

Burdened by the Ought's and Should's
Matt 25:11-30

Brothers and sisters, welcome to 2024! A new year has begun, the old year has passed. And as we transition from the old into the new, between all the well wishing and the celebrations and get-togethers, we have... inevitably spent some time in personal reflection about our previous year- and in light of that, considering what we would like to see happen in the new year. Such is the nature of how we mark a significant passage of time, whether it be a birthday, an anniversary, or a new year...

And personal reflection as such can be a good practice, as Psalm 90:12 says *"teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom."* It would be hard indeed to number our days without spending some time reflecting on the past and anticipating the future.

And yet for many of us such times of personal reflection do not end up producing wisdom or insight or perspective but rather a list – a list of all our ought's and should's.

As we look back at what we accomplished in the past year, it seems to only highlight what we did not accomplish – all of the should's. I should have worked out more, I should have saved more, I should have paid off more debt, I should have spent more time with family, I should have finished that home reno project, I should have cleaned out the garage, organized my basement, I should have... I should have... I should have...

And then... as we shift to looking forward, the should's become ought's. In this new year I ought to work out more, I ought to save more, I ought to pay off more debt, I ought to spend more time with my family, I ought to finish the projects that I've started, I ought to get organized and do something about the clutter, I ought to... I ought to... I ought to...

Now maybe some of these ought's and should's are true – for me personally, I definitely should've not eaten so much over the holidays - and in the new year I definitely ought to eat less and work out more and lose some weight. But the fact that it's true only adds to the sense of urgency which we feel about what we should have done and what we ought to do.

And usually, the things we should have done and ought to do are difficult and challenging for us, they require a change in habits or lifestyle and much discipline. They're not things where we can just take an afternoon and get them done... or maybe some of them are, like sorting out the basement clutter – but... our schedule is so full of other more urgent and pressing matters we don't have an afternoon to set aside until sometime in 2025!

But – every time we pass by that basement door, we're reminded that we should have cleaned that up by now, I need to get around to that, its on the to do list – it can't stay like that.... I ought to do something about it.

And brothers and sisters, the reality about ought's and should's... is that they don't go away if you ignore them, they just accumulate. They pile up and they start to become overwhelming and we become burdened by them, wearied by them.

Our ought's and should's become a heavy load that we have to carry and cope with, and not just when we do some self reflection on Jan 1st but all year round!

And we don't function very well when we are burdened and wearied by the ought's and should's do we? It saps our energy and enthusiasm; it steals the joy from whatever we have accomplished... we become harried and agitated and stressed out.

We might look like we're coping well, like we have it all together but inside we're reaching the breaking point. If we have one more ought or should added to our list we're gonna lose it. We can't take in any more, we're going to blow up or have a melt-down.

Now this doesn't progress as rapidly as I've described it, its a long way to go - from conducting some self-reflection on New Year's to having a full-on meltdown... and perhaps your list of ought's and should's are different from what I've described... but you understand what I'm talking about here.

So, if you are struggling in any capacity with the ought's and should's of your life, if you are feeling burdened and overwhelmed by what you should have done and what you ought to do – and especially if you are feeling like you're one ought away from snapping... then Jesus's words from Matthew 11:28 are for you this morning *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest!"*

Even if you're not feeling burdened – pay attention anyways – because maybe someone close to you is, or maybe your turn is coming up in a few years from now...

So, listen and make notes on what the Lord has to say about coming to Him in order to find rest when you are weary and burdened by the ought's and the should's.

Now – you may have noticed that I didn't include any Christian ought's and should's in my list of examples such as; I should have read my bible more, I ought to pray more, ought to attend church more... and that wasn't because we don't

experience these disciplines as ought's and should's but because of how they typically become such burdens for us. You see when our list of ought's and should's starts to pile up and becomes overwhelming, and we begin to feel weary and burdened – as Christians we instinctively realize that we ought to turn to God for help, so we pray *"God help me!"* and we open up the bible and try to read something from it – maybe Psalm 23 or 1 Cor 13 - hoping it will help us stop feeling burdened.

But when that doesn't happen right away – and we realize its going to take more prayer and bible reading... then suddenly prayer and bible reading become yet one more thing that we should have done and ought to do – and it only adds to our list of burdens...

Or when saying a prayer and reading the bible doesn't relieve us from the stress and anxiety of feeling burdened, in fact it only makes us more acutely aware of how un-Christian we are feeling inside – angry, resentful, impatient... and since we know this is sinful and wrong we now have to add dealing with

our sinful feelings to our list of should's and ought's... I shouldn't feel this way, I ought to feel more Christian!

But adding this burden to our list only increases our sinful feelings, and causes us to feel resentful of being a Christian, we may even feel like we don't want to be a Christian anymore because its such a burden.

And maybe we share this struggle with a brother or sister in Christ, and with all sincerity and good intentions they attempt to encourage us and they say "*you should just....*" and now you have another should and ought added to your list.

So even if you are not burdened by the oughts and should's this morning brothers and sisters, this is why its important for you to listen and understand. So that when someone who is burdened and weary comes to you for encouragement you don't inadvertently, with the best of intentions, add to their burdens.

You see, that is what the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law were doing back in Jesus' day. The misconception that Judaism was a religion of rules and legalism was caused by the good intentions of the religious leaders who were attempting to ensure the people of Israel obeyed the Law of Moses so that Kingdom of Israel would be restored.

After God's people returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild the temple and live in the promised land, they did not want to get sent into exile again. They hoped their faithfulness and obedience would lead to their political independence and freedom from foreign empires.

So, to ensure people did not carelessly or thoughtlessly disregard the Laws of Moses, especially some of the more obscure ones, the religious leaders added safety laws. For example, God's command in Ex 23:19 says "*do not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.*" An added safety law to never mix meat and dairy together in cooking would help ensure no one would be covenantally unfaithful by accidentally cooking a young goat in its mother's milk

So, an list of additional safety rules began to accumulate - a list of ought's and should's which if observed diligently would ensure compliance with the Law of Moses, and demonstrate Israel's covenant faithfulness which would lead to the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

Now I'm not reading this into things, the Prophet Isaiah foresaw this legalism happening, listen to what he foretold in Isa 28:11-13 *"with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, (Israel goes into exile) to whom he said, "This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and, "This is the place of repose" – (Israel receives the Law of Moses) but they would not listen. (all the years of covenant unfaithfulness and rejecting the prophet's warning)*

So then, the word of the Lord to them will become: Do this, do that, a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there – (adding safety rules to prevent breaking the law again) so that as they go they will fall backward; they will be injured and snared and captured." (the Law becomes a burden and something that causes them to stumble, not a means of grace)

You see brothers and sisters; God's intention for the Law of Moses was to give His people rest from the weariness that is caused by the uncertainty of not knowing if your life was pleasing God or not, the Law was a gift of grace.

If that is difficult to understand, just imagine finding yourself in the middle of some kind of sporting game and you happen to be holding a ball, without any knowledge of the rules of the game – you don't know what to do, how to compete, or if your actions will be penalized or give your opponents an advantage... a list of the rules would be greatly appreciated!

In the same way the Law of Moses was a gift of grace to God's people so that in both the Letter and Spirit of the Law, they would have clear instruction about how to live correctly, to do what was right and avoid what was wrong, and show gratitude as covenant partners with Yahweh.

This is the context Jesus is addressing in Matt 11:28. He echoes Isaiah's words about rest and proclaims He will relieve the burden which the Law had become. He will give rest from

how the religious leaders had made the Law the means by which you earned God's favor with all the additional ought's and should's.

Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

So we can see how Jesus was speaking to what people were burdened with in His day, and the appeal it would have had - but how does it apply to our day-to-day ought's and should's that we are burdened with?

Well brothers and sisters, what Jesus says here is critical to helping us develop our understanding and experience of grace, in such a way that it becomes real for us.

You see our sense of being burdened by all the ought's and the should's in our day to day lives can be the means by which the Holy Spirit intimately reveals to us the limits of our abilities and capacities and actually shows us that we need help in overcoming our sin and disobedience.

Because if ordinary everyday matters can bog us down and overwhelm us and burden us... what makes us think that we would ever be capable of faithful obedience – to the letter and the spirit of the Law of Moses?

In fact, considering how we typically react to a little bit of prayer and bible reading when we are overwhelmed, we can see that it doesn't take much to bring out our sinful reactions and resentment towards God, to the point of wishing we were not followers of Jesus...

And this is the point where the Holy Spirit reveals to us, and thus it becomes very real to us, that we... are utterly incapable... of completing, accomplishing, achieving, earning... all that would be required of us in order for God to be impressed with us, and to say "*they deserve the forgiveness, the salvation, the blessings that I've bestowed upon them, they've demonstrated they're worth it.*"

Getting to this point brothers and sisters, is getting to the core of grace. Because grace recognizes when it receives

something GOOD that it doesn't DESERVE, that it hasn't EARNED.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus doesn't say, come to me all you who are weary and burdened, you've tried hard enough, you've done your best, you deserve a break – you can have some rest. He says *"I will GIVE you rest"*

If you are feeling burdened by all the ought's and should's of your life today – and there's only one thing you get from this message, I pray that the Holy Spirit reveals this truth of Grace you, and you experience Jesus giving you something GOOD and the only reason it's being given to you is because Jesus is GOOD, Jesus is GOD.

And as the Holy Spirit "graciously" gives this understanding to us brothers and sisters, knowing grace in this way cuts right to the root of our sinful nature which is responsible for turning all of our good God-given responsibilities and gifts in life into burdens of ought's and should's.

To put it another way, when the Holy Spirit sets grace right in our spirit, it eliminates the root cause of becoming burdened by the ought's and the should's. This is how Jesus gives us respite from this incessant, unrelenting need which drives us to attempt to earn, to prove, to try and demonstrate our value and our virtue. Grace applied into us by the Spirit simply unravels it.

Thus, Paul says to us in Gal 5:18 *"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law."* It is no longer a burden to us. As Paul also writes at the beginning of Gal 5 in vs1. *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."*

So we must learn how to live by grace, because our sinful nature is always looking for ways to enslave us again under the yoke of the ought's and should's.

So, to equip us for that task and to wrap up this message let me leave you with some specific and practical ways we live by grace.

First - take Jesus' yoke upon yourself – yoke yourself to Jesus. We often miss this because we only focus on what Jesus says in vs. 11. We're so burdened and weary, we stop at the rest and we don't read the rest... But Jesus continues speaking to us in vs. 12 saying *"Take my yoke upon you..."* and in vs. 30 *"my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

Let me give you a visual illustration of how this works brothers and sisters. Some of us carry around the burden of our ought's and should's like this... its pretty obvious that this is not a good way to carry something and we'll get overwhelmed pretty quickly - which isn't really a bad thing if you want grace...

Those who are more capable figure this out and we heft it up to our shoulder. We can carry our burdens farther and longer this way before we get overwhelmed and reach our limits.

The exceptionally capable among us actually figure out how to yoke themselves to their burdens, like with a milk maid's yoke – they've figured out how to leverage their skills and abilities

with tricks and tips or performance enhancing drugs and this allows us to really load up the burdens and carry them for quite a long time before we are overwhelmed...

But eventually we all falter carrying our own burdens and we need to take Jesus' yoke – because Jesus' yoke is an oxen yoke and it is hooked up to a cart. A cart can carry far more burdens, so throw your burdens in Jesus' cart and He is pulling it along with you, in fact He's the stronger oxen who's pulling the majority of the weight, and showing you how to pull it like He does. That's what we learn from Him and why His burden is easy and His yoke is light.

Now this is a helpful illustration but what does it mean that He pulling our burdens for us and practically speaking how do we get yoked to Jesus?

Brothers and sisters, in addition to the good gift of rest that Jesus gives us, we also receive Him.. as our everyday substitute. Jesus didn't just die in our place – He also lived on our behalf.

In His life Jesus' accomplished every ought and should that is required by God to earn God's favor and to deserve the glory and honor and blessing bestowed upon Jesus Christ.

And all of that righteousness is substituted into your life, not just filling in the gaps and shortcomings where we fall short, but shining through and eclipsing the very best of what we have to offer.

So when you are acutely aware of your failings, of all that you should have done and all you ought to do, when we struggle with our habitual sins for the millionth time, when we don't feel like we are making progress in becoming more Holy, when we're tempted to despair that the Christian life is too hard and too difficult to accomplish... and especially when we tempted with pride that we've doing quite well in the Christian life and we've figured it out...

Jesus is pulling for you, Jesus is pulling your burden, He is pulling your load, He has lived life on your behalf already, He is your everyday substitute! HE is your Grace!

And His substitutionary life is credited to you as you are yoked to Jesus through the Holy Spirit – The Holy Spirit is our connection to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit reminds us of this connection, and strengthens this connection and works through this connection when we receive the sacraments of grace; baptism and the Lord's Supper, through faith.

Baptism is the sign, the symbol, that God's grace has yoked you to Christ by the Holy Spirit, the Lord's Supper is a regular reminder that we must constantly feed on the grace of Christ in order to live daily by that grace and strengthen that yoke to Christ.

And practically speaking, since the Spirit is how we are yoked to Christ, and it's an oxen yoke that is connected to a cart, its absolutely correct to say that the cart is the church – the body of Christ, since scripture makes it quite clear that the Church is born of the Spirit and connected to each other as the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

So, how do you take your burdens, all your ought's and should's and put them in the cart?

James 5:13-16 gives us clear instructions *"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."*

And by also doing what Paul says in Gal 6:1 *"brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."*

Brothers and sisters, we are yoked to Christ by the Holy Spirit and by that same Spirit we are connected to that yoke as a cart that carries our burdens as we stay connected to each other in prayer, and praise, and through our presence with one another.

If you are burdened and weary from the ought's and should's in your life, Jesus' invitation to come to Him, also means come to His Body – the Church – and lay your burdens down by talking to your pastor, with your elders, receiving prayer from the prayer ministry team, opening up and sharing with fellow brothers and sisters at men's group and women's group – so that burdens are lessened and joys are increased.

Don't pull back, don't pull away, don't bear your burdens on your own, by yourself... keep attending, keep connecting, keep on receiving the grace the Lord Jesus offers to you.

For the gift of grace - receiving something GOOD that you did not EARN or DESERVE – that is the key to undoing your

burdens and finding rest from the weariness brothers and sisters....

Look to Jesus, Come to Jesus all you who are weary and burdened and He will give you a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light and you will indeed find rest. Amen.