

"CAUGHT IN THE SPIN CYCLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
August 4, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

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I don't know about you, but sometimes I think I must own one of those chairs! Things happen so fast around me that I'm sort of left....reeling. And I'm not at all certain that I'm nausea-resistant. Can any of you relate to that feeling? If so, then you will appreciate these words that come to us from the lips of the Master.

"Come to Me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."
(Matthew 11: 28, 29 and 30)

Beautiful words and how full of encouragement for our busy and perhaps troubled lives. They're among my favorite words of Jesus and few services are held in our church where those words are not lifted up.

Back in the early days of automobiles, it was quite common for eating and drinking places to be built on the tops of long hills. These locations were for the convenience of people who need to stop and let their overheated radiators cool down. And that's one of the functions of worship for many of us...a time for rest and renewal and refreshment...a time when we let our overheated radiators cool down. Thus we come gladly to the Word of Jesus for this summer Sunday, "I will give you rest."

BALANCE

First of all, it seems to me that Jesus is telling us to have some balance in our lives. "I will give you rest" He says. He did not mean for us to be frantically on the go all the time...even when we are serving Him as many of you do, 365 days of the year.

Jamie Buckingham, in his book, Look Out, World, notes that early World War I fighter planes had no slow speeds. When Eddie Rickenbacker and the Red Baron were dueling in the sky over France, their aircraft engines had two power positions: FULL ON and FULL OFF.

The fact is that those early rotary engines did not have an adjustable throttle. That was a later invention. All they had was an OFF / ON switch. At "contact" the engine would bellow into an immediate full-throated roar. And woe to the pilot who was not pointed in the right direction when some luckless private hand-propped the engine. From that moment on, the engine was running at full RPMs. Pilots of today's planes know the danger of running at full throttle. While it's necessary to get off the ground and clear any obstructions, full power will soon burn out an engine.

And that's not only true of airplane engines. It's also true of human beings. Human beings were never intended to operate at full throttle all of the time either. Christ did not mean for us to be frantically on the go every minute of every day. In fact, Christ Himself wasn't on the go all the time. Notice how often the Scriptures say that He withdrew for a time apart. And notice, too, how much time He spent with friends. We catch a glimpse in the Gospel of a Man who took time to enjoy the beauties of nature, and time to enjoy the laughter of little children, and time not only to minister to others, but to allow others to minister to Him in various ways. His life was a life "in balance."

Ken Blanchard, auther of The One Minute Manager, tells about a tour he took of Sea World a few years back and how, on this tour, he learned how the employees of Sea World trained and worked with Shamu, their killer whale. Blanchard remembers them saying that they designed Shamu's days into five different periods of maximum effectiveness: work time, play time, free time, rest time and learning time. He found himself wondering how many people are wise enough to systematically try to cover those same priorities every day in their life. Let me repeat them:

Work time.
Play time.
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And we would add a sixth: worship time. Jesus is saying that we need "balance" in our lives in order to operate a maximum efficiency.

PRIORITIES But you may ask: how do we find that balance? We find it as Jesus found it. We find it by establishing priorities for our lives. And this brings us to the second thing we need to see and remember. We need to establish priorities.

I came across a very helpful article recently entitled, "You Can Say No: (Without Feeling Guilty)". Kevin Miller, the author, notes that Jesus had a specific, narrowly defined ministry. He didn't try to do everything. For example, notice that Jesus said He was called to "the lost sheep of the House of Israel"... the Jewish people. Yes, He is the Savior of the world, but His time and His energy, while on earth, were poured primarily into the Jewish people. While Jesus was on earth, the Roman Empire boasted 57,000 miles of roads...more than in our Interstate Highway System. Jesus could have traveled the Mediterranean world, as did Paul later on, and seen Greece and Italy and Turkey and Spain.

People in all those places could have been helped by Him. They desperately needed Him, too...but He did not go. He stayed within one tiny chunk of the world, mostly within the regions of Judea and Galilee. And even though Jesus had a world to save, He established priorities for His life and for His work, and so, too, should we! This is the great secret of time management. What are those things that are really important in your life? Those are the things on which you and I should be devoting the major portion of our time and energy.

Perhaps we need to slow down and ask ourselves this basic question: what would I be doing if I only had six months to life? Ask yourself that question, and then compare the answer with your current life. If we had time and paper and pencils at hand, I would have you fill out a questionnaire on this subject. I think the answers would be most revealing. Chances are that with half a year remaining in our lives, our most common preference would be to spend more time with family and to look up some old friends....to travel a bit...to read... and to do some writing. Maybe you're doing some of those very things now and if so, good. But chances are that many might say that their present lives are far from it...totally opposite. "Zilch". "Ha!" Some might say they're spending too much of their lives just trying to succeed...."too busy living for tomorrow".

Then Jesus happens by and says to us:

"Evaluate your life. Does your present schedule reflect your real priorities? Have you included some time for rest, for friends, for family, for worship...for some spiritual growth?"

Some of you may be familiar with a book by a Mark McCormack, entitled, What They Don't Teach You At Harvard Business School. Now McCormack's management techniques are widely accepted and highly praise. He tells us that he, himself, personally spends a full hour each day deciding how he will invest the other 23 hours. Now, think about that for a moment....one hour spent each day just deciding how to use the rest of the day! This, to me, is the role of prayer and meditation in our lives. We need to set aside a time every day and evaluate our lives in the light of our priorities. Says Jesus, the Master of life,

"Come to Me....all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke and learn of Me..."

Establish balance for your life by establishing priorities for your life.

YOKE YOURSELF TO CHRIST

But there is a third principle to work in here and that is to yoke yourself to Christ. This is the secret of establishing the right priorities and finding that "balance" that we need. Yoke yourself to Him and make sure it is a strong connection...not one that is weak and casual...and subject to ups and downs and moods and what have you.

You can see the picture in your mind, can't you...even though it comes from a different day and time? You've all seen pictures of cattle yoked together or perhaps water buffalo. But imagine now what your life would be if you were "yoked" to Christ. Some of you, I know, are probably thinking...yoked to Christ. That would be so dull! I wonder....

Jesus was a man who loved life! A man who loved people! A man who knew how to live life to its fullest. And I doubt very much that a life yoked up to Him would be at all dull. Really!

And even more important, I suspect that many of our anxieties and our fears and frustrations would quickly melt away if our lives were really connected up to Him. There may be someone here this morning whose life is in continual turmoil... in a spin, so to speak. You somehow can't seem to get it "all together"...you're behind in your bills, behind in your work, neglecting family, perhaps, or church or responsibilities and even friends. It's tied in with difficulty with personal discipline. A question to turn over in your minds: would your life be simpler if you were really "yoked" to Christ?

What our text here today is calling for is a life that is focussed upon the person of Christ that HIS priorities become our priorities. E. Stanley Jones, that great evangelical spirit of the thirties, forties and fifties, once said:

"Get the center right....and the circumference will take care of itself."

I remember that from my boyhood days and from reading his devotional books growing up as a teenager. "Get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself!

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And, of course it is. The reason His yoke is easy and His burden is light is that He bears the load of life with us. We are no longer pulling the cart all by ourselves. He is there....supporting us and guiding us along the way.

CLOSING

Perhaps you've been living in a bit of a spin cycle...many of us do. We need to find that "BALANCE" in our lives and that's what being YOKED to Christ is all about. Be willing to center more of your life in Him. Let His priorities have a go in your life...let them begin to rule all you do and say. Let HIM shoulder your burdens with you and trust that He knows the way and the road and how to drive you and lead you along. As you do, you will find rest for your souls...for: "His yoke is easy. And His burden is light".

PRAYER

May we be sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these quiet moments in this city church....Thou, who hast come to us in Christ Jesus. Wrestle with us in the shadowy corners of our lives where fear and worry, doubt and despair and restlessness persist. We believe that the deepest things within us are now being stirred up in this act of worship....that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and best we are meant to be. So wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love.

Our prayers reach out to include the sick, the dying, the bereaved....those whom we mention in our prayers at this time.

Marney Kliever. Eric DeFreitas. Daisy Herrick. Salvatore Ramundo, father of Jeff.

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What our text here today is calling for is a life that is so focussed upon the person of Jesus Christ that His priorities become our priorities. Get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself is something that E. Stanley Jones said in one of his devotional books. I remember that from my days growing up as a boy and having parents who every day read a page of his devotional books.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, 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 shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

And of course, it is! The principle reason His yoke is easy and His burden is light is that He bears the load of life with us. We are no longer pulling the cart by ourselves. He's there...guiding our lives the way they should go.

Doug Forsberg in his book, On Fragile Wings, shares a story with us that's worth sharing and with which I begin to close. He tells about receiving a three am phone call on a bone-chilling January night. The male voice on the other end was panic-stricken. The caller was an infrequent visitor to his church, a man who had been thrown into jail earlier that day. His panic was because of his two children, ages two and four, who had been involved in an auto accident and he did not know of their condition. All he knew was that his roommate had been drinking, taken the two children in his car and hit a telephone pole. Forsberg told the man on the phone that he would come to the jail (three in the morning) and that together they would find out what had happened. He dressed and headed for the jail in the 10 degree January darkness. When he arrived, the man who had called him was sitting in his cell with his two children on his lap. The kids had a few scrapes and cuts, but their father was overjoyed that, for the most part, the two children were OK...unharmd. The ambulance driver had taken the children to jail and now the police were in a quandry about what to do with them.

Forsberg and his wife took temporary custody of those two little ones that cold night. They would look after them until other arrangements had been worked out. One of the police officers helped him wrap the children in some blankets (they had no coats) and carried them...shivering...to his car. As they walked to the parking lot, Forsberg couldn't help but think how frightened these two little children must be. Their father was in jail. They had been in a car accident under the care of a driver who had had too much to drink, and now they were going home with stranger. And what he will always remember from that night was a question the five year old girl asked him when he buckled her seat belt in

the backseat of his car. As he fastened the buckle, she held his arm and looked up at him with frightened brown eyes and asked, "Can you drive?"

On that cold, January night, a child was struggling with the issue of trust. She had been in an automobile accident. Would this stranger do any better? But this is a question that you and I struggle with....each day of our lives. It is essentially the question at the center of the meaning of life. Can I trust God. Can I focus my life on Christ and trust that He will help me with my burden and lead me where I need to go? Maybe God's response to us during our times of struggle would be somewhat similar to what Doug Forsberg told a frightened five year old child on a dark January night, "Yes...little one....I can drive....trust me."

Jesus says to us:

"Come to Me...all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest....."

Perhaps you've been living in a bit of a spin cycle. So many of us do. We need to find balance in our lives and that's what being yoked to Christ is all about. Center your life in Him. Let His priorities rule your life. And let Him shoulder your burdens with you. And trust that He knows how to drive and that He will lead you where you need to go. And as you do, you will find rest for your souls. For,

"His yoke is easy and His burden is light!"

Remember that and now, go in peace....

PRAYER

Make each of us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness, O God, You who have come to us in Christ. Wrestle with us in the shadowy corners of our lives where fear, and restlessness and worry and doubt persist. We believe that the deepest things within us are now being stirred up in this act of worship and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love. May we hear Your voice speaking to each of us...reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us, and lifting us...all in the name and spirit of Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

At the second service that morning, Bruce McIver just couldn't get "into" his sermon in quite the same way he had at the nine o'clock service. He found it difficult to read the passage about the ragged man in the Department Store lying under the counter that he had read with such enthusiasm at the early service. It was, he said, just coming "too close to home".

CHRISTMAS REMINDS US

Christmas reminds us of the "least and the lowly", that Jesus was not born in a palace, but among the homeless in a stable behind an inn. I wonder...where would He be born today? I think it's well for us...in our overwhelming and sometimes suffocating affluence...it is well for us to remember "Mary's Song"...that Christ has come to "lift up" those who have fallen. And her utter confidence that this Child is carrying is the answer to the needs of humanity...that should be our confidence, too.

I once heard a story about a King who had a troublesome dream. In his dream, he saw a huge pair of scales held in the hand of JUSTICE. The scales seemed to reach from earth to sky...to the very heavens. And in one side of the scales was a pile of gold, jewels, houses and land....all the symbols of earthly power, earthly wealth. On the other side of the scales was a nest of straw. The gold, the jewels, the houses and all the land had tipped the scales down until the nest of straw was high in the air...reaching up to heaven. The gold-laden side of the scales touched the earth. Then, a woman came from the sky with a baby in her arms and she tenderly and gently placed this baby in the nest of straw.

The King in his dream saw the scales slowly begin to move until the Child outweighed the side loaded with gold, jewels, houses and land. The side with the baby touched the earth and the materials tipped to the sky.

Mary saw that kind of "tipping of the scales" in the still unformed life of her unborn Son. And that is what we are celebrating here today and will be celebrating again on Christmas Eve. Like Holly Lynn and her brothers with whom we began this sermon on Mary's Song, we are returning to the site of a very special birth....for in that manger of Bethlehem, as Mary foretold in her song, lies "all the hopes and dreams" of our humanity.

PRAYER

As we "brush up" against Eternal Truth once again in these hours, O God, let us remember Mary...her song, her trust, her belief in You and in the Kingdom of love. Make each of us deeply sensitive to the things of the spirit in these days...remembering how You came to earth and in the life of Jesus, "tipped" the scales in favor of hope, peace, joy and love....that each of us may "magnify" in our lives Your coming to earth. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.