

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Falling Short: Take a Load Off, Fanny”
Matthew 11:25-30

Whatever it is, we are bound to fall short. There is no such thing as a runaway success in life that just hits it out of the park on every single facet. No such thing. And we've spent the past couple of weeks of this series “Falling Short” unpacking the frustration and the futility we can feel when we try to live up to it. But more importantly than that, we've looked at the freedom and the relief we can know when we accept and embrace the fact that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and that there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. The love and grace of the Lord is not about what we do, but rather what Christ has done.

So at this point, you might be wondering, well preacher if it's not about what I do, guess I should just keep binge-watching Cobra Kai and call it a day, huh? The grace of God, the love of God, sure, I get that. But what's the point of doing anything if it's not about what we do? Now that's a question. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

The priest had been thrown to the walls of his jail cell, only to look up and see an unlikely defender. There stood his assailant who had struck him, but in front of him, standing between them was another, another criminal sharing the jail cell, and he had said stop.

How the priest ended up in that jail cell was a long and tragic story, but the sum of it was that he had been trying to do the right thing. In particular he had been trying to help two sisters on the run from the law. But because they were on the run from the law, it meant that he was on the run from the law. Eventually the law caught up with him, and he was thrown in jail.

In jail he was ridiculed and beaten by the other men, until this stranger, this other criminal stood up and said stop. He bandaged the priest's wounds and sat down next to him. The priest asks the criminal, “Do you want to be good?” That's a great icebreaker. The man says, “I don't know.” “Do you want to change your life?” responds the priest. “Do you want to change yours?” snaps the man. “I do nothing but bad things,” he continues, “but what good is your life for? You go to the good side and I to the bad side, and neither of us is any use for anything.”

His words shake the priest to his core, and on top of everything else that had happened to him, this was reward he got: ridicule, beatings, and a crisis of faith. When he's transferred from the jail, he is led away dejected.

And that's it. That's as far as the story goes. That priest had tried to do everything right, and this is where it got him. The burden he carried of trying to do the right thing only drove him into the ground. He did so under the mantle of the church, in the name of God, but honestly considered it more a matter of obligation than anything else. It was his duty to do the right thing. There was no life in it, no joy in it, but he felt he was supposed to do it, so he soldiers on, until there was nothing left, until that burden he weighed him down completely.

If only this sad, tragic priest and those like him had heard the words of Jesus that we read a moment ago: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

It’s precisely to people like this priest that Jesus is speaking to: those who have languished under the burden of constantly trying to do the right thing, constantly trying to live up to expectations, in particular religious expectations. These chapters in Matthew have a lot to do with Jesus’s confrontations with the Jewish religious authorities, figures that were hypocritically calling for rigid adherence to the law as the path to revival. But those that listened to them bore this burden of constantly trying to follow every minute rule, thinking that doing so, simply out of duty like the priest, would bring them life.

It’s this conflict, this tension that’s behind some of Jesus’s words to begin this passage, words like in v. 25, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent,”—I think he’s got these religious leaders in mind here—“and have revealed them to infants.” He then makes the outrageous claim that “no one knows that Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” But what’s so powerful is just what Jesus then reveals. In a time when the day’s religious authorities were trying to one-up each other with how closely they would follow the law, piling up burden after burden as signs of their piety, here comes Jesus who says, “Come to me, all you who that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

What an invitation! While everyone else is saying “Do this, do that,” here comes Jesus saying, “Come to me...and I will give you rest.” It’s good news for the weary, good news for those who carry heavy burdens. Come to Jesus, and he will give you rest. I hope you hear that.

But I know that there are some of you thinking right now, “Preacher I don’t buy it. Sure today, you talk about resting in Jesus, but I know that some other week you’re just going to turn around and say, well you should do this and you should do that, and then we’re back where we started, and the whole thing is just a big bait and switch.”

If you’ve ever thought something like that, you’re not alone. It can look like a discrepancy between on one hand the message of grace and “It’s not about what you do” while on the other there’s talk of what Christians should or shouldn’t do. Before long we just end up where that priest was. So what’s all this talk about a “light burden” or an “easy yoke”?

It’s a good question, a tough question. Gets at the heart of what a life of faith looks like. If it’s not supposed to be just passive, then what are we supposed to do if we say it’s not about what we’re supposed to do?

A Christian writer and theologian named Dallas Willard put it this way about this passage. He said, “One of the lies of our culture today is, ‘It’s hard to follow Christ.’ No, *it’s the easy way!* ... The person with the easiest strongest life is the one who walks in the easy yoke with Christ....

“What is the yoke? It refers to two oxen being yoked together to pull the load. The idea here is that *we’re pulling Jesus’ load with him*. His load is to bring the reign of God into ordinary human life.”

Try to think about what he’s saying. It hinges on the simple point that yokes in those ancient times were commonly not for a single animal but for two, who would be *yoked together*. It meant that when Jesus is offering his yoke, he’s not saying, “I don’t have a lot for you to do.” He’s saying, “There’s an enormous amount to do. I’m ushering in the kingdom of God. And I want you to learn from me. I want you to join with me. But I’m not just going to plop this burden

on you and say, well, do your best. I will be yoked to you, side by side, and we'll work together, because when you carry the yoke with me, you'll find that the yoke is easy."

Jesus isn't calling us to a life of inactivity. He's calling us to a life so bound to him that the burdens we carry don't feel so much like burdens—not because they're not heavy, because they most surely are, but because Jesus is the one doing the lifting.

It's like this. If we have any campers, more particularly any overnight hikers, this might ring a bell. There's camping of course—what's the term, glamping?—where you park a luxury hotel on wheels in a parking lot and call it roughing it, and I'm not knocking that. To each your own. But then there's camping where you hike in, following a trail, pitching camp wherever you would sleep for a night, and carrying everything with you. Years ago I used to do a good bit of this kind of trekking, and some things I learned were - a) don't take more than you really need, because you just have to carry it, and b) don't underestimate the value of a good pack. Some packs just sit on your shoulders, like a glorified school backpack. Seems straightforward enough, but you start hiking up mountains with 50 pounds all on your shoulders, that's going to wear you down pretty quick.

But then there are these packs that attach not just at your shoulders but with something almost like a backbone running up and down them, with enormous padded straps that go around your waist. And what they do is transfer the weight of your pack right on your hip bones. As a result, you don't even notice that you're even carrying it. It's the same weight, the same burden, but you don't even notice that you're carrying it.

That's what Jesus is saying when he says "My yoke is easy." It's not because the life Jesus calls us to is easy, because it's not. It's because Jesus is carrying the load with us, so much so that when a life is truly bound to him by his grace, the burden we carry living in his presence and for the gospel and for his kingdom doesn't feel so much like a burden at all.

It means we don't do things just because we feel like we're supposed to, like that priest did.

Incidentally the tragic story of that priest served in part as the inspiration for another instance of carrying a burden, carrying a load.

A bit over fifty years ago, a band weary of life on the road holed up in a pink house in Woodstock, New York, and started writing. One of the songs ended up being all about burdens, about the burdens you end up carrying when you're just trying to do the right thing. The story of the song is this traveler who pulls into Nazareth, Pennsylvania, really with just one purpose. He'd been sent there by a woman he knew to pass along her regards, but when he gets there, he finds no place to rest, and the people he encounters keep asking him to do stuff for them, all while he is just trying to do the right thing, to do what he was supposed to do. The refrain he keeps coming back to is this invitation to that woman he knew, that woman who sent him, not to worry, but to leave it with him, and he would take care of it. "Take a load off, Fanny. Take a load for free. Take a load off, Fanny. And you put the load right on me."

By now, many of you have guessed it. It's a song called "The Weight" by a band called The Band—I have a mild obsession with The Band—and though the song is kind of mysterious, if you really get into it this traveler doesn't come to a point of release or freedom. He's tired. He's trying to get home. He's carrying a burden but still he keeps saying to this woman Fanny, take a load off, put it on me.

It's no wonder it leaves him weary. No wonder it leaves him homesick. These weren't burdens he was meant to carry on his own.

But imagine what this weary traveler would sound like if someone turned to him and said, “Take a load off, yourself.” What relief would come across his face? Imagine what peace that priest would have felt if someone had said to him, you don’t have to walk this alone.

Friends that’s the invitation that comes to you. If you are carrying a heavy burden, the promise to you is not that the work would cease, but that the burdens would be light. And the promise that the burdens would be light is not because they’re not heavy, but because someone else would be carrying it with you.

It is Christ speaking to you and to a world of weary travelers, buckling under the weight of their own burdens. He’s saying, “Take a load off, and put the load right on me.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**