it to us, this present rest, we must find it.

And the way that we find this present rest, this experience of present rest, is by obeying the two commands. Verse 29, take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

For I am gentle and lowly in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. So a yoke is a piece of wood, curved piece of wood. And it's used, usually put over two animals.

One stronger, wiser, smarter, older. One's younger, foolish. And they put them in a yoke together so that they would work together and plow a straight line.

[19:19] Jesus commands us to put his yoke around our necks. He's on one side, I'm on the other. He's commanding us to be personally joined with him so that we walk his direction and learn from him.

And what do we learn? He alone reveals God the Father. We come to know God the Heavenly Father. Because all the treasures of wisdom and glory are in Jesus Christ. We learn from him. You see, the Christian life is not just an intellectual, massive mastering of knowledge. It's more like a continual companionship together with Jesus.

He does the heavy lifting and we follow where he leads. A Christian life is not just the forgiveness of sins and the hope of glory and eternal rest.

It is putting your neck under his yoke right now, just as you are. It's taking it up, literally putting it on and committing ourselves to walk day by day with him because he's promised to walk day by day with us.

[20:23] So when we come to him, verse 28, that's not the end of the story, nor is it the end in itself. But it leads to a life of discipleship and companionship into eternity.

Isn't that great? And that's how we find rest now. Walking daily beside Jesus, closely beside Jesus, attending to Jesus, having his yoke on us, which is easy and it's light.

We don't find rest anywhere else. We can't find it apart from the Lord Jesus. But it's as we place his yoke on us and learn from him. It's incredible, isn't it?

The one to whom God the Father has handed all things, wears a yoke and offers us his yoke. Gentle, humble in heart. He came willing to be rejected.

And now today he still makes this offer as Dan said, come to me, I will give you rest. Take my yoke, learn from me, and you will find rest for your souls.

[21:26] Two things to conclude. One, there's very deep wisdom here. If you're someone who comes to church, but you know that hearing the word of God is making no difference in your life, I beg you to heed the warning that Jesus has here.

Jesus alone understands the awfulness of eternal life without him. But he still invites you, all of us, to come to him, all who are weary and heavy laden.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. I sometimes meet people around Vancouver who, when they see me, they say, I'm so sorry, I haven't been to church for two years.

I feel so guilty. I haven't been to church for two years. I want to come to church. I want to come to church. I really want to come to church. And I say to them, I don't want you to come to church. I want you to come to Jesus. And on the other side, you may be here, you may be someone who secretly worries whether you are part of those whom God has chosen to reveal his son to. And you struggle with that uncertainty and maybe even tie yourself in knots, whether you can be sure. But you don't have to ask the question, will Christ reveal God's love to me?

[22 : 49] What we need to hear is that he says, come. We need to simply do what Jesus commands. Come, take my yoke, learn.

Without exception, without qualification, it is your responsibility to come to him, to take his yoke and to learn from him. And he promises to give us rest for he is gentle and lowly in heart.

Secondly and finally is the dynamic of discipleship. If you feel yourself stunted or stammering in your own discipleship, there's only one way to grow in the knowledge of God and increasing discipleship.

It's with your neck inside the yoke with Christ. You can't grow spiritually outside of submission and committing to Jesus Christ. Jesus says, learn from me.

We can't learn over there. You can't study God over there. You can only study and learn from him inside the yoke. Walking with Jesus, watching him, learning from him, copying his ways.

[23 : 56] Take his yoke because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Amen.