

But Which Burdens?

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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 11:28-32

One of the problems in Bible study is refining what we're talking about. For example, in the scripture above, which burdens are these?

To do the right thing seems at times to be a burden. It's easier, less costly, not to. But that can't be it. No way would Jesus tell us not to do the right thing, or not do his Father's will, or not keep the commandments, or not do our duty, no matter how difficult. Jesus is not talking about bearing the weight of faithfulness.

One way to refine our focus in Bible study is to look at the teachings or stories in close proximity to the one we're dealing with. See if there's a theme or concern that each is dealing with in its own way. The biblical writers at times lump-related matters together.

Prior to Mt. 11: 28-32, above, Jesus says that the knowledge of God has been revealed to him, and through him to whomever he chooses. He also says that the knowledge of God has been hidden from "the wise."

There were people in Jesus' day who thought they were wise when it came to the knowledge of God. For example, the Pharisees thought they were the "bees knees" when it came to the ABC's of a Godly life. And, surprise, surprise, the Pharisees show up in the story immediately following Mt. 11:28-32.

And what do they do? They criticize Jesus and his disciples, who were walking through grain fields, for plucking heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees' interpretation of the commandment, "Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," was that you could only walk a few steps from your house on the Sabbath, else it was unholy work. And you couldn't light a fire to prepare a meal, or it would be unholy work. (You could eat if it was prepared the day before.) And you couldn't rescue your nanny goat if it fell in a pit. And so on.

The Sabbath day, marked from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, was given as a day of rest. Other cultures worked every day. This slavishness wasn't good, wasn't healthy. Break up the calendar with a day per week not devoted to making a living. Trust in God. Acknowledge that all good things come from God.

Rest is good. But people have to eat. Emergencies don't take a day off. And maybe there's no other time of the week to visit family and neighbors.

In any event, Jesus answered his critics with an example – King David and his men, who broke into the Temple and ate the 'bread of the presence.' (A much bigger no-no than eating granola.) Furthermore, he claims that he is Lord of the Sabbath. God means the Sabbath for the benefit of humankind, not humankind for the benefit of the Sabbath. Jab that in your life raft and deflate it!

How would we apply this story to life today? Jesus dealt with know-it-alls who laid burdens on others, saying, this is God's way. It's mandatory that you live this way. Obviously, religious restrictions are not so much our problem today. But we do live among people, corporations, media, schools and universities, etc., that pressure us to

conform to their idea of what constitutes the “good life.” You have to have this... This is the mark of a good parent... This is how you should think.

But in many instances, these voices merely want to sell us something. In others, they know that what they are saying is harmful rather than helpful. They want to keep us in our place, lest we threaten their position of privilege. And rarely do these voices even pretend to be connected to God. Jesus's voice is not being heard when greed, sex, violence, and power are worshiped.

It is a burden to be something other than the human beings God created us to be. But almost everywhere we turn, we are tempted or pressured to be something less. And these foolish expectations can wear us down.

There's a better way. Tune the other voices out. *Come to me... and I will give you rest.*