

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

As you may know, anyone who has truly taken Christianity to heart, finds that it is not easy, nor is it light. We struggle with burdens just like those who don't believe that Jesus is our Savior. So what did Jesus mean by this?

Some pastors, when they first start preaching, don't want to admit that bad things happen to good people. They want to think that everything is going to go smoothly, that nothing bad can happen if you truly believe in Jesus. They whitewash everything, have a Pollyanna point of view, and never talk about things that are really important. It's almost a prosperity gospel, believing that you deserve and will receive only the best when you follow God's will. When that doesn't happen, they say that either you have sinned, or you don't have enough faith. Unfortunately, what they aren't noticing is that everyone sins, and even though God doesn't say being well off is wrong, God doesn't promise everyone they will have worldly wealth, or that life will go smoothly.

So, what does God want for us? Do you ever get confused about what God wants you to do? You've prayed. You've listened for God's response. One person says to you, "I think you should do this." Then another person criticizes you, and tells you something different you should be doing. Then, there may even be another person who claims you shouldn't even be approaching the thing that you've put so much effort into. It seems as though you cannot please anyone, when all you were trying to do was what you thought God wanted from you, and you are so confused that you just quit, when all you were trying to do was to please God.

This happened to Jesus as well, although he did not quit because he had a direct connection with God and God's will. There were other persons at that time who wanted to tell people about God as well. There were the Pharisees; their message about God was filled with rules. It was more about being a good follower of the Jewish religion than about creating a relationship with God. "Do this, don't do that." There were 613 religious laws that the Hebrew people, the descendants of Jacob, were expected to keep. Imagine how psychologically heavy those 613 religious laws had to be; trying to remember all of them, let alone not breaking any, because there was always someone looking over your shoulder, ready to stone you if you broke one.

Another group of people who were trying to tell people what God wanted them to do was the Scribes. The Scribes watched over the stories of the religious books in the temple. Their idea of the most important message from God was to watch over the stories, to protect them from being corrupted. It's important that we have the stories of our past, that we know the interactions of God with the people on the earth. But is it what God wants everyone to do with their life?

The last group who were exceptional in their quest for everyone to follow their thoughts about God's expectations were the Zealots. The Zealots didn't care for anyone who wasn't of the Jewish faith, and they didn't believe God thought anything good about those other people either. The Zealots carried swords and were always at the ready to attack anyone whom they judged to be a non-believer, therefore an enemy.

It's no wonder people were so confused when they came to Jesus. How could they carry the weight of the 613 laws? Were they the ones selected to guard their history? Or should they be ready to attack those whom they judged to be their enemy? They didn't know who to trust. They didn't know who to believe. They were afraid of God because of what they were told would happen if they did the wrong thing.

When Jesus came, he saw how frightened they were, how confused they were, how tired they were, and he told them that the way to find rest was to follow him. He told them God loved them. He told them that they would no longer be confused about what they were supposed to make of their life because he was the only one who knew what God really wanted from them. He told them all God expects from them is to love God, to care for one another, and to rest.

So, yes, life is not easy but at least we know what God wants from us: to love God, to love others, and to rest. I think the most important message from this text is that we are to rest. God wants us to keep the Sabbath. When we are pushed around by everything the world expects of us it is difficult to find time for a Sabbath rest, a day set apart to relax in whatever form that takes for us. There is an episode in *Emergency*, a TV show from the 1970s, that maybe a few of you can relate to... the paramedics received a call from a woman calling for a man who was in distress. When they arrived at the location, they discovered it was an office, and the man's secretary had phoned them because he was having symptoms of a heart attack. The man fought them about going to the hospital because he had to stay abreast of the stock market so he could trade shares and make money. Somehow they got him to the hospital and enforced rest on him.

We sometimes go, go, go, not taking a rest until we find ourselves unable to do anything, and have no choice but to rest. When we get to this point, we are not able to care for ourselves, let alone care for others. God warns us against this, telling us we are to take time off from our busy schedules and think on God. For those who do not know how to relax this can be very challenging, but there are ways to incorporate movement with Sabbath. Such as walking and reciting a Psalm or praying for the neighborhood as we are walking. Another example would be to do yoga while focusing on scripture. Dancing to Christian music may be something you'd enjoy. If you enjoy being on or near the water, you can mindfully concentrate your thoughts on the goodness of God while on or near the water. There are other active ways to incorporate God into your life than these; with some thought I think you can come up with something that fits your style.

Taking time to rest in God, move in prayer, exercise in God's word, or however you find to focus only on God for a few hours out of a day will take your mind off whatever it is that has you held in distress. It will draw you closer to God. You will be able to realize that it doesn't matter what others think of you as long as you are doing what God has called you to accomplish. Remember that Jesus said we are to love God, love others, and rest. Loving others is never accomplished through something that hurts anyone, takes away their self-worth, or judges them to be less worthy than we are ourselves. Loving others cannot be accomplished if we are exhausted.

God is love. We love because God first loved us. God took the seventh day to rest and expects us to make time to rest as well. Remember the Sabbath Day and make it holy, and you may find it a blessing. Love God, love others, and rest, that you may find dealing with life's difficulties is made easier when you spend focused time with God. All glory be to God.