



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 24, 2016

**Rest**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

# **Rest**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2016 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 30, 2016

*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 (Matthew 11:28-30).*

Christianity, to me, is a vigorous and active thing. It's not a passive mix of familiar platitudes and sentimental attitudes, not the sort of thing that can be captured in a Hallmark card. I like the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard's image of the "knight of faith," the person who goes wherever God leads, even if he goes sometimes in fear and trembling, because he wants to live for something greater than himself and he knows that in the end God alone is great. Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me," and surely that's a call to a spiritually demanding but infinitely rewarding life.

Some people seem to want a faith that just sanctifies their own comfort and security, but that's not the sort of faith we see in the Bible. It's not the faith of Abraham or Moses or David or the prophets, not the faith of Ruth or Mary; and it's certainly not the faith we find in Jesus and his disciples. They risked all kinds of things for God, even life itself, because in spite of all the trials they faced, they came to see the goodness of God as irresistible and the steadfast love of God as absolutely reliable.

Taking the Great Commandment seriously, to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves, can be hard work because that kind of love does not come naturally to us. It takes a lifetime for most of us to become the sort of person who does it well, and since there's never any lack of need in the world, the work of love is never finished. My father used to say, "There's no rest for the wicked and the righteous don't need it." I'm not sure that's true, but part of the point, I suppose, is that those who want to do right will never run out of things to do, and the better souls they become the more they thrive on

doing it.

I find myself drawn to the high expectations of the Christian life, and lifting that up to the whole congregation, as some of you will have noticed. It's striking to me, then, that this same Jesus who says "Take up your cross and follow me" also says "Come to me, all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The one who calls us to do so much also offers deep rest in him.

Even more striking is Jesus' claim that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Really? I wonder. He's the Savior of the world. Jesus takes the sins of the whole world upon himself, and yet he says that his burden is light. How is that possible? What does it mean to rest in this Jesus who carries so much weight upon himself?

Whatever else it means, to rest in Jesus is not like taking a vacation. It's not at all like a golf get away or a trip to Disney World. Vacations have to do with a change in scene. They're about getting away from things, even though we know that whatever we left behind will still be there when we get back. Resting in Jesus is not so much about getting away from our burdens and responsibilities as it is about finding strength and renewal in the midst of them.

In fact, many of those who find the greatest rest in Jesus are the very ones who work the hardest, and seldom or never get away from the things they have to do. Caregivers who look after children with special needs, or aging parents, or spouses with some chronic illness might rarely get away from the daily burdens of caring, and when they do it's often just for a brief respite; but because they love the people they're caring for they remain true to the task. And if they're people of deep faith they find rest and strength in the power and presence of the Lord.

I was reminded this week of a song made popular by a group called The Hollies in 1969: “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother.” Some of you remember it. It got to be so popular at the time because the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement were prominent in people’s experience, and there was a social dimension to bearing one another’s burdens beyond the personal challenges people always have to face. I was curious where the title came from, so I looked it up and did a little research. One story traces the saying back to 1884, when the moderator of the Free Church of Scotland told about a little girl carrying a baby almost as big as she was. Someone asked her whether she was tired of carrying him around like that, and she said, “No, he’s na heavy; he’s my brither.”

The sense of being brothers and sisters can make the burden of caring seem lighter, and the more we think of all God’s children as brothers and sisters the less we focus on the heaviness. Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” Anyone in ministry, whether ordained or in a context like Stephen Ministry, knows that it’s a peculiar kind of gift, a blessing of sorts, to take on the yoke of another person’s concerns, and to share a little of the weight of it just by being a supportive presence. The best of friends can be like that too, and family members who love and care for each other out of a sense of belonging to one another.

Resting in Jesus means not escaping from our responsibilities but finding strength and renewal and peace in the midst of them. Those of us who hope to go to Israel in March are reading a book by Elias Chacour, who was archbishop of Galilee in the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. He calls himself a “Palestinian-Arab-Christian-Israeli,” and his whole life has been dedicated to seeking peace and justice for Jews and Muslims and Christians together in the Holy Land. He was offered a comfortable teaching position at a great university, and sometimes he wanted to retire from the hard

work of seeking reconciliation and justice among people so often in conflict with one another. But each time he found himself called back into the fray as an ambassador for Christ, an agent of God's reconciling love of God in this world, and he always found the strength and rest in God to do whatever he was called to do.

Even great heroes of faith often start out preferring that God would call somebody else, and after they've been in service for a while they continue to find their faith tested as more and more is required of them. Moses did not volunteer to lead God's people out of slavery, and when they found themselves bogged down on the long journey through the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, Moses wanted God's assurance that if he was going to lead this "stiff-necked people," as he called them, he would not be left alone. But God said to Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses never did get to retire from the work God called him to. What he got instead was God's presence all along the way, and the rest he needed in God to see him through.

The same has been true of faithful people in every time and place, called by God to do difficult things, whether as prominent leaders or ordinary folk. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the most eloquent people of our time, but when he was tired of leading the struggle for civil rights in the face of tremendous backlash and resistance he liked to quote Mother Pollard, a seventy-two-year-old uneducated woman who walked for months during the Montgomery bus boycott. When asked whether she was tired of all that walking, Mother Pollard said, "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest."

Just before Jesus offers rest to his own disciples, he tells them that no one truly knows the Son except the Father, and no one really knows the Father except the Son, and those

to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. He says that the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father, which is to say that when Jesus offers rest in himself he is really offering rest in God.

Many of us find momentary rest in God when we step outside the press of everyday affairs and into the quiet peace of nature. There's something about the serenity of a mountaintop, or the deep woods, or the rhythm of ocean waves, or the tranquil light of the full moon like I saw this morning, that points beyond itself toward the God who made them all. It's as if nature reminds us, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

I come back again to that remarkable claim of Jesus, that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. By "easy" he does not mean trivial, like a simple task we might accomplish and then move on. I think he means something more like "to ease," as in the way that a medicine might ease our pain or a compassionate friend can ease our burden. If love is the thing that makes burdens lighter, Jesus embodies the love God, and the infinite depth of God's own love is enough to make even the Savior's burden feel somewhat lighter.

Actually, I think I see in all of this something of what our Atonement in Christ is like. The Atonement is the Christian doctrine that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Sometimes it's described as Christ's paying the penalty of death for our sins in order to satisfy the righteous wrath of God. Paul uses that analogy, based on the model of animal sacrifice in the ancient world, and in his context it made sense to think of Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. In our modern world, where animal sacrifice is not a part of our culture, it might make more sense just to picture God in Christ taking our sins upon himself and absorbing that

enormous burden through the infinite power of God's own reconciling love.

Either way, the Christian claim remains the same: God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, saving us from our sins by the grace of God alone. When we become yoked to Jesus as his disciples, we share not only his ministry of love and reconciliation but also the rest and peace that God alone can give. The more we reach the limits of our own abilities, the more we learn to rely on God, and the deeper the peace we find in him.

St. Augustine famously prayed, "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you." So many of our hymns say the same thing. "For all the saints, who from their labors rest," we sing, recognizing that our deepest rest probably lies beyond this world. In the meantime, I recalled early this morning the words to the tune our bell choir played, though I did not realize they'd be playing it:

This is my Father's world:  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;  
His hand the wonders wrought...

The hymn goes on to say that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." The whole of the Christian life reminds us that, as long as we work for God, and wait for God, Jesus walks with us and will give us all the rest we need in him.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

**[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)**