

Food for Thought Article: “The Dynamics of Discipleship (Part 1) ~ Come, Take, Learn.”

In this first part of ‘The Dynamics of Discipleship’ we will concentrate on these words from Jesus: “**Come** to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.” (Mt. 11:28-30)

In the second, separate, part of the article, we will examine Jesus’ different, yet complementary, words of exhortation in Mt. 28:16-20, i.e., ‘**Go,**’ ‘**Make**’ and ‘**Teach.**’

I would suggest that before we ‘**Go,**’ we must ‘**Come;**’ before we ‘**Make**’ we must ‘**Take;**’ and before we ‘**Teach**’ we must ‘**Learn.**’

But back to Jesus words in Mt. 11:28-30.

I wonder if you are burned out on religion? If so, this invitation from Jesus is the remedy. And it **is** an invitation; with Jesus there is never any coercive control. We choose what we want to do and how we want respond.

Firstly, we notice that the invitation is to ‘come towards Jesus’ or ‘come with Jesus’ (‘Deute pros’). It is a dynamic verb of movement and it is plural. So often, especially in our Western churches, we apply things individually and personally, and of course this is important. But here the invitation is corporate; to the whole congregation. All disciples have a responsibility to come to Jesus together and to look out for one another ~ to make sure that no one is getting burned out on religion; that no one is taking on too much and becoming overburdened.

And this invitation, to come to Jesus and to look out for one another, is something that we are to bring not only into our Church life, but also into our family life, our community life, and into our places of work.

Notice too, that this invitation is specifically addressed to those who **are** weary and burdened; those who **are** tired out from carrying heavy loads. Jesus seems to be saying: “You are the ones who especially need to come to me, and I will give you rest.”

So, we are really talking here about how to relieve stress and pressure.

There are 3 things that we need to be aware of in ourselves which can create problems in this regard: -

1. The compulsion to prove ourselves through having excessive ambition.
2. To try and do everything ourselves to prove that we are irreplaceable.
3. To be working so hard that we have no time for friends, hobbies, and leisure activities.

If these 3 things apply to us then we really do need to respond to Jesus' invitation with some urgency.

Are you getting enough rest and leisure time? There was an occasion when Jesus' disciples were not. They were so busy they didn't even have time to eat. So, Jesus said to them, "Come apart from everyone and get some rest." (Mk. 6:31). People and ministry can be demanding, hence having leisure time is vital.

Sometimes, as I listen to people, I think to myself, "You have a very strong work ethic." And then I think, "I hope you also have a very strong play ethic."

The book of Proverbs has a very strong work ethic **and** it also depicts wisdom as being like a playful child being with her father. "Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually." (Prov. 8:30 – Revised English Bible).

One of the signs of God's blessing, according to Zechariah 8:5, is that, "The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there".

Are you playing enough? Play is important for people of all ages, so play football, play cricket, play scrabble, play bridge, play monopoly, play dominoes. Just play! And of course, if you can't play real sport, you can play interactive video games on the T.V. as a substitute!

Are you resting enough? Sports psychologists have discovered that one of the key things that separates top tennis players from the others, is that the top players have found a way to rest ~ between points, between games, between sets and between matches. They work hard when in training and when out on the court, but they have also learned how to rest.

However, there are some people who just love stress and pressure. They thrive on it and even become addicted to it.

I used to work for the Managing Director of a company and he was addicted to stress. He was a high-octane person always on the go! He would go away on holiday and the next morning he would be phoning us from some far-flung country wanting to know what was happening and what we were all doing!

I've even known managers who came back early from their holidays because they couldn't stand the stress of being on holiday! They craved the high-pressure work environment!

The problem is that these kinds of people can infect those around them. They remind me of a lady called Mary Mallon (1869-1938) who was an Irish American.

She worked as a cook in New York and was a carrier of typhoid bacteria (*salmonella typhi*). She herself showed no symptoms whatsoever of having the disease, and even denied that she had it, but everywhere she went she infected dozens of other people with typhoid and quite a few of them died.

Look out for people who will infect you with their own stress! They may be thriving and showing no adverse reactions, but they could be killing you!

Firstly then, we, and especially those who are weary and burdened, are to come to Jesus together, and he will give us rest. And notice that rest is a gift; we don't have to buy it or work hard to achieve it; we just receive it for free.

Secondly, Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us. The familiar picture is of two oxen being yoked together and then attached to a plough or a cart to pull it along.

Now the religious Jews and the Rabbis in Jesus' day already had a yoke; it was called the 'yoke of the Torah' or 'the yoke of the Commandments.' And there they were, desperately trying to be good enough for God by keeping His laws.

Not only the 10 commandments, however, but also the 613 'Thou shalt' and 'Thou shalt nots' in the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible. And not only those 613 rules and regulations but 100's of other laws which they added (the 'Hedge around the Law'), which were designed to prevent you from breaking the 613 laws!

It became silly. For example, in medieval times, when false teeth first came out (using other people's real teeth!), you couldn't wear your dentures on the Sabbath day because that was classed as 'carrying a burden'! And neither could you drag your walking stick along the ground because that was 'ploughing'!

And today, religious Jews all over the world, as soon as 6pm arrives on a Friday evening, they will not switch their lights on and off at home for 24 hours because that would be working on the Sabbath day. So, they set their light switches on timers instead!

I'm always somewhat amused by folks who think they can be acceptable to God by keeping His laws. Either they don't know what his laws are or they have never really tried to keep them.

God's laws all hang together and if we break one of them, well, we are guilty of breaking God's law.

It's a bit like if I'm stopped by the Police for driving through a red traffic light. The Policeman says: 'You've broken the law.' I say: 'But I went through all the other lights when they were green. He says: 'You have driven through a red light you have broken the law.' I say: 'But I've got my driving licence.' He says: 'You have broken the law.' I say: 'But I've paid my road fund licence.' He says: 'You've broken the law.' I say: 'But I've got my MOT certificate here.' He says: 'You've broken the law.' I say, 'But here's my insurance certificate.' He says: "You've broken the law, you are guilty."

If we want to be acceptable to God by keeping his laws, we will have to keep all of them all the time and that, dear friends, is impossible for any of us to do.

If we break the 10th commandment, 'You shall not covet', we have broken the 1st commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me'. Covetousness is idolatry. If we break the 10th commandment by coveting our neighbour's wife, we have broken the 7th commandment, 'You shall not commit adultery.' God's laws hang together.

In Jesus' day, the problem was that the Pharisees, the Scribes and Teachers of the law, had substituted man-made laws for the Word of God. Their man-made laws then became traditions which gradually took the place of, and eventually nullified, the Word of God.

On one occasion, they said to Jesus: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?"

But Jesus asked them: "Why do you nullify the word of God for the sake of your traditions? You honour me with your lips but your hearts are far from me." See Mt. 15:1-9

Jesus told his disciples to look out for those religious people who bind the heavy burdens of the Law onto other people's shoulders but will not move a finger to help them. (Mt.23:4)

And in other parts of the Bible, we can read about other yokes ~ for example, the yoke of forced labour or the yoke of taxes; but the yoke of the law is probably the most oppressive.

In Hinduism, of course, there is the yoke of 'Yoga.' 'Yoga' is the Sanskrit word meaning to 'join together.' Yoga is a system of meditation and asceticism designed to unite the devotee's soul with the universal spirit. The goal of Yoga is the realisation of the transcendental Reality; it is union with the Absolute and Ultimate Reality, which is Brahman.

Paradoxically, yoga is also about detachment; separating the 'self' from the 'non-self;' withdrawing from all sensual engagements; and releasing the soul from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Some people in the West begin yoga thinking it is no more than a sophisticated 'keep fit' class ~ an opportunity to lose a few inches round the waist! But the more you devote yourself to yoga through meditation, posture, and breath-control, the more demanding it will become. It can lead to altered states of consciousness and into the worship of false 'gods' and false 'Lords.'

But as Christians, the apostle Paul reminds us: "There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone possesses this knowledge." (1 Cor. 8:6)

An Indian guy called Narayan Tilak (1861-1919), who was one of the Marathi people in the State of Maharashtra, was converted from Hinduism and became a Christian at the age of 33. He broke with Westernised forms of devotion to Christ and adapted the Hindu bhakti yoga tradition of poetry and music to illustrate his newly discovered union with Christ. His poem *Christ and I* illustrates this: -

"As lyre and the musician,
 As thought and spoken word,
 As rose and fragrant odours,
 As flute and breath accord;
 So deep the bond that binds me
 To Christ my Lord.

As mother and her baby,
 As traveller lost and guide,
 As oil and flickering lamp-flame,
 Are each to each allied;
 Life of my life, Christ bindeth
 Me to His side.

As lake and streaming rainfall,
 As fish and water clear,
 As sun and gladdening dayspring
 In union close appear;
 So Christ and I are holden
 In bonds how dear.”

The invitation, then, from Jesus, is to take **his** yoke upon us because **his** yoke is easy and **his** burden is light. And this is something we are to keep reminding each other of: we are not saved by works of the law but by the grace of God through faith in Jesus dying for our sins. Jesus gives us **his** righteousness when we have none of our own.

In Acts 13:39 we read: “Everyone who believes in him [Jesus] is declared right with God ~ something the law of Moses could never do.” (New Living Translation)

Loyalty to the law has been replaced by a relationship with Jesus and then we have the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit (i.e., the Trinity) to help us live the way God wants us to live. It is through our relationship with Jesus that we are enabled to keep God’s law.

Again, the verb ‘to take’ is plural and it is active (‘arate’). Together, we are to keep on taking upon us the easy yoke that Jesus offers.

~ When Gentiles were becoming Christians in the book of Acts, one of the pressures that came upon them was an insistence by some Jewish believers that new Gentile converts should keep the law of Moses. So, they had this big conference in Jerusalem where Peter said: ‘Why are you Jewish believers

tempting God by putting the yoke of the law on the neck of these Gentile Christians; a burden which neither we here nor our fathers have been able to bear? We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved." See Acts 15:10&11.

And when Paul was writing to the Christians in Galatia he said: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (Gal. 5:1 KJV)

So, Jesus wants us all to keep on taking his yoke upon us because his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and we will find rest for our souls.

But this does not mean we will have a trouble-free existence as Christians or that the way will be easy. Jesus said: "In the world you will have trouble."

When Paul first preached the gospel in Thessalonica, we read that 'great trouble accompanied the Word,' but the folks who became believers there 'were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit – taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.' (1 Thess.1: 5&6 The Message)

We can't allow trouble to take away our joy in the Lord.

So, we should remember that taking Jesus' yoke upon us does not mean a trouble-free existence; nor does it mean that the path and the dynamics of discipleship will always be easy. Jesus said: "The way to life is hard and narrow." (Mt. 7:14) But it is the destination that's important.

When we are yoked with Jesus we will experience rest for our souls, including joy and peace, even in the context of difficulty and trouble.

The burden that Jesus asks us to carry is light. The burdens we put on ourselves or allow others to put on us, or allow the devil to oppress us with, might not be light, they might be heavy.

Our Church Bible verse for the year reminds us that we are to bear each other's heavy burdens ('bare'), and lighten the load that is being carried. However, we need to be moving that person, gently and humbly, to a position where they can carry the light load ('phortion') that is part and parcel of them following Christ and being yoked to him.

Paul writes: "Carry each other's (heavy) burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:2) So this is a corporate, shared responsibility that we all have in the Church, the Body of Christ. And Paul then goes on to say: "Each

one should carry their own (light) load.” (Gal. 6:5) So now we have moved from the corporate responsibility to help carry each other’s heavy loads, to the individual responsibility of carrying our own light load.

And this, it seems to me, should be the goal of all pastoral care. To come alongside all those who are experiencing heavy burdens, helping them to carry those, and then encouraging them towards a position where they can be equally yoked with Christ, know that his yoke is easy, and carry their own light burden.

Of course, there are many things we can be overburdened about. There may be financial burdens and we need to help folks out financially; there may be the burdens of physical and mental ill-health; the burden of bereavement and loss, the burden of being a sub-postmaster if you have been falsely accused by the Post Office of stealing money from them; the burden of living near rivers if your house has been flooded etc.

It may be that we are overburdened with worry. If so, we need to check out that it is not because we are accepting responsibility that God doesn’t want us to have. God often says to me, “Why are you worrying about that? That’s my responsibility not yours!”

If we are overburdened, it may be because we have turned away from Christ and we need to turn back to him. That is the context of the verses from Galatians chapter 6.

So, to summarise thus far: the first part of Jesus’ invitation is that we are all to come to him together and receive the gift of his rest. Secondly, we are all to take his easy yoke upon us whilst we help to carry each other’s heavy burdens until the load lightens and we can all, individually, carry the light burden Jesus gives us.

Moving on, **Thirdly**, Jesus then invites us all to learn from him. He is our teacher. We are his disciples and together we are to learn from him (the verb ‘mathete’ is plural again).

How is your Bible study going? Are you studying the Bible both as an individual and with others? What do you think of what you hear in sermons? How are you processing what you hear?

Some years ago, my wife and I went on a holiday to the Holy Land organised by a Christian company. One of the guys on the tour was someone I would describe as the ‘joker in the pack.’ I found him amusing and we got on quite well.

However, each evening, after dinner, there was a Bible talk by an invited guest speaker who was part of the tour party and was a Leader in a Church back home. The 'joker' knew the speaker, as did I.

But every night, as soon as the speaker rose to give his Bible talk, the 'Joker' would get out a pair of 'joke spectacles' which had wide, alert eyes painted on them. He would then put these on, thus giving the impression that he was wide awake and looking at the speaker, when he was, in fact, having a sleep!!

One night, I asked him why he did this. He said: 'Well, I've heard the speaker many times before and he is just giving us his opinion about things so I don't really feel as though I need to listen to him. In any case, I'm tired after a long day and a nice meal so I prefer to have a sleep.'

Compare that scenario with what happened, for example, when the gospel came to the people in Thessalonica. It didn't come just with words that you could sleep through. Rather, Paul writes: "Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction." (1 Thess. 1:5). No one in Thessalonica was asleep when the word of God was proclaimed to them!

I like the Message version: 'The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions,' Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to put steel in our convictions? Or is our faith like the reinforced, autoclaved, aerated concrete (RAAC) which is in some of our schools, hospitals, colleges, and airports and is cracking up? Is our faith lightweight and cheap? Will it crumble and break under pressure like RAAC concrete or our favourite aerated chocolate bar?

Finally, we come to a wonderful revelation of what Jesus is like. What his heart attitude is towards us, as together we come to him, take his yoke upon us, and learn from him. Jesus says: "I am meek ('praus') and lowly ('tapeinos') in heart." Alternatively, "I am gentle and humble in spirit."

This is the only place in the gospels where Jesus describes his essential nature and character. In other places he gives his names and titles; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the good shepherd; I am the light of the world etc. But only here does he describe his true nature, his heart attitude towards us.

If your Jesus is brash, loud, haughty, and arrogant, you have the wrong Jesus. The real Jesus is meek, lowly, gentle, and humble. Many people don't become Christians, or have turned away from Jesus, because they have been sold the wrong Jesus. Or maybe it's because they haven't seen the true Jesus in us.

However, we should also remember that to be meek, lowly, gentle, and humble, does **not** mean that we are namby-pamby, wishy-washy, weak, wobbly, and frothy individuals.

For just before Jesus spoke these words of invitation to us all to come to him, take his yoke upon us and learn from him, we read this: “Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgement than for you.’ “ (Mt. 11:20-22)

So it is, that we are to combine meekness, humility, gentleness, and lowliness with the authority Jesus gives us and the courage, strength, conviction, and power of the Holy Spirit.

The dynamics of discipleship, then, begin with us all coming to Jesus, taking his yoke upon us, and learning from him. And as we do this we will keep on finding (‘euresete’ = future active tense) rest for our souls.

But this is only the beginning. For once we ‘Come,’ ‘Take’ and ‘Learn,’ we are then, Jesus says, ready to ‘Go,’ ‘Make,’ and ‘Teach.’ (Mt. 28: 18-20)

The dynamics of discipleship continue and they complement each other. ‘Come’ and ‘Go.’ ‘Take’ and ‘Make.’ ‘Learn’ and ‘Teach.’ We will look at ‘Go,’ ‘Make’ and ‘Teach’ in Part 2 of this article.

George Irving – Feb. 2024

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