

Life is hard. Making a living, building relationships, providing for our families, keeping house, completing school, there's no end to the challenges we confront every day. But there is victory, victory for our own lives in Christ. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, using Romans 7 and Christ's words of encouragement in Matthew 11:28-30.

OPENING PRAYER

Again, life is hard. Besides the things we contend with which are outside of us, St. Paul reminds us of the struggle we have with the things that our inside of us, in our own hearts. He wrote, **Romans 7:18-19: I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.**¹⁹ **For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.** Life is hard.

Inside the human heart a war is being waged, a war between the "law of sin which dwells in my members," which rebels against God and His law, and the "law of my mind," which desires to walk with God and to obey His law.

This is not something we're proud of. We don't wear t-shirts with the words, "Nothing Good Dwells Within Me!" We don't buy books by authors who say, "I Have The Desire To Do What Is Right, But Not The Ability To Carry It Out!" No, we want answers. We want solutions. We want to watch programs and read books about people who have better lives than we do.

But, alas, you know as well as I do that too often upon closer examination the lives of the people who claim to have all of the answers are often in greater turmoil than our own!

And the world doesn't help us out either. In fact, as Paul writes in the first chapter of Romans, the people of this world, though they "know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things as they do are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them" (Rom

1:32). Turn on the TV for 5-minutes and you'll see nothing has changed. Life is hard.

This is certainly a dilemma. Either we can fix this internal conflict we suffer from or we can't. Perhaps the old saw is right, we should just eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we may die!

Again, Paul wrote, **Romans 7:19**, **"I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."**

And, then **Romans 7:24**, **"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"**

We don't like this because it doesn't work on a graph which shows continuous improvement. You can't sell this. I mean, who wants to buy a wristband that says, "WMTIA!" or **"Wretched Man That I Am!"** or sing a song with the lyric, **"The evil I do not want is what I keep on doing"?! (Well, maybe if you're country.)**

However, if we keep reading we see that Paul himself had the solution to this problem all along! He said, **Romans 7:24b-25**, **"Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"**

Despite Paul's ongoing battle with sin, he found peace in his heart because of **"Jesus Christ our Lord."** Please say it with me. (Jesus Christ our Lord.)

This is our confession, and it is the only answer to our struggle with sin and temptation: **"Jesus Christ our Lord."**

For in Him and in Him alone is our victory. **"Jesus Christ our Lord."**

Right after these words, Paul wrote, **Romans 8:1**, **"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."**

According to Paul we've got everything upside down when we look at ourselves and try to find God, which is what most Christian self-help books encourage us to do. What Paul was saying was that **everything we want and need can and will be found in our acceptance of Christ's acceptance of us.**

Christ's acceptance of us is real. Consider His own words in **Matthew 11:28-30: (Jesus said,) Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you REST.** ²⁹ **Take my YOKE upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find REST for your souls.** ³⁰ **For my YOKE is easy, and my burden is light.**

When Jesus said, "Come to Me," He didn't do so with conditions. There were no strings attached to His invitation, as in, "Come to Me IF you're a good person, or "Come to Me IF you believe all the right stuff, or "Come to Me IF your thoughts are pure." But He said, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden."

I like that a lot because most days my success is measured by a whole bunch of conditions, like whether or not I was loving enough, or efficient and effective enough, or smart enough. Indeed, I labor and I am "heavy laden" with many demands.

Perhaps you feel the same way. It's tiring, isn't it. I'm tired of having to put up, to measure up! So when Jesus invites us unconditionally with the words, "Come to me," we breathe a sigh of relief.

But what's He inviting us to? Jesus continued: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you REST." Now that sounds like a pretty good deal! I could use some rest. How about you? The 3-day weekend is nice, but two weeks would be even better! Maybe slow down and spend more time with my loved ones, maybe read a good book, watch a movie, take in a game, or maybe travel.

But what kind of rest was Jesus talking about? He was talking about spiritual rest,
that place where there is forgiveness of sins and eternal life,
that place where we understand that God is our Father and that He provides everything we need for this body and life,
that place where we can say with confidence that the Spirit of God lives in me and that He gave my life meaning. This is the rest Jesus was talking about.

When we receive this gift in our hearts, like St. Paul did, we also can say, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Please say it with me. (Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!)

Jesus continued his exhortation, saying, “Take My YOKE upon you.” In His day the image of a yoke was used to illustrate the relationship between a rabbi and his students. When a student learned and followed the teachings of a rabbi, he was under the rabbi’s yoke.

So when Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon you,” He wasn’t talking about bearing another burden, as if we were farm animals. But He was encouraging us to learn from Him. And He said it Himself. “Take my yoke upon you, and LEARN from Me.”

This is NO yoke!

And He continued. He saying, “I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find REST for your souls.”

There it is again! REST! That’s the purpose of the Lord’s teaching here, that is, that we would learn from Him in order to find rest for our souls. If we could do that one thing, if we could live in the REST of Jesus, we could do anything. Therein is our strength. Therein is our victory. For when we rest in the assurance and hope of Jesus, He is truly the Lord of our lives.

Jesus said, “I am gentle and lowly in heart.” “Lowly” literally means “close to the ground.” Indeed, the Lord has come very close to the ground, hasn’t He. He came down to where we have fallen flat on our faces with discouragement, self-condemnation, and plain old tiredness. And He said, “Come to Me.”

Friends in Christ, we make everything so complicated when really it’s as simple as believing Jesus loves us and He wants to have a relationship with us. This relationship is so simple little children grasp it as our Lord Himself suggested.

Again, Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” But the world cries out, No, come to me! Indeed, come into the disaster, come into the darkness, and despair for your life!

But Jesus said, “Take my YOKE upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find REST for your souls.” But the world keeps telling us to take on more burdens, more debt, more responsibilities, and prove yourself!

Brothers and sisters, you don't have to prove yourself to anyone. For the Lord has already laid a claim on your life. You are His Son, His Daughter.

You were clothed with Jesus' righteousness in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Your life is filled with the life of the Lord at His altar in and with the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ.

Jesus said on the Cross, "It is finished." This means that He completed all the work necessary to bring you into the presence of God Almighty. Because that work is done, indeed, we may rest in Him, trust in Him, rely on Him, live in Him, believe and hope in Him.

Life isn't so hard after all, when we rest in "Jesus Christ our Lord," that is.

Brothers and sisters, this week may you be encouraged as you reflect on the words of Jesus, "Come to Me," for when He said that, He was calling YOU to Himself with an unconditional invitation.

This week may you be encouraged to meditate on God's Word, not as an obligation but as an opportunity to be filled with the teachings of Jesus that you may learn and grow in your understanding of His love for you.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share what you've learned about what it means to rest in the presence of the Lord with another person who could use some encouragement, to the glory of God. Amen.