

“My Burden Is Light”

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).

According to recent polls by Gallup, Barna and the Pew Research Center, we live in a Christian nation. At least that’s how we *see* ourselves. In the research conducted by these organizations between 73 and 78 percent of Americans call themselves Christian. At first glance, this may sound impressive, but when we compare this claim to the things we actually experience both in the world and in the church, it raises all kinds of questions and, at the very least, it forces us to define what it really means to be Christian.

Now, if you take your cues from the media, you’re likely to see Christianity characterized by people who judge and condemn the behavior of others. If you ask someone outside the Church to define Christianity, you’ll probably hear an explanation based on things you should or shouldn’t do. Even those of us who worship consistently and incorporate the Word 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 that serves as the beginning and end of our faith. And in some ways that confusion is understandable. The truth is that Christianity *does have* a lot of rules. In fact, there are whole books of the Bible featuring 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 frightening truth is that we *can’t!*

In today’s Epistle reading from Romans, Paul wrestles with this very thing when writes, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...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).

My friends, this spiritual schizophrenia described by Paul is a struggle for every believer. It is a serious spiritual crisis and the burden created by this condition is crushing. We call ourselves Christians and yet we can’t even keep the most basic commands of God and the result is that we feel like a failure. We feel hopeless and embarrassed and yet instead of owning up to the truth of our sin and laying this burden down...we lie about it. We come to Church with a smile on our face and yet inside we are afraid to admit that we are struggling and we conceal the truth. We hide the most sinful and broken parts of ourselves because we’re sure that if any real Christians ever saw those things, they’d never speak to us again. We’d be outcasts if anyone ever knew the truth. And once we believe this idea, the Christian life becomes nothing more than an exercise in how well we can hide our sins and keep everything on the surface looking good.

And in this moment of temptation and deception, we have lost the truth of what means to be a Christian. We’ve redefined Christianity as a system of belief that rewards good behavior and celebrates success...and as a place where sin dare not be seen. In doing this, we buy into the false teaching that *we just need to try harder* and be more disciplined and yet when we try this strategy for self-improvement, our burdens only increase. We pull ourselves up from the dust and we pile on the guilt of our latest failure and we pledge that this time we’ll get serious. And it might even work for awhile, but any progress in this self-centered theology quickly falls apart and we find ourselves right back in the same spiritual mess where we began and our feelings of helplessness only become more suffocating.

In the 1970s, a group of psychologists was studying the effects of different learning scenarios on rats and in one of their experiments the researchers electrified a portion of a cage floor. The rats quickly learned to avoid being shocked by jumping to a different part of cage where no electricity was applied. Then the researchers electrified the entire floor and an amazing thing happened. Initially, the rats tried to avoid the shock but they

quickly discovered that there was nowhere they could go to be safe and so rather than keep trying, the rats finally just settled down and accepted being shocked. They were hopeless. Even when escape routes were later offered by turning off one portion of the shocking mechanism, the rats had already learned there was no point in trying and they simply refused to move.

This same thing happens with people as well. When Christianity is defined by what we do or by what we do not do, the result is a debilitating helplessness. The burden overwhelms us and we either lie about our condition or simply give up. Because the truth is that 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 the cycle we eventually conclude that either this is all a big lie or that there's something fundamentally broken and wrong with us as individuals. We just can't do it. We can't bear the weight. The burden of sin is simply too great.

And it's into this hopeless reality that Jesus speaks today: "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, 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 means "at the same time just and a sinner." And we are both! 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! We *will* fail! And as damaging as this may be to our pride, we shouldn't be surprised by it. Until the day we go to be with the Lord sin will always be present in us and our response to the shame of our sin can't begin with us! Because no matter how much time and energy we invest in *trying harder*, anything that starts with us is doomed to fail. The essence of the Christian faith and the reason Jesus went to the Cross and the assurance that 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 Christ. Christ carried the burden of every shortfall and every broken rule. And Christ wore the yoke of obedience that we constantly fail to achieve. And the amazing grace that justifies us before God is that this perfect obedience of Jesus – His keeping of every single law – is *given to us* and is *counted as ours!* He took the whole burden of the world's sin upon Himself when He died on 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 who we are. We say the "Amen" and we sing the last song and we walk out the door and we immediately start living as if it all depends on us...and we need to hear the promise of God that it is finished. And we need to be reminded that our burden has been lifted and that the guilt of our sin has been removed. And we need to know again from God's own Word that He loves us and *week after week after week* we need the assurance that our future is in His hands.

So today my Christian brothers and sisters, fellow saints and fellow sinners, in case you've forgotten, this is who you are: You are cherished by God! You are forgiven in Christ! You are alive by the Spirit! You do not have to pretend anymore...*you are loved!* Not because of what you've done, or can do, or ever will do. You are loved because you are a creation of the God of the universe who has claimed you in the waters of Baptism and invites you to come with empty hands to receive His own body and blood. You are loved...not because you try harder or get it right this time or even because you might get it right next time. You are loved because of what Christ has already done for you. He has taken your sins. He has died your death. You do not have to pretend anymore because today Jesus speaks to you: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Live in the light of this promise of God. Amen.

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