



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE GREAT INVITATION"

Sunday Morning, November 12, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Matthew 11: 28-30

Have you ever fully realized what an unusual, unique gathering a congregation is? Surface appearance reveals only that a certain number of people, at a certain time and place, meet together for worship. Yet if we go behind the surface, we discover that each face is a separate world. Think of the diversity that characterizes our congregation this morning. There are the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly people. There are those married and those single; those with no children, those with grandchildren; those who eagerly come to worship, those who come not expecting much to happen. There are young Christians, mature Christians, and non-Christians. We could continue to enumerate the diversity of such an assembly.

This diversity overwhelms me, but there is one fact that amazes me even more - that we with all of our differences can come before Christ - the Word of Life - and depart individually refreshed, encouraged, and strengthened.

This can happen because we are unified in our common need of Him. In some sense we all come to this service weary and heavy-laden and in need of His new life and strength. Is there a one of us who does not bear the weight of excess activity, of self-preoccupation, of neglected duties, of undisciplined passions, of actual deeds we are ashamed to reveal? In short, though we approach our Lord from different pathways, we all can find relevance in His invitation - "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11: 28-29).

Notice with me the two arms or facets of this invitation. First, Jesus says emphatically, "Come unto me!" "Come" was a frequent word on the lips of Jesus and often took the form of an invitation. If we were to strike this word from the gospel accounts, much would be forfeited. Had it been omitted, the fishermen might not have left their nets to follow Jesus. It was the invitation "to come" that encouraged Peter to attempt the walk upon the threatening waves. This single, simple word portrays one movement of His invitation - "Come unto me."

Yet the important question is where does He invite us? Where is that spring that would refresh your life? Where is that power that would lift and encourage? Jesus does not say, "Come to a certain church" or "Come to a particular set of beliefs." Neither does he say, "Come to a certain minister." No! Jesus had the audacity to say, "Come unto me!" Doesn't Jesus sound a bit self-centered here? Some critics have accused Him of being unduly egotistical. These critics point to other similar passages, such as, "I am the way, the truth, and the life"; "I am the light of the world." Just preceding the passage under consideration, Jesus dared to say, "All things are delivered unto me of my Father...."

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And then He continues, "Come unto me." But this is precisely the point! When we become a Christian, we come to a Person, Jesus Christ. He becomes the focal point of life. When we come to worship, we come to a Person. Indeed, if He is not present with us now through the Holy Spirit, then our worship is in vain. Living the Christian life is living alongside of a Person. So Jesus had not fallen to egotistical speculation about Himself but was underscoring a basic truth. The heartbeat of our religion is the heartbeat of Jesus Christ. It is to Him that we go. Martin Luther could say, "He who knows Christ knows all." Jesus was speaking the truth in love when He extended the invitation, "Come unto me...and I will give you rest."

Yet there is another arm or aspect of this invitation that is often overlooked. Jesus not only said, "Come unto me," but continued, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me." What does He mean by placing upon us His yoke?

I imagine if you and I would look long enough, we could find in some barn an old wooden yoke. Most of us have at least seen pictures of a pair of oxen working in the fields beneath the wooden yoke. A yoke is a wooden frame that is placed around the necks of two animals for the purpose of pulling a load evenly. The yoke was a common farming instrument in the day of Jesus. No doubt He Himself had made many as a carpenter. It was primarily useful because it kept the yoked animals working together and not at cross purposes.

As Jesus often did, He takes a familiar instrument and uses it to convey a spiritual truth. He invites us to take His yoke upon us. It is important to see that Jesus does not invite us to come to Him and then do as we please. He says come and be yoked together with Him. This means we accept His companionship, His discipline, His lordship, and His task in this world. We pull with Him and not against Him. We become co-laborers with Him in our church, vocation, school, and home. I am told that some farmers train young mules by yoking them with a more experienced, stronger companion. So Christ, the Strong One, yokes Himself with us in our weakness so that we are able to labor with and for Him.

It is important that we hold the two arms of the invitation together - to come and find rest but also to take the yoke of responsible discipleship. These two parts of the invitation remind us that Salvation is both gift and demand - both privilege and responsibility. The two must always be held in tension. When we come to Christ, we receive the gift of His life but also the demand to reflect this kind of life in our living. When we come beneath His yoke, we again receive the gift of His companionship but also the responsibility to be faithful to His companionship. If the two are not held in tension, error is always the result.

In speaking with inactive church members, one frequently hears this kind of response: "Oh, I am saved. I made my decision thirty years back home in the country - and that's that!" Such a person believes they have received the gift of salvation but yet feels no urgency or responsibility to be a co-laborer with Christ in his own world of activity. This kind of thinking is foreign to the New Testament. When we receive Christ as Saviour, we must also acknowledge Him as Lord. Thus, we receive both the gift and the demand - the privilege and the responsibility. We come to Jesus and find rest but also joyfully submit our lives beneath the yoke of continual discipleship.

Having noticed the twofold invitation, let us now consider the twofold gifts offered to those of us who respond. First, Jesus pinpoints the specific gift of rest. However, it is not the kind of rest that you and I might desire. The rest

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that Jesus gives is not the rest of ease or laziness. He refuses to remove all of the strife from living. Usually He does not remove the burden of pain, discomfort, or obstacles always demanding to be faced. Neither does Jesus offer the rest of running away from problems. No, He does not offer a life free of burdens and yokes. His gift of rest comes while wearing the yoke, while carrying the cross, while facing the problems.

Then what kind of rest does he offer? Jesus deals with the primary source of our weariness - namely, ourselves. Is it not true that the most heavy-laden person you know is the one completely wrapped up with self? Here is the real root of weariness and discomfort. There are outward circumstances that weigh upon us, but still the greatest weight is self-preoccupation. Is there a one of us who has not wanted to break the walls of self-centeredness and love more deeply - to go beyond our immediate goals and cast our lot with a higher purpose? Yes, the real root of the heavy-laden heart is the unbearable weight of the "I." Listen to his offer now: "Come unto me ye weary, selfish ones, and I will give you rest."

How does He give this kind of rest? Where is the release from this kind of weariness? The answer sounds contradictory. You may not believe it at first. His answer to the heavy-laden life is His burden or yoke, which He says is light. Such strange language. How can the yoke of discipleship be restful and light? Yet it is true, that as we submit to Him and His concerns, we begin to find real rest, serenity of mind, and maturity of purpose. We find release from self-centeredness only through self-commitment. As we accept the yoke of other people's needs and pull with them beneath their concerns - again our burdens become strangely light.

Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of such a release: "O blessed burden that makes all burdens light! O blessed yoke that bears the bearer up!"

I recall asking a member of a former church to teach a Sunday School class. She informed me that she had done this before and could not bear such a responsibility again. She continued to say that she took the pupils' problems to heart and that this simply was too much of a strain on her. Too bad. This could have saved her, for she was a very selfish and unhappy person. The burden of outgoing love to these pupils would have been light and restful to her. In the giving of herself she would have found herself.

There is a legend that illustrates this paradoxical truth. According to the legend, birds at one time had no wings. They rebelled when wings were fastened to their little bodies because they did not want the additional weight. To their surprise the extra burden of the wings did not restrict them but rather lifted them to the sky. To be yoked to Christ in His concerns is definitely an additional burden, as the wings were to the birds. Yet it is the mystery of grace that this burden of love will lift your life beyond the weight of self-centeredness to new heights of meaningfulness.

As you come to Him and take His yoke, there is still one other gift - you learn of Christ. This may not sound much like a gift at first, but upon reflection you will find that the greatest gift is to grow in the personal knowledge of Christ.

This was Paul's one desire: "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings..." (Philemon 3:10a). We begin to learn of Him as we serve with Him beneath His yoke.

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This kind of personal knowledge is illustrated for us in human relations. Married couples are often amazed at how little they actually knew each other before their marriage. When they began to live and work together, they began to learn of each other. Neither did you know your friends very well until you became companions in a common task. So as we become co-laborers with Christ, we begin to not only learn of Him but become gradually like Him.

We learn that He is a revealing Christ, bringing into focus what God is like and how life should be lived.

We learn that He is a disturbing Christ, disturbing us in our moods of complacency.

We learn that He is a merciful Christ, ever giving us a new lease on life upon genuine repentance.

We learn that He is an ever present Christ, a companion who journeys with us in this life and even beyond the grave. In fact, it is life after death where our personal knowledge of Christ reaches finality. Here the relationship is fulfilled. John best describes the end of the journey with Christ: "We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2b).

Nathaniel Hawthorne in his short story, The Great Stone Face, illustrates this transforming power of admiration and companionship. There was a majestic stone face carved by nature on the side of a mountain overlooking a small village. An old prophecy predicted that one day a great man would appear in the village possessing the same majestic countenance of the great stone face. One boy, Ernest, became enamored of the stone face and its prophecy. He constantly studied the great features in the face. The stone face became both teacher and companion to him. The village looked for the one who would be the living likeness of the stone face. In time there came to the village a wealthy merchant, successful politician, and an outstanding poet. None of these, however, quite possessed the divine qualities of the stone face. Ernest, now an older man, had looked in vain for the one prophesied to come. However, without realizing it, he had taken on its features. The companionship of the stone face had transformed him into likeness. He had learned so well from the majestic face that he became made over into its image.

Is not this what happens in the Christian pilgrimage? As we accept the yoke of Christ's companionship we gradually take on his features and attitudes toward life. The more we learn of Him the better we can reflect His kind of love. It is almost an unbelievable hope that He shall so transform us that at a future point "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

We come back to where we began. Though we be characterized by diversity, nevertheless you and I are unified in our common need of Him. We have need for the peace in submission, the rest of His burden, and also the need to learn of Him, that we might be like Him. His invitation does transcend the centuries demanding a response from you this morning: "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me." Will you come to Him?