Unloading Your Burdens

There is a photograph on one of the old Led Zeppelin albums showing an old man carrying this huge bundle of sticks on his back and his burden just seems to be overwhelming—actually bending him over. There are a lot of people like that today, but the burdens that they are carrying are much more crushing than a load of sticks. Maybe you are carrying one of those crushing burdens today. How can you get rid of that burden forever? Well, as Christians, we know that we are to place our burdens at Jesus’ feet. The Scriptures teach us: “Give your burdens to the LORD, and he will take care of you. He will not permit the godly to slip and fall.” Psalm 55:22 (NLT) “Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.” Psalm 68:19 (NIV) So, we need to identify a few of those “burdens” this morning, and then begin to understand what happens when we do have the faith that allows us to unload them. Before trying to actually identify some of these burdens, there are two things that we would do well to remember.

First, we must acknowledge our burdens. The reason for this is expressed very well by Annie Chapman, writing in Today’s Christian Woman, when she states: “It’s possible to go through life with excess [spiritual and] emotional baggage as well. Hurts and memories can make us unable to move [forward to a mature intimacy with God]. It is vital to our spiritual and emotional growth that we identify these hurts, because Christ cannot heal suffering that we insist isn’t there. And without His healing, the weight of excess baggage will wreak havoc on our capacity to love and be loved.”¹ She is absolutely right. If we want to experience the love of Jesus Christ in our lives then we must come face to face with those things that are burdens in our lives, and refuse to let them hide in the recesses of our hearts where they act like a spiritual herbicide and eventually kill the seeds of faith.

Secondly, once we acknowledge those things that are burdens in our lives, we must learn to put them down—stop carrying their weight on our backs. But, sometimes we are like the parable that a pastor in the Philippines liked to give to his congregation. It was a parable to illustrate that Jesus offers to provide us with rest, but we are the ones who need to respond to His offer. Unfortunately, there are those whose arms of faith are too short to reach out to Him. To make this point, this pastor described a wagon driver who was on his way to market and there beside the road he saw an old man (like the one on the Led Zeppelin album) carrying a heavy load on his back—apparently a burden that he had been carrying for a very long time. So, the driver pulled beside the old man and took pity on him, and told him that he was welcome to ride on the back of his wagon—get some relief from that heavy load that
was bearing down on him. Well, the old man readily accepted this invitation, and onto the back of the wagon he jumped. As time went on, the driver turned around to check on the old man, and he was flabbergasted at what he saw. Sure enough, the old man was sitting on the wagon, but he was still carrying that heavy load on his back. He had never put it down, even after ascending onto the very wagon that afforded him an opportunity to set the burden aside.²

There are some Christians like that. They know Christ is their Savior, yet they just can’t seem to lay their burdens at His feet—trust Him to take care of their problems, trust Him to actually be their Savior. And there are a lot of burdens that they continue to tote around. So what are some of these burdens? Well, there are too many to cover this morning, but I would like for you to consider four of them.

THE BURDEN OF GUILT: First of all, there is the burden of guilt and shame. This guilt can stem from all kinds of things. Many times they concern the guilt that people carry because of their roles in a failed relationship—could be a failed marriage, failed friendship, or perhaps some betrayal of someone. David was certainly a man well acquainted with that kind of guilt. In one of his Psalms, he cries out to the Lord in pain: “My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.” Psalm 38:4 (NIV) We can see that kind of guilt quite often, particularly when someone has had the opportunity to help others during their time of desperate need, but failed to come to their aid. It can create a burden that becomes especially crushing. There was a man who had lived in Germany during the Nazi reign of Adolf Hitler. He was a German citizen and considered himself to be a good Christian. But, he and the members of his church had become aware of what was happening to the Jews during the holocaust. They tried to pretend that nothing was going on in those Nazi death camps despite the stories they heard about the gassing of thousands of Jews each day. And they knew about the ovens where their dead bodies were thrown to get rid of the evidence. Yet, they did nothing about this. The problem was that there was a railroad track behind their church and on Sunday mornings, when the trains passed, this man and his fellow-worshippers could hear the wails and cries of the despondent Jews on rail-cars as they were transported to concentration camps like cattle to the slaughter. So loud were their collective cries that he could hear them over the sound of the train’s engine—and on spring and summer Sundays when the church windows were open, their screams were almost unbearable to him. Many years later, he described this when he wrote: “Their screams tormented us. We knew the time the train was coming and when we heard the whistle blow we began singing hymns. By the time the train came past our church, we were singing to the top of our voices. If we heard the screams, we sang
more loudly and soon we heard them no more. Years have passed and no one talks about it anymore. But I still hear that train whistle in my sleep.”

That kind of guilt is a heavy burden to carry. Sooner or later it will crush those who think that they can hide it away in dark corners of their minds. That won’t work. The guilt will always haunt you unless you find the remedy. And the only remedy is to bring such a burden before Jesus and trust in His love. And the way you trust in His love in these circumstances is to ask for His forgiveness. But if you ask for Christ’s forgiveness, with genuine sorrow for whatever thing that may have caused your guilt, then you must put it behind you. You must be willing to trust in the fact that God’s love is real. Because if you doubt His ability to forgive, then you deny His goodness—and no true Christian can ever do that. In other words, God’s forgiveness allows you to start a new course: One that looks ahead and not to the past. President Harry Truman was sometimes noted as a somewhat profane man, but he actually got it right when he said: “[Y]ou have to give thought to what’s going to happen the next day. . . What you’re ‘going’ to do is more important than what you have done.” To the extent that you are walking in the grace of God’s forgiveness, that is certainly true.

THE BURDEN OF REVENGE: While God’s forgiveness is a remedy to the burden of guilt, the lack of human forgiveness can actually create yet another burden that people carry—and it can be one of the most destructive burdens of all. It is the burden that comes with bearing a grudge against someone. It is the burden that craves revenge. And it is a burden that is so contrary to the Scriptures. God’s Word tells us: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” Leviticus 19:18 (NIV) Revenge feels good at first, but it actually consumes and destroys those who let it into their lives. During the crisis in Bosnia in the mid-1990’s, there was a young man in Sarajevo named Pipo. By most accounts, he was a good, hard-working man who loved his family, and eventually wanted to marry and raise a family of his own. Then one day, his mother was thrown in jail and beaten by Muslims. And from that point on, Pipo changed. Talking about his experience, he said: “When [my mother got out of jail], she wouldn't talk about it. That's when I picked up a gun and began shooting Muslims. I hate them all.” So to feed his hunger for revenge, Pipo became a Bosnian Serb sniper who killed in cold-blood 325 people, all Muslims, solely for the sake of revenge. After these many shootings, he says: “I have no feelings for what I do. I went to see my mother in Belgrade, and she hugged me, and I felt nothing. I have no life anymore. I go from day to day, but nothing means anything. I don’t want a wife and children. I don't want to think.” By embracing revenge to settle his grudge, Pipo effectively destroyed himself—robbed himself of his own humanity. That is what the burden of revenge and grudge-bearing does—it strips you of love. Lay it down, before it lays you down.
THE BURDEN OF WORRY: Another common burden that people bear is the burden of worry—worries about their health, worry about the welfare of family members, worry about keeping their jobs—the list goes on and on. The Apostle Peter teaches us what we are to do with our worries. He instructs us as follows: “Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about you.” 1 Peter 5:7 (NLT)

And I love how holocaust survivor, Corrie Ten Boom, puts it: “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.” Do you know what else the burden of chronic worrying can do?—It also can strip you of your faith in God. Bishop Fulton Sheen points to this when he writes: “Worry is a form of atheism, for it betrays a lack of faith and trust in God.” These words from Peter and Corrie Ten Boom and Bishop Sheen—they are important. But when Jesus speaks, His Words are even more important.

In the parable of the Four Soils, Jesus describes three soils that fail to allow the seeds of God’s Word to produce any mature faith. And because we are saved by God’s grace through our faith in Him, if one’s faith dies out because of a preoccupation with the worries of this world, then their soil (representing their life) appears destined for a place of eternal death. Speaking of such people, Jesus said: “The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” Matthew 13:22 (NIV)

Now just to eliminate any doubt as to what happens to such unfruitful trees—the ones that are burdened by worldly worries—Jesus explained: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Matthew 3:10 (NIV)

Now, the short version of this would be to simply say: Don’t worry yourself into Hell. And you might say, “I can’t help it! There are so many bad things going on in my life that I can’t help but to worry.” Yet, there is a solution. It’s the same one that I’ve mentioned: Simply lay those worries at the feet of the Savior, and turn to God in prayer. The Christian writer, John Guest, put it this way: “When I lived in England, my landlady had a little wall plaque that read, “Why pray when you can worry?” [Yet a better plaque would have read:] “Why worry when you can pray?”

THE BURDEN OF SIN: The final burden for our consideration is the most prevalent one of all: The burden of sin. It is the burden we take on when we live our lives apart from God’s will. The reality is that the burden of sin weighs us down, while God’s commandments are designed to lift us up. His commandments are the very opposite of burdens. For as the Apostle John explains: “Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome.” 1 John 5:3 (NLT)

Jesus wants to relieve you of all of these burdens. He wants you to exchange those things that are like millstones around your neck for the incredible lightness of living by His Word. Jesus said: “Come to me, all you
who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

Isn’t it time to take all of your burdens—whatever they may be—and lay them at the Cross of Christ? Jesus longs for you to do that, because it was on that Cross that he accepted the burden of our sins. Take on His yoke. It is the yoke of faith. It is the yoke of love. It is the yoke that links us to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not a yoke that binds, but one that frees.

And that’s what I want us to do this morning. So many times people simply put off the act of laying down their burdens. Because of that delay, they fail to accept the freedom and rest and peace that Jesus offers. But, I can’t let you do that. I want you to at least begin the process of surrendering your burdens to Jesus. I am going to ask Flo to help me by handing out pieces of paper to each of you. And I want you to write down on that scrap of paper one or more burdens that are weighing you down—keeping you from being yoked with Jesus and fully enjoying a relationship with Him. And then, I am going to collect them. I am not going to read them—what you write on that paper is strictly between you and God. But I want you to be honest about what you write down and I am asking you to make a genuine commitment to God to let that burden go. If you will do that, then I am going to show you what happens to those burdens.

[The papers describing those burdens are collected in a satchel—one that has become very heavy with so many “burdens” inside. Then, the satchel is taken to the front of the church and laid out before the Cross.]

If you truly surrender these burdens to Jesus at the foot of His Cross—this is what will become of them . . . [Open the satchel, then feed the scraps of paper one by one into a paper shredder.]

Now they are all gone! And if you will just let them stay gone, your life can begin to experience that rest and peacefulness that Jesus was talking about.

Jesus was a carpenter—and I feel certain that during his carpenter days he had the opportunity to make quite a few yokes. 10 Jesus has his own special yoke that He has made just for you—if you are willing to accept it.

There’s an old myth that when birds were first created that they had no wings. And when God took notice of this, He placed wings upon their backs. But the birds objected and complained that these things on their backs—well, they were like yokes that burdened them. But when they realized the true nature of the yokes of God, they understood what a blessing they were—they were “burdens” that
lifted them up to soar among the clouds. And so it is with Jesus—the burden of His “yoke” is the very thing that gives wings to the soul. Try on His yoke today! Let us pray.

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7 Ibid. Robert J. Morgan, Preacher’s Sourcebook, p. 801.

8 Ephesians 2:8 (NIV) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.
