

**Message: REST**

**By Pastor James Lambert**

**Sermon Series: Promises**

**Matthew 11:25-30**

**January 12, 2020**

Jesus says, “come to Me... and you will find rest for your souls.” Rest for your souls. We are continuing a series on God’s Promises today, and I am happy to be able to tell you about God’s promise of **Rest**. I don’t know about you, but I really need to hear that promise today.

I want to pause a moment, and ask you to think about “rest.” What does it mean to you to “rest”? When I think about rest I think about laying in “a hammock in the shade,” hanging between a couple trees, with my straw hat over my head. I’ve probably only laid in a hammock twice in my life, but still it’s one of those common images we have of rest, just taking it easy, with nothing to do. Let’s think of another one. How about reclining in a portable chair on the beach, you know, one of those aluminum frames with fraying plastic straps, trying to get comfortable without the chair sticking to your skin, and trying not to get sand on your towel, so you won’t get sand in the car on the ride home... and the kids... OK, that’s not a very restful thought. Back to the beach. The air a nice 72 degrees. The ocean blue. The waves gently breaking. Bobbing up and down in the saltwater, if you actually choose to get in. That sounds pretty restful. How about another image... how about just staying in bed in the morning? When that alarm rings for you to go to work, or take your kids to school, or meet some voluntary obligation you have set for yourself, how about just turning it off and staying in bed? Well, that’s not a very restful thought really, because we are probably thinking of all the responsibilities that would go undone if we did that, and the consequences of our inaction.

You know it occurs to me that I’m not the best person at painting restful pictures. So I’ll just stop that and get to the Scripture. Our focus today is on a passage from Matthew’s gospel where Jesus gives his disciples this promise of **rest**. It seems to be in the latter part of Jesus ministry, right after he has had an interaction with the disciples of John the Baptist where Jesus basically confirms he is the long-awaited Messiah, and shortly before John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod. In this same section of Matthew Jesus gives some of his most famous parables, and explains to his disciples why it is that he teaches in parables. He also calls to task the people of those cities and villages which have witnessed many of Jesus’ great miracles, which could only come from God, and yet they have not believed in Him. That is where we pick up in Matthew chapter 11 verse 25. [Follow along with me in your pew Bibles or on the screens. Let’s read together:] [At 8:00 will just restate in some form.]

*ESV: At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **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.**”*

[I ask the Lord's blessing on the reading of His word. Amen.]

**Rest for your souls.** I've been looking forward to preaching this message, and yet not looking forward to it. Sometimes when you're a preacher you know you've got to preach a message about something, and that something is a beautiful message, from an amazing Scripture, and there is so much to unpack, and boy will that be fun, but there's just one problem. It's something you're not very good at, something you don't really know that much about. And that's true when it comes to me and rest. I'm honestly not very good at resting. That's why I'm not very good at coming up with restful images. I always get sidetracked by worry, by inconvenience, by my list of things to do, by anxiety about what-will-happen-if. Or, I rest at odd times, when I really have things to do, and so I can't rest later. I'm bad at rest. Just ask my wife. Or actually, don't. Cause that would be awkward.

I'm sure I'm not the only one like that, of course. Many of us have a hard time pausing, resting, breathing. If we've ever kept a weekly Sabbath, that time is a distant memory. Now, I usually have some sort of Sabbath. Usually, except when I don't. Sometimes it's Saturday, except once a month or so when that doesn't work. Sometimes the stars align and it's Friday and Saturday in a row. Sometimes, like when I'm preaching, it is a Friday night combined with a Saturday morning, and then back to work. I think that counts. That's one of those disagreements I have with my wife. Do two half-days make a whole day? I don't know. Is it really supposed to be one whole day, sunup to sundown? After all, the ancient Hebrews timed it from sundown to the next sundown, just like in Genesis 1 chapter 1, so there's something to my evening plus morning theory.

But even when I do have a day off, do I have a day \*really\* off? Can I truly let go and stop thinking about work? I was able to do that some over the holidays. On Christmas Day, and again a week later on New Years Day. In between I just had too much stuff to catch up on, some work, some personal errands, some end-of-year bookkeeping.

OK, enough of my confession time. Do you see yourself in what I am describing? Do you have trouble resting? Well, I've got some good news.

The good news is that this Scripture is not actually about us resting, or keeping the Sabbath. That's not really what it's about at all. That's where my mind has been going with it, because I'm self-conscious about it. But this Scripture isn't really about our weekly pattern of physical or mental work plus a day of rest. That's another sermon from another text. What **this text** is talking about is something a little different than that.

The **rest** Jesus is talking about here is not anything **we do at all**. It's about something God **gives** us. Something God **promises** to us, if we will follow Jesus.

Jesus promises rest for your **souls**. Rest for your **soul**.

That sure sounds good. But what does it mean?

Well, I've told myself I was never going to do this, but I think it's time to get out Pastor Tom's fancy computer monitor thing. I hope I can figure out how this works...

We're going to have a little Greek and Hebrew lesson. Just a little one. I promise it won't hurt. And I hope I don't say anything dumb or inaccurate. Here goes:

The word for "soul" here, the word I am most drawn to when I read and hear this passage, is 'psuche.' Psuche, as in, psyche, as in, psycho, psychological, psychiatric.

The main definition for Greek "psyche" is "mind." So in one sense, you could say Jesus is offering us rest for our "minds." I like that. I could use some of this rest for my mind. It's always wandering too and fro, focusing on this problem or that, focusing on things that make me worried, things that make me anxious, things that make me upset... or things that I find to distract me for a while to help me escape from those worries. Yes, rest for my **mind** sounds pretty good.

But not so fast... there is great scholarly debate about what exactly "psuche" means in a Biblical context. If we think of it as just "mind," then we might get the wrong idea. That's because Greek "psuche" was often used to translate a Hebrew word called "nephesh." And "nephesh," although it used to be translated into English primarily as "soul," almost certainly did not mean "soul" in the way we usually think of it – as the immaterial part inside you that inhabits your body. No, Hebrew "nephesh" meant something a lot closer to "a living, breathing, conscious body." Something more like "creature," or even "self." So in the Hebrew sense, your "soul" does not *\*exclude\** your body, it *\*includes\** your body. Your body is part of your soul. Your soul represents the totality of your life.

All that is to say, that when Jesus or the Gospel writers use the word "psyche," since their native language is Aramaic, their Scriptures are Hebrew, and their culture is Jewish, we need to make sure not to hear it as *\*just\** our disembodied soul, or *\*just\** our mind, as if it was independent from our body. It's about both. What this means is that **Jesus is offering us rest for our WHOLE selves**. That's the first point I'd like you to remember today. Jesus is offering rest for all of us. Body, mind, spirit, soul, emotions, everything that encompasses who we are. Maybe even, in some way, our relationships with other souls. OK... now this is sounding *\*really\** good! You mean, Jesus, I can have rest for my mind? And my body? And all the rest of me in between? Tell me how I can get some of that rest. How do I get a hold of it?

Well, Jesus tells us how. He says: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."

And as we read in the Sermon Journal this week, the "yoke" has to do with working, and it has to do with working as a team. [Here is an image of a yoke of oxen.] Imagine Jesus as the strong ox, the experienced ox, and we are the weaker ox, just learning how to pull the cart, how to plow the field, how to carry the load. Jesus is inviting us to join Him in his work. He will be patient with us. He will show us how it's done. His gracious invitation awaits us. He promises us that somehow this yoke will be easy and this burden is light. We will find rest for our souls. But it is still work.

So there's actually something paradoxical going on here. Jesus is inviting us to find rest in work! (Even though those two things might seem to be opposites.) He's inviting us to find rest in doing His work.

And that's the second point I'd like you to remember today: we find God's rest in Jesus' work.

~What is Jesus' work? Well, what do we see Jesus doing in the Gospels?

He sees people. He loves people. He calls them by name. He teaches people – which we usually think of as his main activity; he was called Teacher after all. He asks people questions. He sometimes boldly and lovingly corrects people. He heals people; he was known as a healer.

So, you know, just go do that stuff, and you'll be walking in Jesus' yoke. That may sound intimidating, but remember, you don't actually have to \*be\* Jesus. You just have to walk with Jesus. We don't do His work under our own power. We do His work in constant, direct, contact with Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

I want to pause a moment, change the subject just slightly, and put in a little plug for our Wednesday night Holy Spirit series. We had over 400 people join us the other night in the Chapel to hear Pastor Guy begin teaching about the Holy Spirit. I had the privilege of leading music, and it was a great time of worship. I mentioned to my wife Christine that I had recommended that series to a few different people over the past few weeks who were looking for a certain something: guidance as to what is next in their lives. I've told folks that I have faith that the Holy Spirit will show up to these gatherings, and that if they listen, they will hopefully hear something from the Lord about where they should apply themselves next in life. Part of my prayer going into this series has been: "Lord, unlock the gifts of your people through this time! Start some new works among us by the power of your Spirit!

And Christine's reply to that was basically: "OK, but you know, if someone wants to know what the Lord is calling them to do, you can just look in the Bible... find something that God tells you to do there... and go do it. Look in the Bible, find what God tells you to do, and go do it. Brilliant! Right? It is so true.

**Following Jesus** is not rocket science. God means for us **all** to be able to understand it. And following Jesus isn't necessarily a super spiritual thing either, odd as that sounds. You might not get a lot of warm fuzzy feelings. But if you aren't getting a special impression from the Holy spirit, you can always just open the Book, open the Bible. As it says in James 1:27 – "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." And as Jesus said after the parable of the sheep and the goats: "If you do it to the least of these, you do it to me."

So with that in mind, to that list of things we see Jesus doing, you can add things that God tells us directly to do. Visit the sick. Care for orphans and widows. Do you know someone who's in the hospital? Go and see them. Are you nervous about visiting sick people? Talk to one of our pastors or Congregational Care Ministers; we can give you a few pointers on etiquette, but you don't have to be perfect. Just go do it; be the presence of the Lord. Or, do you want to do something about the sorry state of the world? Well, you can change the world by helping a child. You can change the world by being a foster parent, or by giving respite care to foster children, or by being a mentor in an after-school program, or by supporting children in many ways. Financial gifts are great, but we're talking about \*work\* here. About investment of time, and energy, and love.

Jesus' promise to us is that when we do His work, He will meet us there, and he will give us **rest**, down deep in our souls, rest that sustains us for the whole journey of life.

There was another Scripture lifted up in our Sermon journal, a very stirring passage, Hebrews chapter 4. The author of Hebrews is referencing the story of Israel wandering in the desert for 40 years while those who did not trust the Lord to give them the promised land lived out their days and died. It reads in part: "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For **we who have believed enter that rest.**" And then a little later, quoting Psalm 95, we read: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Today. Today is the time to find this rest, and we find it by faith, by trust. That's the third point I want you to remember today: **We find God's rest by faith.**

And once again, the truth is kind of paradoxical. I know it can sound contradictory to those who are trying to understand what the Christian faith is all about. I just go through telling you that **we find God's rest in work**, and now I'm telling you **we find God's rest by faith**. But that's how it is. That's always been the truth about us and God. Our problem is that as Protestants we are a little bit conditioned to hear the words "faith" and "work" as opposites. But they are not opposites. They are *\*distinct,\** but not opposites. It's like the apostle James says in his letter (2:18): "you say you will show me your *faith apart from works*, but I say I will **show you my faith by my works.**" And yet, of course, the apostle Paul also teaches that we **are justified by faith, apart from works** (Romans 3:28). Well, those are both Apostles, both in the Bible, and both of those things are true. And here's how that works:

It is by faith, by **trusting completely in Jesus Christ and what He can do**, that we enter a **right relationship with God**. Faith gets us "in the same room with God," so to speak. Faith gets us to the promised land. Not our own work or our own merit. We can never conquer the promised land ourselves. We can't begin to do Jesus' work ourselves. We don't deserve it. Only Jesus the Holy One deserves God's glory. So we yoke ourselves to Jesus. Faith gets us yoked to Jesus.

**But then we must start working. We start working immediately.** We don't just sit on our faith and contemplate it, we "work it out," we do something with it. This actually relates back to the very first verse of our main Scripture this morning: The Lord does not reveal his mysteries to the wise and learned, but to "little children" who trust their heavenly Father and take action based on that trust. Faith is always demonstrated, in Scripture, by action. Always. Abraham believed God's promises and took action. The two faithful spies Joshua and Caleb were ready to run headlong into the Promised land because they had faith. The rest of the Israelites refused because they did not have faith. Paul, the great teacher of justification by faith, was absolutely fearless in his pursuit of God's call, putting himself repeatedly at the mercy of others. In the New Testament, the inward acts of repenting and believing were always accompanied by the outward acts of receiving baptism. Faith and action are not separate. **Action is the only way to show we have faith.** I don't mean to show others as in to show off. I mean taking action is the only way to even show ourselves that we have faith in Christ. We've got to follow

Jesus, and we follow Jesus in his work. And then when we are next to Him, yoked to Him, he can truly change us.

My friends, I pray that you can get a clear picture of what Jesus is offering today, so that you can enter his rest. Let me try to describe what it can be like when you place your trust in Jesus and start working with him. Maybe one of these images will relate to you:

God's Rest is:

A peaceful place to return to at the end of every day, and at the beginning of the next.

A place to center your thoughts as you walk through all the activities of your life.

A wellness that is deeper than physical health, which will help you to be as healthy as possible, but which stays with you even when your body breaks down.

A Friend who's always there. Always there, even when you sometimes let them down.

A Boss who always gives you just enough work. Not too much, not too little.

A Co-Worker who doesn't mind doing most of the hard work but still somehow makes you feel needed, who lets you know that what you bring to the team is important.

God's rest is a relationship with Jesus. A linking of our minds with the mind of Christ. A centering of our souls that allows us to be at peace, even when our surroundings are anything but peaceful, and even when we are very hard at work, physically and mentally.

And so, friends, I want to invite you today to enter God's rest through a relationship with Jesus – a **working relationship**.

What that looks like is going to depend on what steps you have taken in the past and where you find yourself. If you are feeling a pull or a nudge to respond in some way right now, I would encourage you to come to the kneeling rail and pray, and bring a friend or loved one, or look for one of our pastors who will be there to pray with you. Soon we will join as a congregation to sing our closing song. But as you respond to God today in worship:

If you have never placed your trust in Christ in your heart and never confessed Christ before witnesses, then you need to do that. "Today, while it is still called today." Do not harden your hearts. Soften your hearts. **Confess your need for Christ. Confess your sin and your uncertainty.** Ask a Christian friend to pray to help you place your trust in Christ, and then don't delay; come talk to a pastor about professing your faith and being baptized.

And if you have taken those steps, but your relationship with Christ is rather inactive, or you feel there is something missing, all I can say is **do Jesus work the best you know how**. Look at what Jesus spent His time doing, and do that. And look at what God tells us to be doing in the Bible, and do that. Don't get caught up on the hard questions, the thorny questions in the Bible. For this purpose, look at the simple stuff. Visit the sick, care for the widows and orphans. Speak up for those who are oppressed and forgotten. Be an agent of God's peace. Take God's good news to the ends of the earth, or to your next door neighbor. You won't figure everything out, but you'll meet Jesus there, and find **rest for your soul**.

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