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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
Pastor Jim Mead

The Yokes on You: A New Rest? Matthew 12: 1-21

At its heart, what's this story about? A miracle figures prominently right in the middle of it, so it *seems* like it's a miracle story. But, even though Jesus heals miraculously, this isn't really a story about miracles. It's a story about conflict.

What's the conflict about? (See if congregation will shout out.) In the end **this is a conflict about “who gets to say so.”** Who gets to say so about who God is and how to live God's way instead of any other way. In particular, it's about who gets to say so about how to keep the commandment about keeping a Sabbath, a day of rest, holy to God. The conflict was that Jesus behaved as though *he* gets to say so about the Sabbath, and of course, the religious leaders, the Pharisees, thought *they* got to say so. And, just so we don't get all self-righteous about those mean-old, dumb-old, up-tight Pharisees who didn't like our Lord Jesus, we might just keep in mind that *someone* is telling you and me how many hours a week to work, how much rest to take, how busy our children ought to be, and how hard we expect our employees to work . . . and my bet is that it isn't necessarily Jesus who gets to say so for us, either.

Well, the conflict arises over **what's allowed on the Sabbath—on the day of resting from all work commanded in the fourth of the Ten Commandments.** The conflict began while Jesus' disciples were walking through a grain field; they plucked some grain, ground the husks off it in their hands, and then ate it. It may seem odd to us, but they violated the Sabbath laws in no less than three ways: they harvested grain, threshed grain and prepared a meal. *Everyone* knew you couldn't do any of those things on the Sabbath: the regular good townspeople who went to synagogue every Sabbath knew it, and so did the wicked, disreputable people who never went to synagogue and violated the Sabbath a hundred times every week. They all knew it because for hundreds of years their religious leaders had said so. And everyone *knew* there was no one who kept the Sabbath more piously and perfectly than the Pharisees. Everyone except Jesus, that is—and he showed from scripture that his view was right and theirs was wrong. And the funny thing is that even though the Pharisees just *knew* they *had* to be right, they couldn't find a way to win the argument. If you can't win the argument, you can always kill the one who did win, of course. But the really funny thing, the wonderful thing, is that when they did that, they still didn't win, did they?

The second opportunity for the conflict came when Jesus went to the synagogue to worship, and a man with a crippled hand was present. The religious leaders were very bitter about their last encounter with Jesus, and they were just laying for him—just itching for an opportunity to nail him. If he healed the guy on the Sabbath, they were sure they'd have him, because the teachers of scripture had figured out a long time before that you could save someone's life on the Sabbath, but you couldn't just *help* someone on the Sabbath who could be helped some other time. This guy's hand had been crippled a long time, no doubt—what difference would it make if he waited until the Sabbath was over to be healed? Jesus could very easily have avoided the conflict by saying to the man, “My son, you are precious to God who knows how your life is limited by your crippled hand. As soon as the sun goes down and the Sabbath is over, I'll be at your house and heal your hand and you'll be better than new!”

Now, take a moment and think about this: why didn't Jesus do that? **Why did Jesus pick a fight with the Pharisees that he could so easily have avoided?** Why do you think? It's because everything is at stake for him—and for all of humanity—about who God is and how we ought to get along with God and live God's way in God's world . . . and who gets to say so. The religious leaders were sure *they* were the ones who to say so. But Jesus and his Father in heaven didn't like their answers—their answers were keeping people away from God, they were laying heavy burdens on people that God didn't want them to have to carry. Jesus wanted to throw off the yoke the religious leaders had laid on everyone—smash it to bits, burn it up and throw the ashes to the winds—and replace it with his yoke. His yoke, as Pastor Mark said so wonderfully last Sunday, is easy, it fits us just right, was made with us in mind, and is no burden at all to carry.

Now, the conflict about who gets to say so about what's allowed on the Sabbath, whose yoke people ought to be carrying was literally a fight to the death. And the key to understanding why it was a fight to the death is found in a little sentence almost hidden away in verse 6: **“I tell you, one greater than the Temple is here.”** It's a sentence that's easy to miss—

and not easy to understand. But everything hinges on it. Who is Jesus talking about—who's the one who is greater than the Temple? Yes—he is.

So, what's the deal with the Temple? Well, Jesus' argument with the religious leaders has run like this: in the scriptures, there is nothing greater than the Temple (except God, of course). It was against the biblical witness to do what David and his soldiers did: to eat the bread in the Temple because the Temple had made the bread holy to God. It was against the Sabbath law to work on the Sabbath, but priests were allowed to work on the Sabbath—indeed, they worked twice as hard on the Sabbath as on any other day of the week—because serving God in the Temple made their work holy even if it violated the Sabbath. Why? Because the Temple was greater, even, than the Sabbath. The teachers of scripture had been saying that for generations, and Jesus' opponents knew it. So, here is what Jesus said to the religious leaders: “The Temple made the bread in the Temple holy because **the Temple is greater than the bread** and the Temple made a priest's work on the Sabbath holy because **the Temple was greater than the Sabbath**. And I get to say what's lawful on the Sabbath because ***I am greater than the Temple.***”

Now, that's a bit esoteric for us—we might think, “okay, whatever. I'm not sure I followed all that, I'm pretty sure I don't entirely care, and I don't see why the Pharisees got their knickers all in a bunch about *that*.” But this is actually do or die stuff. Let me show you why. If Jesus of Nazareth, Mary and Joseph's boy, really *is* greater than the Temple, and if he's the one who gets to say so about who God is and what God wants from us on the Sabbath and every other day, if it's *Jesus'* yoke that God's people ought to carry, then he is a threat to them and to *everything* they believe, everything they have taught, and to everything about their high status in the culture. He is a threat to the Pharisees who saw themselves as *the* models of the spiritual disciplines of God's people, *the* teachers of God's word, *the* guardians of the purity of God's people, *they* were the ones everyone else was yoked to, and that's the way they liked it! If Jesus is greater than the Temple, he is a threat to the Sadducees who ran everything in the Temple, and to the High Priest and all the other priests. He is a threat to the Herodians who sucked up to that dreadful king Herod and to Rome. **If Jesus is greater than the Temple, he is a threat to the entire Temple apparatus and all of its worship and sacrifices**—sheep without blemish, doves, money offerings and burnt offerings—all of it.

And, the Pharisees were not wrong in the least about the scope of Jesus' threat to absolutely everything they counted on, everything that mattered to them, everything they taught. Jesus is, in fact, greater than the Temple—and he will sweep it all away because he is the Eternal Son of God in human flesh; he will sweep it all away in his life, his death, his resurrection and his ascension back into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. Think with me about what that means: because of Jesus, there will never ever again be a need to find a spotless lamb to offer God as a burnt sacrifice, because his death on the cross is the perfect sacrifice by the perfect Lamb of God once and for all, for all time, for everybody, everywhere. Because he is greater than the Temple, there will never ever be a need for another high priest or any priest at all, because Jesus is the perfect High Priest who offered the perfect sacrifice once and for all before he sat down at the right hand of the Father. Because of Jesus, there will never ever again be a need for a perfect observance of the Sabbath because the law Jesus said would never pass away until all was fulfilled *has been* fulfilled completely in him, in the human body of the Eternal Son of God born in Bethlehem, crucified in Jerusalem and ascended into heaven where he reigns for us and prays for us.

Okay, that's lots of fancy sounding theological stuff. Is there any reason to care—even if it's all true? I mean, okay then it's all true . . . but so what? Here's the deal: **No one can admit that any of that is so without admitting that they need to change.** The world can't admit that Jesus is greater than the Temple, that he is the One and Only Son come from the Father, that he is the Lord of the Kingdom of Heaven, without admitting it needs to change. *That* is the real reason Richard Dawkins, the evolutionist who writes all the nasty attacks on Christianity and religion, despises Jesus in the end. *That* is why the Pharisees and the rest of the religious and political leaders of God's people killed Jesus. It's why I find Jesus so unsettling, such a confrontation of my life, sometimes—most times if I'm honest. *That's* why any employer who works 70-80 hours a week and expects you to do the same at the same costs to your family and your health can't admit that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, because to admit that is to admit that he or she needs to change! Listen: when Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, **when we are yoked to Jesus: we get to rest, our children get to rest, our employees get to rest---** according to the Fourth Commandment, slaves, servants, farm animals and even the *dirt* got to rest!

I want to make some comments about keeping the Sabbath when we're yoked to Jesus. In Jesus' day, all the rules and regs about the Sabbath had become a burden to people instead of the blessing God meant it to be. But almost nobody seems burdened about keeping a Sabbath anymore, not even conservative Christians who are among the hardest working people

in the world. We are yoked to our culture, not Jesus, in this: our culture doesn't believe in resting, it believes in producing, and getting ahead . . . and keeping your job by working as hard as your boss says to. Jesus' yoke is a better one than your bosses', or this "produce or die," "buy more, consume more, or be nobody" culture. Contrary to the way we behave, the truth is that the whole world doesn't depend on us—this is God's world, not ours, and the things that matter most depend on him and what he does, not on us and what we do. Jesus pleads with us: Take my yoke on you and learn from me. My yoke is so much easier than yours, your boss's, your friends and neighbors'. this culture's. **For Jesus' dear sake, take some time off**; do it because it's good for you, do it because it's nice not to work all the time; don't get all swept up in the world's craziness to get ahead, to define you by what you produce, what you own, how many hours you work. Stay at home moms—get a Sabbath rest, even if it means having to plan and organize for it. Parents, please, please, don't have your children as booked up as your neighbors book their kids up—sports teams and music lessons and dance lessons and advanced studies, always learning and producing and improving. Because Jesus is Lord, we can take a day off every single week without the whole world falling apart, we can even *waste time* because it's God's world and not ours. When was the last time you *wasted* time—in a Sabbath holy to your Creator and Savior?

Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This week, Matthew reminds us of what Isaiah said about the Messiah: "**A bruised reed he will not break**, a smoldering wick he won't snuff out until he leads justice to victory." If you feel weighed down by all the spiritual obligations that sincere, loving religious people lay on you—or by the pious obligations unloving Christian people lay on you—if they are keeping you away from Jesus, he wants to take them off your shoulders and put his easy yoke on you. If you feel like a bruised reed—like a flower stem that's just about to flop over under the weight of a daisy—Jesus won't break you, he'll hold onto you. (A member of the congregation comes up and splints a broken flower to a whole one so that it's upright.) He'll do this he'll yoke you to himself, and help you to stand up straight, healthy, tall . . . and FREE because you are yoked to him; there's nothing freer than being what we were made to be!

Jesus is on the side of bruised reeds and smoldering wicks who can't keep up with the spiritual disciplines their pastors so earnestly teach and highly spiritual friends and authors urge them to be successful with: daily devotions, journaling, fasting, keeping the Sabbath holy by not working, not playing, not having fun. All the disciplines are good, but they are made for you and not you for them. And **Jesus, who is greater than the Temple is greater than the spiritual disciplines**: he is not waiting for you to achieve spiritual greatness in order to love you, or to hear the longings of your heart, or to answer your prayers. Heresy, I know. Please: don't send me letters about this (but if you do, sign them because the staff that works with me throws away all anonymous notes before I see them). I want you to spend time in reflecting scripture—because nothing produces spiritual growth better than that. Please pray—if you want to know Jesus, spend some time with him, talk with him, have it out with him, *and listen to him*—that's called praying.

Jesus is greater than the Temple. Jesus is greater than our evangelical theology. Jesus is greater than our work and our striving. Jesus is greater than our spiritual disciplines. Our salvation, our closeness to him, depends vastly more on who he is and what he does than on who we are and what we do. Take his yoke on you. It's *way* less burdensome than your yoke of success, or keeping up with the Joneses, or having the approval of *that* group of friends, or someone else's yoke of spirituality, or great achievements and high productivity.

The Lord is with us. Amen.