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Sermon 13 SEPT 2020

JSW 6: Jesus Says WHAT About Stress?

- Matthew 11:1 Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.
- 11:28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'
- AUDIO: (announcer) It's time to gather your friends and family, get out your Bibles and your sermon notes, and open your hearts and minds, because this is another Sunday sermon in a series called "and then, Jesus says what?"
- Good morning church family and church friends—whoever and wherever you are right now-- whatever time it is where you are, we are so thankful that you have joined us today —and we hope that if you're a regular listener that you'll commit to having "church at home" with us in this virtual space --and make an effort to gather with friends or with family as you are able and as the recommendations and restrictions allow, and we know that the Spirit will be present with us all. If you're new here, we welcome you, and hope that you'll take some time to go back and listen to some previous services, and we're sure you'll receive a blessing.

- I believe that once again, as always, God has something profound and life-changing to say to each of us today if we have ears to hear.
- Today is the SIXTH Sunday in our sermon series called "and then Jesus says WHAT"--we're getting close to the end of this 8 week series, and we'll close it out on the 27th of September, and that evening we'll have a Second Helping Bible Study that will review the whole series.
- If you've been following the series, you know that for the last several weeks we have been considering some of the things that Jesus says in the gospels-- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John-- things that Jesus says that can be a bit confusing, or easy to misinterpret--statements that might make us say "and then Jesus says WHAT?"
- And we haven't just been considering the answer to that question--we've been demonstrating ways that we might respond when we come upon a passage in the Bible--particularly one that comes directly from the mouth of Jesus--that might not be easy to understand, things that are challenging—even difficult.
- We started by looking in Chapter 10 of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says to his disciples "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," and we saw how Jesus was referring to the reaction and response to the prophetic proclamation that he was making, and that he was calling the disciples to make as well.
- We looked the next week at Luke's gospel, where in chapter 14 we heard Jesus tell the crowd that was with him that in order to be his followers, they needed to hate their parents, and their families, and even their lives--and to take up the CROSS and follow him--we also find Jesus saying this same thing back in

Matthew chapter 10, right after he says "I have not come to bring peace but a sword"

- In week 3 we looked at what Jesus told Judas about the poor--that "the poor you'll always have with you"--and we saw how differently Judas and Mary responded to Jesus' presence with them
- And then in week 4 we considered the parable of the sower, and thought about what Jesus said about parables, when he told the disciples and those with him that for those outside, everything comes in parables IN ORDER THAT seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand or repent and find forgiveness. And after we learned about what parables are and how the parable of the sower was the "key" to the parables, we saw that Jesus was quoting the Prophet Isaiah, and we saw that once again we were hearing about the way that the prophetic proclamation of the gospel can be met with acceptance and faith, or with rejection--it can fall onto good soil where it bears fruit or it can fall onto inhospitable soil, where it dies. And we heard that we are called, also, to be sowers of the word, like Jesus.
- And then finally last week Pastor Tasha brought the message about Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, and we saw how that encounter was a concrete example of the Parable of the Sower, as she, a Gentile outsider, responds to Jesus' word and their dialogue brings about the healing of her daughter--she has ears to hear; she is good soil and she bears fruit, 30 and 60 and 100-fold, even into the world of the Gentiles

- So in the first four sermons in our series we asked "Jesus says what" about peace, parents, the poor, and parables--we had a theme going, words that started with the letter P
- And then Pastor Tasha called her sermon "Jesus says what about the Syrophenician woman." That doesn't start with the letter P, it starts with the letter S. And if you know anything about my personality you know that I like consistency almost as much as I like alliteration, and I like symmetry, too, and so my "only-slightly-obsessive-compulsive" brain says to me, "Well, you've got 8 sermons in this series, and you had 4 Ps--peace, parents, poor and parables--so now you need to have 4 Ss--so that it makes sense--so that it's balanced--you can't have 4 Ps in a row and then just start haphazardly choosing random letters--that's madness
- And so I spent some considerable time over the last couple of weeks trying to figure out what word starting with the letter S would describe the general subject, the topic that Jesus is addressing this week--I knew what the sermon was going to be about, in general terms, but I couldn't put my finger on that one word that I would put in the title
- I knew that the text for the sermon was Matthew 11:28-30--Jesus says '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.'

- Now in isolation, those words just sound pleasant and inviting--you read that and you think, well, the Christian life is easy, and restful--following Jesus doesn't take much effort at all, it sounds like a day at the beach with nothing to do but relax and be restored and refreshed--what a beautiful image, what a lovely metaphor
- But if you back up just one chapter in Matthew's gospel, as we have considered over the last several weeks, the imagery, the metaphor, is quite different. Take a look at Matthew 10: 34-38: <sup>34</sup> 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
- <sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; <sup>36</sup> and one's foes will be members of one's own household.
- <sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.
- The imagery, the metaphor here is quite different--it's about conflict and sacrifice--and it ends with the call for followers of Jesus to take up the cross--think about that image for a moment--a cross is heavy, and it's carried on the way to a horrific death--crucifixion is torture and torment, it is agony and anguish, pain and passion--it is about as opposite to "pleasant" as anything you could think of

- And yet, the Christian life--being a follower of Jesus--what disciples of Jesus are called to--is described by Jesus himself as "taking up the cross" in chapter 10, but as restful and gentle and easy--in short, as pleasant--in Chapter 11
- How can both of these images, these metaphors, these parables if you will, be appropriate to describe what following Jesus is like? They are not the same--in fact they SEEM quite contradictory to each other. And so this is a paradox--since following Jesus can be described on the one hand as involving conflict and the taking up of a cross, and on the other hand as restful and easy
- And so my challenge was to figure out what one word, beginning with the letter S, described what it was that was different about these two images. One was like taking a day off--pleasant and relaxing--and the other was like the most grueling toil you could imagine.
- And so I thought of struggling--Jesus says what about struggling--or striving--Jesus says what about striving--or sacrifice--Jesus says what about sacrifice--but none of those words really captured what was different about those two images--and so I finally settled on "suffering"--it worked well enough, because taking up a cross was about embracing suffering, and finding a place of rest was about having one's suffering relieved
- But I wasn't completely convinced. "Suffering" worked ok, but I was sure that there was a better word out there and I just wasn't hearing it
- And just a few days ago, I was having my morning coffee with Tasha--we were sitting looking out across the water over to Cumbrae--watching the ferry make its trek back and forth

- And I said, "I've been working on this sermon, and I'm calling it 'Jesus says what about suffering' but I'm really not satisfied with that word--I don't think it captures the difference between these two images" and I told her about the two ways of describing the Christian life, and all the other words I had thought of.
- And I said " It's really stressing me out"-- and the light bulb above my head came on--EUREKA!! That's it!
- I had been trying SO HARD to come up with the perfect word on my own and I just couldn't do it--but when I was in conversation, when I was relaxed and enjoying some fellowship, when I wasn't even making an effort, the word came to me and I heard it.
- And so this week's sermon is called "Jesus says what about STRESS."
- People have been under some stress these last few months, haven't they?  
(Pause)
- It was good to see some of you in person during the past week or two. With the relaxation of some of the restrictions about meeting we have enjoyed some good fellowship with some of you all. We even had time to get the praise team together and do some recording--that was certainly a blessing. And you heard the result of that gathering just a few minutes ago
- Pastor Tasha and I went into Glasgow last week for a Dr's appointment, and even with the mask requirements and the social distancing that was being practiced, we were almost able to forget about COVID-19 for a little while. But that didn't last long, and just this week it was announced that we would not be moving forward into Phase 4 of the lockdown, and in fact because of the rises in cases

that were being seen in different parts of the country, we were going to need to back up and impose tighter restrictions--so that we could only meet in groups of 6 at most, and from 2 households.

- We--all of us-- have had to deal with COVID restrictions now for 25 weeks, more than 175 days--half a year. March 15th was the last time our church family met together in our church building. The lockdown began that next week, and life changed pretty dramatically for all of us as a result of the pandemic--and now it seems like every few days there are new regulations, new recommendations, new restrictions placed on what we can do, and where we can go, and who we can meet--things may loosen up and begin to feel a little bit normal, and then things tighten up again
- and I know that many of us are getting pretty weary--and it's easy to become disheartened with all the ways our lives have changed, and the things that we've been unable to do, and the rules we've had to follow. We all know that there is good reason for the recommendations, and we all want to protect each other from what is an often-deadly disease--but that doesn't make it any easier to cope sometimes. And we get tired, and sad, and we feel the weight of the burden of having to be mindful, all the time, of the regulations we need to be following, of the requirements placed on us, and sometimes it just seems like there's no end in sight.
- And if regulations and rules and requirements for good reason can get tiresome and frustrating, imagine how tiresome and frustrating--and STRESSFUL-- it would be to have rules and regulations and requirements for NO good reason



- That is the situation into which Jesus speaks the words in Matthew 11:28-30, and I want to take a little time to consider the context of his statement, and while we're doing so, I think we'll also begin to see how being a follower of Jesus can be described BOTH as "taking up a cross" which SOUNDS LIKE a stressful proposition-- AND as stress-free rest for the weary--relief for the "stressed out."
- The way that I want to unpack Jesus' statement here in Chapter 11 is by looking at 3 words. 3 words that Jesus uses in these 3 sentences.
- The first word is "burden."
- Now before we look at that word, let's think about who Jesus is talking to here. We are told in verse 1 that he has gone into the cities to teach and proclaim his message.
- Now cities are a bit different from the countryside--in a city there are very obvious socioeconomic structures and ways that power is wielded. There are those who are powerful because they have some sort of authority, whether it's political or economic or religious, and those who do not, and there are those who enforce the rules and regulations and requirements of that city. It is organised in a certain way. And for most people in the city, life is hard. And to those in these cities,
- Jesus says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
- Now keep in mind that not everybody in the city is weary and carrying heavy burdens. Some are quite comfortable. Some have all they need. Some have more than they will ever need. And part of the reason that some are quite comfortable,

part of the reason that some are members of the elite, is because they keep those who are powerless under their thumbs. They burden them with taxes so that they are continually indebted, and the enforcers who collect those taxes take more than they should--and the police force keeps the populace under control through fear of imprisonment and torture and execution--Jesus refers to the powerful in Chapter 20 of Matthew's gospel when he says "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (v25)

- and even the religious leaders are in cahoots with the political leaders, taking their cut and keeping the general public in a constant state of need and stress for fear of being called an outsider, a troublemaker, or unclean.
- So when Jesus says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. He's not talking to everybody in these cities, because not everybody is weary. Not everybody is carrying a heavy burden.
- Jesus makes this clear in verse 25 when he prays and thanks God that he has hidden his message from those who are called "wise" and "intelligent"--that is, the elite--and has revealed it to "infants"--to the powerless, to the uneducated, to those without authority.
- So Jesus says: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
- And then in verse 30: For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'
- The Greek word there for carrying heavy burdens is phortizo--and it means to be overloaded, weighed down--and it's related to the word there in verse 30 which

is *phortion*--it refers to a burden, a heavy load, like the load of cargo that a ship or a wagon might carry

- And the people to whom Jesus speaks are burdened--they are burdened by taxation and corruption and political oppression--they are ruled by a foreign occupying force--and you would THINK that they might find some relief from the stress of the social and political and economic demands on their daily lives and their livelihoods and their families from their religious tradition, from their faith--from their spiritual leaders whose job it is to care for them, but this is not the case, and just a few chapters later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus spells out the situation.
- In chapter 23, verse 4, Jesus says of the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders in these cities: "they tie up heavy burdens (the word there is *phortion*, just like it is here in chapter 11), they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (23:4).
- And just let me tell you--if you want to read some heavy-duty critique of the damage that can be done by the religious establishment, just read through the rest of chapter 23--it is SCATHING.
- Jesus says things like this in verse 13
- 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you

cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

- Jesus don't play.
- Jesus is here calling to those who are weary because of the heavy burden they carry, and he makes it clear that much of that burden has been placed on them by their religious leaders--by those who are supposed to minister to them.
- Now don't think, though, that the heavy burden the scribes and the pharisees place on the people is the Law, the Torah--because it isn't--it is the way they INTERPRET the law--the way they REQUIRE that the law be PRACTICED--in ways that are exclusive and oppressive and ignore the needs of others-- with an interpretation that is zealous about tithing spices, but neglects the "weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith--loving your neighbour as yourself--
- And let's not think that we in our enlightened age are immune to the same sort of thinking
- It is an ever-present temptation to replace the greatest commandment with those lesser commandments--to make our Christian life all about those things we don't do, for instance
- I am reminded of the great WE Sangster--who, in his sermon "Called to be Saints," refers to those lop-sided Puritans who "think our glorious gospel is a series of negations" and call a person a saint because of what he DOESN'T do--he doesn't drink, he doesn't smoke, he doesn't bet, he doesn't joke--he's a saint

- Let's remember this morning that Jesus sums up the Law and the Prophets in the greatest commandment--Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. . . and your neighbour as yourself--two POSITIVES--two things TO DO--not a negative, not a THOU SHALT NOT in there at all--why, because if you DO these TWO, you don't have to worry about what you're NOT doing--you'll avoid those things by necessity by following these two positives--so easy--so simple--and this is why Jesus says "my BURDEN is light"
- I better be careful here, I might start preaching
- Very quickly, let's move on to the other two words
- The second word I want us to think about this morning is YOKE.
- Now when we think about a yoke we might think about animals that are indeed carrying a heavy load, even slaves that are bound in their tasks, and prisoners of war that are restricted by them.
- But I want us to think about this word that is translated "yoke" here--the Greek is zygos or zygon, and it literally refers to a yoke placed on a pair of animals who pull together; or that which unites two elements to work as one unit (a pair of scales or a pair of oxen)
- In English, the word zygote--the union of two reproductive cells into a fertilised egg--comes from the word zygos
- And if you reach up and touch your cheekbone--just below your eye toward your ear, you're touching your zygomatic bone--that's the bone that connects, that unifies, the bones of your cranium--the top of your head--with the bones of your face

- Zygomat--joining two things together
- And these two words remind us that the word zygos is all about the uniting of two elements to work together as one
- So when Jesus says take my yoke--my zygos-- he is reminding his listeners that they are not working alone--that they are joined together with another
- And so while the Pharisees pile rules and regulations and restrictions upon people that keep them OUT of the Kingdom of heaven--Jesus' yoke--Jesus' zygos - -reminds us that we are not working as a single unit--we are bound to him and we are bound to each other--and so Jesus says "take my yoke and learn from me--follow my example--take up the cross as I take up the cross--and be reminded that your salvation is not a result of your efforts, it is not a work that you do, but it is a gift that you accept through faith
- How are "taking up the cross" and "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" compatible? How are they not contradictory images of the Christian life? Here it is right here.
- Taking the yoke of Jesus is accepting the work that Jesus does on the cross--it is sacrificing our own efforts, any claim to righteousness that we might earn--it is saying I am dead to self but alive in Christ--it is shunning the burden of the Pharisees with their constant critique and their unobtainable righteousness--
- Unlike the burden of the Pharisee or the oppression of the tyrant, Jesus' yoke offers life and forgiveness and to the one who is weary and heavy-laden, it offers rest.
- And that is the 3rd word I want to consider for a moment. Rest.

- Jesus says 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"--he says that if we take his yoke and learn from him we will find rest for our souls.
- The Greek word that is translated as "rest" there is *anapausis*--and it means rest and restoration and tranquility, particularly that rest that comes when work is done--like on the Sabbath--a day of rest--after the way that God rested after he had finished the work of creation
- And I believe Jesus is contrasting the way that the scribes and Pharisees kept folks working, kept folks worried about their salvation, about whether they were going to trip up and break some rule and find themselves unclean and outside of the approval of the authorities--the way that the Pharisees twisted the Law so that it was impossible to live up to, so that folks were always striving to measure up but found themselves on a treadmill, working toward a righteousness that was never complete, that they could never reach--they had no rest
- But Jesus says to people "your sins are forgiven" and "go and sin no more"--he offers forgiveness without an exchange of money or merchandise, even to the unclean, even to outsiders, even to Gentiles like the Syrophenician woman--and it's his forgiveness of sins that the scribes and Pharisees just can't tolerate
- Jesus asks for no financial offering or animal sacrifice, but he himself becomes the sacrifice, and he calls us to follow him, to present our bodies as living sacrifices, blameless and acceptable, to take up a cross, to bear his yoke--a yoke that is easy, and a burden that is light, because in the cross of Jesus the work of salvation is completed, and when the work is done, we can rest.

- To take up a cross and follow Jesus is to find rest.
- Maybe you're feeling weary this morning. Stressed out. Weighed down by a heavy burden. Look to the cross. When we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, we are reminded that our salvation is not a result of our own efforts. We are reminded that following Jesus is being a living sacrifice empowered by the Spirit--it is being dead to self but alive in Christ
- His yoke is easy and his burden is light because the cross of Jesus accomplishes what we cannot accomplish on our own--we can't do it alone--but through him the work is done and we find rest.
- And when we find that rest we can say with the hymnwriter, Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul
- Why can we say this? Because our sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought, My sin, not in part but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I BEAR IT no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul
- May God bless you all this morning, have a restful, restorative, stress-free Sunday, and join us again next time.