

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.” For there were so many people coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat. ³²They went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³But many people saw them leave and knew where they were going. They ran there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus stepped out of the boat, he saw a large crowd. His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. He began to teach them many things.

“They” and “them.” These two pronouns are sprinkled all over in this section. It’s interesting because they are not really referring to the same group of people. Some of the theys are the disciples, the twelve close friends of Jesus and his partners in ministry. But some of the theys are the crowds of people following Jesus around and looking for answers. As far as this account in scripture goes, it is easy for us to figure out which theys belong to which groups. But which theys are we?

The Gospel for today comes on the heels of the Gospel from last week. Jesus had sent his twelve disciples out two-by-two to preach and to heal. And remember, he sent them out with almost nothing. No money. No warm coat. Yet this mission experience for them had allowed them to see that the message of Jesus was taking root in the people they went out to. Now they were back together with the group, ready to slow down and swap stories. Jesus says to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.” Jesus sees that they are tired and hungry from all the work they’ve done. So, Jesus and the twelve flee in their boat for a few hours of shut eye.

The crowd, however, sees them leaving. They run ahead of the disciples to the town Jesus and his group are heading. When Jesus gets out of the boat, he sees the crowd. He sees the faces of the same people he had just seen on the other side of the lake. He sees the faces of those he and his disciples had been ministering to. Then we hear the most important fact in this entire section: “His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” We are moved when bad things happened to other people. We become emotional at stories that capture tragedy and struggle. But Jesus is moved in a different way.

Jesus sees sin for what it is and sinners for who they are. He knows the people he’s serving. They are people with lives stained by sin, stained by their own destructive sin and the fact that they live in a fallen world. They are also people who have been spiritually shaped to strive for works righteousness. The Jewish leadership had not instilled a gratitude for God’s mercy in the people. Instead, they pushed a righteousness that comes by observing the law. Because of this, there are plenty of people beaten down by life who know they cannot be enough for God. They have been shepherded poorly. Jesus knows what they need. They don’t need a preacher to give them seven new habits that will transform their life and lead God to love them. They don’t need life advice. The people are tired of the uncertainties of their lives. They need rest. They need permanent rest.

Thankfully, Jesus is going to be exactly what they need. His healing shows that he has the authority of God. But the sick and injured people he healed did not have permanent physical health. Some would face other injuries. Many would get sick from some other disease later on. And all would eventually die. Jesus provides them rest. He provide it in his gentle care for them. He provides it in his focus on them and their needs. But most importantly, Jesus provides rest from sin. He sees them as sheep without a shepherd, so what does he do? He shepherds. And the work of the shepherd involves feeding the sheep with the food they need and tending to their wounds when injured or sick. But it also means sacrificing for the sheep.

As we hear, Jesus begins to teach them many things. But he does not remain with them permanently. He goes off because that great wolf of sin that makes the sheep shiver and shake with fear needs to be combated. Jesus goes to the cross to disarm Satan, sin, death, and hell. What does this mean for the crowds following Jesus and his disciples here and there? Their sins would be forgiven. They could find true rest in the peace with God that was earned for them by Jesus. This scene gives us just a glimpse of Jesus' heart, but we see it on full display as the shepherd endures death to provide his sheep life.

Just like the people of Jesus' day, and like the people of every age, we get worn out by life. We get worn out by the busyness. It seems everybody has this or that going on, projects they are constantly working on and people they are constantly meeting. We get worn out by the struggles of life too. To say that your life is without struggle just isn't true. We get worn out by sin. Sin hurts, whether it's us sinning against others, other people sinning against us, or just the fact that we live in the sinful world. And finally, we get worn out because of that evil desire in us that desires to live a life of works righteousness. That flame is fanned by some religious groups who focus on what you can do for God rather than what he has done for you.

Vacation will not fix our problems. Stepping back from some responsibilities might give us temporary rest. But we need rest that lasts. We need the kind of rest that Jesus delivered over the course of his ministry to the crowds. Your shepherd knows your struggles. He knows your needs. And more than that, he supplies for all of your needs, from the greatest to the least. Look to the cross and you'll find the reason for your rest. Jesus didn't rest so that we could rest. And even now, on his throne in heaven, Jesus is at work for us. You and I can rest in knowing that our Savior's heart is moved when he sees us in our struggles, and he does everything needed so that we don't have to live a life of stress and hurting and failure.

But let's also look at this account from the disciples' perspective. They are back from their mission trip, and they are ready to share stories. Jesus pulls them aside and tells them they are going to seek out a place for rest. The disciples have been working like dogs. All work, even work done to strengthen God's kingdom, takes it out of you. Like the crowds, the disciples need rest too. But again, true rest is not found in a hot meal when you're starving or a few hours in a dark room to get a nap in. True rest is found only in Jesus.

Jesus shows that rest in seeking out time for them to recharge their batteries for ministry. But he shows it even more in the example he sets. Jesus shows that gospel ministry is not about checking boxes. It is about people. It was important that the disciples get time to rest their bodies and minds. But it was also important that after their rest they get back to the ministry they are carrying out. People need to hear about Jesus, and the disciples are a big part of that work.

When we look at the ministry of our church and even our private ministries that we carry out in our everyday lives, we find that we get busy. How much time do you have to invest into that troubled friend as they call you up to talk for hours about their problems? How much energy do you sacrifice to make sure you are visiting that loved one in the hospital and the nursing home, with the hopes that someday a door will be opened for you to share the gospel with them? Ministry is busy and it's tiring and sometimes it's even thankless.

But what moves us? We heard that Jesus saw the people as lost sheep and his heart went out to them. Who do our hearts go out to? Why are we moved to give up time, money, energy, and even our pride to minister to others? It's because Christ's love to seek and save lost sinners like you and me leads us to see others in the same vein. It helps us see them as sheep without a shepherd and connect them to that shepherd.

And so, it is good for us to find time for bodily rest. In our workaholic culture, we can be led to believe that any rest is laziness. This is not true. On the seventh day of creation, God rested. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath was always a day of rest from work. For us, we are not required to rest on a certain day of the week,

but God does call us to be wise stewards of our time and bodies. This involves getting enough rest. But let's not let that rest turn into laziness, because we rest in our beds and on our couches so that we can go out and bring a greater rest to others.

Keep Jesus front and center, friends. He provides his disciples with what they need to keep carryout out their ministries. He'll do the same for you. But don't forget that his sacrifice for us is the heart of our ministries. Our peace and rest come only because of what Jesus did. Amen.