

Weekly Reflection - Abide: Why does it feel so hard?

Let me give a few texts: *Hebrews 12:14 – “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Colossians 3:5 - “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” Matthew 7:13-14 - “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. [14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”* Gate is narrow, the way is hard, strive for peace and holiness, kill sin. This sounds hard, it sounds like work and war. How do you get through the door? The gate is narrow, and it's hard. But four chapters later in Matthew Jesus says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] 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. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)* All those verses are in the Bible, all are true. That's what we believe about the Word of God. All of it is true. What I pray is that as we step towards understanding how it is that we must strive, kill sin, walk the hard-narrow path AND rest and abide in Jesus, and carry His easy yoke and light burden we will better understand why it feels so hard, and maybe it will feel a little less hard.

Matthew 11:28-30

I want to look at three things in these amazing words from the Lord of the universe. The first thing we see that's so obvious is that He really does want you and me, to rest. He wants us to enjoy a soul of rest. He wants His followers to have deep, peaceful restfulness of soul, not anxiousness. The second thing that's obvious here is that the restfulness is not inactive. It is a way of active living, of doing life, of serving with rest. The reason I say that is because when you've got a yoke on, you're plowing or pulling a wagon or something like that. The third thing is we see that there is a yoke. Christ did not say to the distressed, “Come to me, and I will remove all yokes from you and give you rest.” His invitation and the condition upon which people would experience the results were found in taking “my yoke upon you.”

What is the yoke? The Jews thought of the law as yoke. It was the heavy burden of the system of works that the Pharisees laid on the backs of the people. The burdensome yoke of self-righteousness and legalistic law-keeping. Jesus's yoke is His teaching, the Gospel, salvation by grace through faith.

Why is His yoke light?

The reason Jesus's yoke is easy, and His burden is light is not because Jesus just threw the law and obedience out the window. Jesus did not lower the standard. So, what keeps the yoke of Jesus from being heavy and burdensome? He says, *“My yoke is easy, my burden is light.”* What's the difference between His burden, His yoke, and the Pharisees, who heaped up legal burdens upon people (legalism, performance, works based)? Maybe you're thinking we don't really have Pharisees around in the church, so what does this have to do with me? We can be our own Pharisee and start putting our own set of rules or expectations on ourselves that we think will get us to be accepted or loved by God.

Listen to what Jesus says about the Pharisees in Matthew 23:4, *“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”* That's Jesus's diagnosis of the difference between His burden and their burden. They don't lift a finger to lighten the load of the law on the backs of people. And Jesus not only lifted His finger, He lifted the cross. They said do this this and this so you can be a child of God. Jesus says, I have done everything

for you so that you can be a child of God. He says in this beautiful passage about rest, "I'm gentle, I'm lowly, and that's the reason my burden is light, and my yoke is easy, because I'm gentle and lowly." Jesus got really low and came to earth to live the life we could never live and to die the death that would send us to hell for eternity. He lifted the sin from us, the curse from us, the condemnation from us. In other words, Jesus has lifted the heaviest load by being obedient to the whole law for us and dying our death for us. He has also lifted and goes on lifting the daily load of working out our salvation by being the decisive worker in our lives. ***"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."***

(Philippians 2:12 ESV) Sounds heavy, sounds like work, sounds narrow and hard. Sounds like a Pharisee but let's keep reading. ***"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."***
(Philippians 2:13 ESV)

Why does this feel so hard?

It seems like there should be nothing easier than to stop working for God, to stop trying to earn anything as a means of salvation, to stop needing to prove anything, and just rest in the work of Jesus that is so complete, so full, to cover all your sins, give you all the righteousness you need, and adopt you into the family without working? What could be easier than to say, "I give up. I need help. I surrender. I rest?"

I'll tell you why it's not as easy it sounds, at least for me. I don't like to be needy; I don't like to give up my control; I don't like to be helpless; I don't like to feel vulnerable. Jesus says this in Matthew 18:3-4, ***"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [4] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*** Who wants to be a little child? I want to be somebody. I want to look competent. I want to look big and strong. Nobody's going to praise that baby's strength. Maybe that's why it's hard? Our ego makes it hard to come to Jesus. It's not hard to come to Jesus. It's not a struggle, except the struggle to surrender, to ask for help, to be a child. ***"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.""*** (James 4:6 ESV)

What does this look like?

We must be abiding in Jesus the True Vine, the only source for the grace we need, the help we need, the love, joy, hope, and peace we crave and need. Our faith is always faith in His grace. We believe, we trust and obey the grace of God. Abiding in Jesus is living with Jesus; constantly dependent and reliant upon Him for everything. We live moment by moment depending on His grace to sustain us and enable and empower us to bear fruit that lasts and that glorifies the Father. This raises a potential question: Where do we find this grace? Our God is lavish in His grace, often dispensing His grace without our cooperation. The sun coming up, the seasons changing, every breath we breathe. His pursuing us with His love when we were enemies. We did nothing to control any of that. But He also has His regular channels or means of pouring out His grace; and we can place ourselves in these revealed paths of blessing or neglect them to our detriment. In other words, there are places we can go, things we can do that position us to receive more grace in our lives, to receive special grace that we need for specific circumstances in our lives. We need to place ourselves day by day and moment by moment in the channels of grace that God has given to us. What are those channels? The Word, prayer, and Christian fellowship (the local church).