



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Greatest Word in the Bible

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 11, 2018

“Come to me, “all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

A Return to the Basics

Frederick Buechner, in his novel, *Brendan*, tells the story of one of the greatest Christian missionaries of the Dark Ages. The young man named Brendan, gifted with a brilliant mind, was sent to study theology and philosophy under the finest teachers in the Church in Rome. Upon receiving his advanced academic degrees, he assumed that he would become a professor or a theologian or a writer in some monastery or other center of higher learning. Instead, to his shock, he was assigned by his bishop to be a missionary in one of the most pagan, isolated and primitive places: the wild and uncivilized island of Ireland.

And there, among poor people who worshipped trees and the sun and countless other false gods, he had to start at the beginning, with the very basics. Since they would never understand the deep and profound principles of theology, he told them around their campfires and in their villages the simple stories of the Bible: of God’s creation, and Jesus’ birth and death and resurrection. And the people were absolutely spellbound. They had never heard such remarkable things as this. And for Brendan, his mind fogged by years of scholar-

ly study, this was a time of rediscovery of the joy and thrill that is found in the glorious message of the Gospel.

Sometimes we need to go back to the basics again and rediscover them. That's what Brendan did. It's what we can all periodically benefit from doing. It's what over 50 men are doing this weekend, as they are refreshed and reacquainted with the truths of our faith through the Great Banquet experience.

The Invitation: "Come"

What I want us to think about today is what I believe to be the **greatest word in the Bible**. And that word is found in our text for today in Matthew 11—Jesus' most gracious and merciful offer to **"Come."** It's just a little word—only four letters—but it is so deep in meaning when spoken by our Lord, crammed with love and passion and emotion.

The word "come" is found over and over throughout the pages of Scripture. Beginning in the first book, Genesis, we find God inviting Noah to come into the ark with his family to be saved, as earth's punishment of 40 days of rain is about to begin. Later in the Old Testament, in Isaiah, the Lord appeals to His rebellious people, "Come, let us reason together: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Later God appeals to those who are spiritually needy: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters" (Isaiah 55:1). Time and time again, Jesus invites people to "come follow me" and become one of His disciples. The last chapter of the whole Bible completes this symphony of God's gracious invitation. "The Spirit says, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17). Consistently, from Genesis to Revelation, our Lord invites us to **come** to Him.

But perhaps the most touching of all the places where we find this word is our passage for today. In Jesus' invitation to us, we hear unmistakably His love for us. He speaks as our Lord, our Creator, our

Heavenly Father and Master. And although He could by right demand our obedience, yet He chooses instead to call us and invite us rather than coercing us. It's our choice.

When we hear this word of God to us, "Come to me," we also are reminded that our true home is with Him. For in fact this is a call to come back home, to return to the One who loves us and gave us life and breath. Our home is with Him, and we were created to function best when we're in a relationship with God.

But why does God have to speak this word "Come" to us so often? Why does He need to cry out for us, to plead with us to come home? Because every one of us has at times wandered or run away from Him. And we need to be honest about our true spiritual condition. When we drop our phony image and pretensions of being just good, pious people; when we quit our self-justifications and excuses for the selfish and foolish things we do; when we honestly look in the mirror, we find that the Bible's diagnosis of our true condition is absolutely accurate and dead-on correct. We struggle regularly with greedy or lustful thoughts, with unkind and impatient words, with self-centered actions; and in doing these we ignore the God who created and cares for us.

That's why we have to be called back home. And how amazing this love of God for us is: a patient, forgiving, merciful love that never gives up on us or disowns us. Remarkably, in spite of all we've done, He still wants us!

Why Do We Resist Coming Home?

But in spite of that amazing grace and kindness, so many people who hear God's invitation to "come home" don't do so. **Why?** Why do so many Americans—we who are wise shoppers and consumers, who know how to spot a bargain or a good deal—turn down that greatest of all offers? Among the people with whom I talk—normal people like you and me—I find two primary things that hold modern people back from responding to God's offer to come to Him.

The first reason is **fear**. It's a fear that God will change us in ways that we don't want to be changed, or that He'll take away all the fun and joy in life. It's a fear that coming home to Him will cost too much. This fear is completely mistaken. There are, in fact, times when our fears prove to be unwarranted and false.

Several years ago, the *New York Times* reported this unusual story. One evening a woman was driving home when she noticed a huge truck behind her that was driving uncomfortably close. She stepped on the gas to gain some distance from the truck, but when she sped up, the truck did, too. The faster she drove, the faster the truck did—and then the truck driver started honking his horn at her. Terrified, she pulled off the expressway at the next exit. But the truck stayed right on her tail. The woman turned left on a main street, hoping to lose her pursuer in traffic. She hit a light just as it was turning from yellow to red, but the truck ran the red light and continued the chase.

Finally, at the point of panic, the woman whipped her car into a gas station and bolted from the car, screaming for help. The truck driver pulled in behind her, sprang from his truck, and ran to the car—ignoring the woman. Yanking open the back door, the truck driver pulled out a man who was hiding in the back seat, knife in hand. With one upper cut, the burly truck driver knocked out the would-be attacker.

The woman had been running from the wrong person! From his vantage point high in the truck cab, this brave driver had spotted the man crouched behind the woman's seat. His pursuit of the car was not for the purpose of harming its driver, but rather for saving her!

In the same way, many people try to run from God, afraid of what He might do to them. But His plans are for good, not evil. He wants to rescue us from all the sins and temptations lurking behind our seats that threaten our very souls. Those who run in fear from the Lord have it all wrong. They're completely mistaken about His character and intentions.

The other reason why I believe many people are unwilling to come home to the Lord can be summed up by the word “**control.**” We’re taught to be self-reliant, to be our own boss. Some of us have gotten to the place where we feel a need to control every aspect of our own little worlds. Business people and professionals struggle with a need to control their work environment and their finances; parents struggle with a desire to control their kids and their homes. But ultimately we cannot always, for our entire lives, manage to be in control of everything. The world is too big, and life is too complex.

I read recently an article by a man who came to the limits of his ability to control. He had founded and built from scratch a technology company. He supervised every detail of its operations, unwilling to let go even as the business multiplied and the company went public. Then one day, unsuspectingly, he went into a meeting of his Board of Directors and they told him he was fired. They felt that a new CEO was needed to come in and take the company to the next level. At the age of 46, having poured his whole life into his business, he suddenly was out.

This same personal struggle comes to athletes when they come to the end of their careers. Even the best eventually get too old to compete. Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, Brett Favre and Peyton Manning, Willie Mays, Michael Jordan, and all the greats eventually have to retire. Oh, they may try to hang on, try to keep competitive one more year, but eventually, if they stay too long, they become an embarrassment. The peak years of athletic performance do not last. Eventually the warranty on our bodies runs out.

Not a single one of us, no matter our situation, can guarantee that we can always keep everything under control. We can’t guarantee 100 years of good health. We can’t control the stock market or the economy to our own advantage. We can’t control our spouse, or our son or daughter, or any other person, nor can we force them to be the person we want them to be.

The bottom line in life is that you and I can't always control the bottom line. We're not smart enough or strong enough. Only God is. When we try to carry all the burden, it will eventually crush us. Or we can choose to give up our need for control, and place our burdens and cares in the hands of One who is way stronger. Listen again to the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened."

Saying "Yes" to His Offer

What exactly does it mean to say "yes" to this invitation from God to come to Him? A lot of different phrases have been used to try to describe what this decision means. Some people call it "accepting Christ"; others call it "asking (or receiving) Christ into your heart." Some like the phrase "born again," though that has been somewhat tarnished by flamboyant evangelists and TV preachers in our times. Some simply call it "becoming a true Christian." It doesn't matter what terminology is used. It's a personal decision of the mind and will. No combination of words is magical. It's simply a redirecting of our heart to turn back home to the One who made us.

Saying "yes" to Jesus Christ is not ultimately a matter of the emotions. It's a decision of the will—and it doesn't require that you be teary-eyed or enraptured to make that decision. In fact, the commitments that tend to really stick are the ones that are made not with intense emotions but with carefully thought-through reason.

The Promise

Before we close let's look briefly at the rest of what Jesus said to us in Matthew 11. Not only do we find here an **invitation**—the most gracious, kind, merciful and loving invitation ever given—but we also find a tremendous **promise**. If we come to Him, conquering our fears and surrendering our need to always be in control, if we place the burdens that are too heavy for us in His strong hands, then He promises to give something back to us in exchange. This is an iron-clad offer. It's not a joke, not a trick, not a con game. The God who never lies, who always keeps His word, has promised that in return

for our burdens He'll give us His peace. It's an inner peace. It's a cleansed conscience. It's a security, both for this life and for eternity, that we will always be a child of God. It's a certainty that we'll never be alone.

That's the peace Jesus offers us. How does that sound to you? Maybe some people here are carrying very heavy, crushing burdens. You feel guilt or shame over something you've done. You're worrying terribly about your health or your marriage or your children or grandchildren. You've got a load of hurt and anger and bitterness inside you. Whatever burden is on your back, Jesus would like to lift it from your aching shoulders and give you His peace in return.

The decision to come to Christ is one that each of us has to make for ourselves. The reason why is that no other person has the right or the power to choose on our behalf. Our father or mother can't. Our husband or wife can't. Our pastor or our best friend can't. Only *you* can decide if you will come to the Lord and place your faith and trust in Him. Trying to make it in this life apart from Christ is tough—and it can be exhausting.

Freedom and Security

Explorer Edward Bartlett was returning home to England from one of his voyages of discovery to the tropics. He was carrying on his ship a number of beautiful, exotic birds he had captured and put in cages on deck, to take back for display in the Royal Zoo. At feeding time one day, the door of one cage slipped out of the feeder's hands and swung open wide, and the bird within it quickly flew out. It soared into the sky and headed for the horizon. The men on deck shook their heads and said, "Well, that bird is dead." They knew that there was no land for over 1,000 miles in any direction; that little thing could never make it all the way to shore.

Nearly 24 hours later they were surprised to find that very bird wobbling back towards the ship, its wings exhausted and barely able to move from constant flapping since the moment it had left its cage. It

hovered over the deck and then collapsed, panting and breathless. Bartlett wrapped the bird in his strong hands, fed it and nurtured it back to health. That ship, which the bird had wanted to escape, turned out to be the only safe place for it in that vast ocean. The thrill of freedom was lost in the loneliness and exhaustion of those long hours trying to make it on its own. Now the ship looked like home to that little wayward bird.

Sometimes we human beings think that what will make us really happy is freedom—to be all on our own, to do everything for ourselves. But it's a vast ocean out there, and our wings are not that strong. We may think that freedom brings happiness. But there is great security in the strong hands of the One who is waiting for us to return to Him. Perhaps someone here this morning needs to quit fleeing from Him and come back to the Lord. Come home, today. ■

