

Did you know that the average American checks their phone 205 times a day or almost once every five minutes while awake? Yes, cell phones, if you have them, consume a lot more of our time than you may realize. In fact, the average American spends 5 hours and 1 minutes per day on their cell phones. At that rate, the average American will spend over 2.5 months (76.3 days) on their phones each year. Meanwhile, experts continue to highlight how social media can exacerbate mental health challenges, especially for younger users, and warn against misinformation that oversimplifies these complex issues ([link](#)). And we wonder why many of us are so anxious?! We wonder why many of us cannot rest or experience peace or turn it all off! When we're anxious or in trouble, do we turn to our screens or substances (drug of choice) or do we turn to Jesus? A pause...a rest...some peace...this is food for our souls. This is what our souls hunger for yet many of our souls are still hungering and very weary. Theologian Frederick Buechner says that it's not the presence of God in our lives that keeps us coming back to church; it's the absence of God, the hunger for spiritual food to fill the God-shaped hole in our lives (*Wishful Thinking*). We come looking for the rest and renewal Jesus promises here in Matthew's Gospel. What does it look like to truly rest in Christ? How do we move from control to trust so that we may truly rest in Jesus?

Jesus offers some of the most comforting words in the New Testament in his invitation. "Come to me" is an imperative/a command with exclamation. This is a direct, personal invitation from Jesus. Rest is found in Jesus himself, not in rules or religion. Jesus offers deep rest for weary souls and

invites us to be communities of rest and refuge for one another. To see who Jesus is inviting here- you have to look back before today's text. Right before today's text Jesus told a parable and ends by thanking his Father because he has hidden these things from the "wise and intelligent"- those who reject Jesus and his message, including the religious leaders, and revealed them to the "little ones," those who are poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, all whom Jesus calls blessed (5:3-12). They are the sick and the lame, the lepers and demon-possessed, the tax collectors and sinners, who come to Jesus for healing of body and spirit. Jesus was calling out the heavy yoke that the religious elite and the powerful of the culture often placed upon ordinary people. **But God's** gracious act in Jesus Christ, cause the "little ones" to see what the "wise and intelligent" cannot- that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus' invitation to come is to the little ones. "This invitation is not to a program, not to a principle, but to a Person...to entrust ourselves to gentleness when the world demands performance" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). "It is an invitation not to freedom from responsibility, but to freedom in responsibility- discipleship that does not crush, but gives life" (Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year A*, pp. 323-325).

Jesus promises that once they come, he will give them rest. This verb, "rest," in Greek means to "refresh, revive or renew." It can point to present peace and ultimate rest. Jesus offers deep rest for weary souls- and invites us to be communities of rest and refuge and peace for one another. My OT professor, the late Walter Brueggemann, frames rest as an act of resistance

to empire's demands: "Those who rest are not defined by works or productivity but by covenant relationship with God" (*Sabbath as Resistance*, pp. 1-19). "Rest for your souls" echoes Jeremiah 6:16, where God invites his people to walk in the "ancient paths" and find rest. Jesus fulfills that promise. Rest= the inner condition Jesus offers us. Peace in anxious situations= the fruit of living in that rest. Rest is so important to God. There are many passages in the Bible where we're invited to rest, especially on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, we're commanded more than invited. Did you know that keeping the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments that we brush off as not really that important? "But it's the longest and most descriptive commandment, the hinge words between how we relate to God and how we relate to each other. It's not a throw-away commandment. The other commandments take the people out of slavery; the Sabbath command takes the slavery out of the people. This is the hardest lesson to absorb, so we have to do it regularly. God tells us. We have to regularly step out of the mindset and activity of the world around us, the measuring, comparing, competing, striving, producing, and consuming. We have to regularly stop *doing* and practice just *being*. Like all the other creatures and the earth itself, we, too, must succumb to the cycles of rest and renewal that God built into the fabric of existence, which we are brutally determined to transcend. One day in seven, this command says, you on purpose remember that you are not God. And you on purpose remember that you are neither better than nor worse than anyone around you, but connected in a mutual belonging to God and each other. This is what it means to be human. This is what it means to be free. But we forget

this most of the time. It's uncomfortable. It's strange. It's awkward. We are trained to measure the worth of a day by what we accomplish. So when we choose to rest in Jesus, expect restlessness. We're out of the rhythm" (Kara J. Root, workingpreacher.org (WP)). As Eugene Peterson says, "We are out of the unforced rhythms of grace."

The Gospel of Matthew is often referred to as the teacher's gospel.

Throughout the gospel, Jesus teaches. Teaching reveals who Jesus really is (Jennifer T. Kaalund, WP), and he leaves the disciples with the directive to go into the world and teach all nations. Therefore, "Take my yoke" should not be a surprise but familiar to the crowd. A yoke was a wooden harness placed on oxen. However, Rabbis also used "yoke" as a metaphor for taking on the teaching or authority of a leader. Jesus contrasts his yoke of grace with the heavy burdens of legalism laid on people by religious leaders (cf. Matthew 23:4). Yes, Jesus offers respite for the weary, and he is also highlighting the importance of instruction. In other words, "Walk with me, work with me and watch how I do it." To take Jesus' yoke means to follow him as teacher and Lord- but instead of adding to our burdens, it lifts them. Jesus' way of discipleship is not burdensome but life-giving. Jesus isn't a tyrant who lords it over his disciples. No, he is gentle and humble in heart. Oswald Chambers has a quote which rings with the truth of Jesus' message here in Matthew's Gospel: *Always measure your life solely by the standards of Jesus. Submit yourself to His yoke, and His alone; and always be careful never to place a yoke on others that is not of Jesus Christ.* I agree with the late theologian Rachel Held Evans when she says, "I am concerned that we

are placing yokes on other people that are not of Jesus Christ. I am concerned that we are slamming the door of the Kingdom in people's faces and tying up heavy burdens and placing them on their backs. I am concerned we are straining gnats and swallowing camels. I am concerned that we are kicking out the very people Jesus welcomed in-the poor, the marginalized, the misfits, the heartbroken, the 'rejects,' the 'sinners,' the troublemakers, the merciful, the peacemakers. And I am concerned that the Church is indeed conforming to the world-every time it preaches violence as a way to achieve justice, every time it glorifies celebrity and success, every time it reduces womanhood to subordination and manhood to power, every time it justifies cruelty or unkindness in the name of proving a point" ([link](#)). Jesus very clearly says, "learn from me" (v. 29a). Discipleship is relational and communal. As we apprentice ourselves to Jesus' way of life, we're called to model Jesus with meekness, not domination. Jesus' character stands in sharp contrast to the oppressive demands of worldly rulers and harsh religion. Why is it that we have trouble modeling and holding one another accountable for these characteristics of God in Jesus? Jesus promises that if we come to him, we will find rest for our souls. He continues, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (v. 30). This is not a call to escape responsibility, but a transformed experience of it. "The offer of a lighter burden is not extended to the powerful and the seemingly self-sufficient in this text. It is offered to the weary and the burdened. It is offered to those who recognize that they just can't make it on their own, no matter how hard they try. It is offered to

those who long to be delivered from forces too terrible to wield or manage” (*Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net*).

I posted a meme on FB last week that reads, “Peace is not the absence of trouble or anxiety. It is the presence of Christ in the midst of that trouble or anxiety.” I keep saying this to myself, especially when I hear the news. I/we cannot control what is happening and so we lean on Jesus and work locally. The Bible highlights that God provides rest as a gift and that we should not overwork ourselves. In today’s culture, ambition with no boundaries— basically work, work, work and strive, strive, strive—is what we are taught, but that is not biblical and it’s clearly not God’s heart. Rest helps us draw near to God and find solace in God’s presence. Rest helps us- especially in the midst of worries and anxieties- to trust in God's care. “In essence, biblical rest is not just physical cessation, but a deeper spiritual experience of peace, trust, and renewal found in God's grace and provision” (Kristina Hosch, FB). It is not that Jesus invites us to a life of ease. Following Christ is full of risks and challenges, as he has made very clear. Jesus calls us to a life of humble service, and it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is a life yoked to Jesus under God’s gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove oneself, free to rest deeply and securely in God’s grace. Again, “Jesus rest is not escapism but participation in God’s peace. Those yoked to him discover that his rule is gracious, not oppressive” (Amy Oden, 2008, workingpreacher.org). Yet, what is oppressive is when our faith requires constant striving and insistent measuring; if we’re never good enough, always needing to do more to be more. That is not the faith of Christ. This is when we forget the God who

saves us and the freedom we've been saved for, and this is when we go back to being slaves for the empire. God did not create us for such as this! Much like with God's gift of grace, rest in Christ is something we have to decide if we're going to receive or not. This is not merely a day of the week deal; it is a state of being. It is a spiritual reality available to every believer through faith in Jesus Christ. We are not called to strive to earn God's favor, to perfect ourselves, or to secure our own salvation. We are called to cease from our labor and enter into the rest that God has already provided in Christ Jesus! This rest is not a one-time event but a continual abiding. When we return to trust and alignment with Christ, the result is rest...the result is peace. Not just metaphorical peace. Actual peace. So come, let's take Jesus' yoke, for it is the only one light and restful enough for us to bear! I leave you with a breath prayer from this text that has been most meaningful to me in anxious times. *Inhale: Humble and gentle One, Exhale: you are rest for my soul.* As we breathe, may these words of invitation, comfort, promise and peace amid our anxiety invite us to experience rest in Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.