

Spiritual Olympians sermon series
Weighlifting - Matthew 11:25-30
August 18, 2024
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

One of the most interesting things about this year's Olympics were the new sports that were added in 2024. Skateboarding, surfing, sport climbing, and break-dancing were all new additions this year. I'm still waiting for my sport, though. I promise you if nerdy wordplay ever becomes an Olympic sport, I hope to show my mettle by not meddling around and winning a medal. Stuck the dismount!

For me, one of the most impressive group of Olympic athletes are the weightlifters. Let me tell you about Shane Hamman. Shane has been lifting weights since he was nine years old. A nine-year-old weightlifter – think anybody tried to steal his lunch money? Shane has grown a bit since he was nine – listen to these numbers. He weighs 344 pounds. He has a 22-inch neck, 22-inch biceps, and 22-inch calves. My waist is 36 inches – his thighs are 36 inches! His waist is 47 inches, and his chest is 62 inches around. For comparison, Stephanie is 63 inches tall. When asked in an interview what he eats, Shane said, “Whatever I see.” In two Olympic events, Shane lifted 947 pounds, which Stephanie pointed out is 8.5 Stephanies.

Have you ever lifted 947 pounds? I doubt you have literally, but metaphorically, sometimes it feels like we're carrying that kind of weight, doesn't it? I could go through the litany of things that weigh us down these days, but honestly, it would just be too depressing. In the past few years, I've heard so many people say, “Life feels heavy.” Heavy with worry and fear. Heavy with making tough decisions. Heavy with conflict and divisiveness. Life feels heavy.

That's why this invitation from Jesus in Matthew's passage sounds so appealing. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” This passage is one of the most beloved in the Bible for two reasons: We all have burdens and we all need rest. We simply can't go on and on and on without taking a rest like the one offered here. If you try to live life by only inhaling, you won't make it very far. You have to take time to exhale, too.

But the exhale Jesus is different than we might think. I saw a meme that someone posted on Facebook this past week. It said, “What I would do if I was stranded on a desert island right now,” and it showed a picture of a beach with these words written in the sand: “Don't send help.” Sometimes it feels good to just get away from it all, doesn't it? Yes, it does, be that's not actually what Jesus is offering here.

This passage comes in the midst of Jesus' ongoing verbal boxing match with the Pharisees, who repeatedly try to brand him as a law-breaker. In turn, he criticized them for focusing too much on the letter of the law and missing the bigger picture. In the very next chapter, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand and the Pharisees say, “That's nice and all, but you broke the law.” Think the guy with the formerly withered hand cared much about that? The Pharisees were so focused on slavish obedience and trivial transgressions that they don't see the fulfillment of the law right in front of them.

As religious leaders, the Pharisees passed their legalistic view of faith onto their followers. For them, you had to follow the law perfectly or else you were saddled with the penalty of your transgression. In Matt. 23 Jesus says about the Pharisees: “Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can feast on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under

these loads and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help." So, Jesus offers help, an invitation to a different way of life, a different way of faith. Not a faith that burdens and breaks, but a faith that refreshes and renews. That is the rest Jesus offers, a rest from trying and trying and trying and always feeling like it's not enough.

Fast-forward to today. We are no longer burdened by the obligation to perfectly obey the law. We are no longer weary from trying to follow every "thou shalt not" in the Hebrew scriptures. Lucky us, right? Then why are we still so tired? Why do we still feel like we are carrying heavy burdens? Because we are. Not necessarily burdens imposed upon us, although that is sometimes true, but more likely burdens placed upon us by society or burdens we put on ourselves. Life is 947 pounds of heavy.

There's the burden of self-sufficiency, the belief that we don't really need any help to get through life, that calling on others is a sign of weakness. Or the burden of self-centeredness, the unspoken but lived-out idea that our needs and wants take precedence. Or the burden of self-worth, which says that our value as a person is determined by what we do or who we try to be. And those are on top of the burdens of our health, our family, our country's future. Those are some heavy burdens. So, if we are carrying around these burdens today, what kind of rest is Jesus offering us?

I can tell you what Jesus is NOT offering. Jesus is NOT offering the rest of inactivity. Jesus is not offering us a luxurious vacation or a day at the spa. He's not offering us an escape from life; he's offering us a different way of dealing with life. Even Jesus knows there's no such thing as a burden-free life. The issue is not if we shall be burdened, but how we will bear those burdens.

That gets us to the second part of Jesus' invitation, which can seem contradictory to the first. Come and find rest...by taking up this yoke! That's like the scene in the movie "Raising Arizona" where the bumbling bank robber says, "Freeze! Everyone get down on the floor!" and the customer says, "Well, which one is it? Do you want me to freeze or do you want me to get down on the floor?" Which one is it, Jesus? Do you want us to rest or do you want us to take up this yoke? Our earthly logic tells us that a burden is still a burden, no matter how much the seller tries to spin it as "light" and "easy."

The key to understanding this part of the invitation is the concept of the yoke. A yoke was a piece of wood that joined together two oxen to make a team for pulling a plow or a wagon. The Greek word Jesus uses for "easy" also means "well-fitting." As a carpenter, Jesus would have made a lot of yokes in his day. The ox was brought to the shop, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and wouldn't chafe and rub the ox's neck. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

Jesus knows what burdens us: our anxieties and our fears, our temptations and our responsibilities, our failures and our guilt. And he offers here to lift our heavy burdens and replace them. He offers to take off the yoke of obligation that sits ill-fitting on our shoulders and instead replace it with his easy yoke. But what makes Jesus' yoke easier than the ones we already are burdened with?

A farmer is standing on the side of the road next to his wagon, which is stuck in a ditch. The farmer hitches his tired, old horse to the wagon and says, "Hiya, Betsy!" and the horse doesn't move. Then the farmer says, "Giddyup, Chestnut!" and the horse doesn't move. Then the farmer yells, "C'mon, Sally!" and the horse doesn't move. Finally the farmer says, "Let's go, Ranger!" and the horse finally moves forward, slowly dragging the wagon out of the ditch. An

observer says to the farmer, “Why did you do that? Did you forget your horse’s name?” The farmer says, “Nope. I know his name. Ol’ Ranger is blind, and if he thought he was the only one pulling the wagon, he wouldn’t even try.”

We are not called to go through this heavy life alone. That’s the amazing thing about this invitation from Jesus: a yoke is specifically made for two. This yoke is not one that Jesus imposes upon us, but one that he wears with us. When Jesus offers us his yoke to carry, he’s offering to become our yokemate, he’s offering for us to learn how to bear the burden by working beside him. He’s saying that the heaviness of life will seem lighter if we are willing to share it with him by worshipping him, spending time with him in prayer, reading his story, trusting him. With Jesus beside us, we become stronger by lifting less weight.

The Message translates the last part of the passage this way: “Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” The unforced rhythms of grace. I feel like we try to force so much today in order to get ahead, to assuage our guilt, to prove ourselves. But with Jesus, nothing is forced. It’s all grace. Jesus promises to replace the burdens that destroy and exhaust us with a yoke that will be life affirming and easier to carry. We become stronger in our faith not by weighing down our life, but by sharing it with the one who walks beside us each step of our journey.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that we go through all this effort and guilt to prove we’re worthy of the gracious gift we’ve been given, while all the time Jesus is standing right there in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us. I believe the only time the load of life becomes overbearing is when we try to take over and do all the lifting ourselves. We are not spiritual Shane Hammans. We can’t move when the weight of the world is on our shoulders. But it doesn’t have to be. You are not alone on this journey. We are here with you. Christ is here with you. Christ says to us, “I have come for you. Now come to me and rest.”