

I don't know if you noticed, but it's been a really warm week. I am not a fan of air conditioning and have steadfastly avoided it for the six years I've lived in my house...until the third night I went to sleep on the couch in my basement and bought an air conditioning unit; when I installed it in my bedroom and turned it on, it was so loud I still couldn't sleep. And through that cycle of complaint and solution and complaint, I remembered that six short months ago, I was cursing the snow and bitter cold temperatures—and probably will be again in another six months. I realize we're dealing with extremes, and I don't want to minimize the real dangers of climate catastrophe, especially for people who lack adequate shelter of any kind or the resources to run to the store and fix the heat with a new appliance. But even normal swings in temperature and changes in weather tend to get us complaining just as much about the winter cold as the summer heat, just as much about dry spells as when we get too many rainy days in a row. Something in our human nature keeps us grumbling, even when we get what we claim we want. If you've had even just one person in your life who is never satisfied, imagine God looking at all of us and saying, *No matter what I do, they're never happy!*

Jesus encountered that same frustration that we sometimes experience when no matter how we try to address someone's criticism, we just hear new criticism. He likens his generation to children who won't follow the rules of their own games: they pretend to play festive music, but their playmates won't dance; they pretend to cry at a funeral but their playmates won't mourn. He's comparing how John the Baptist's ministry was received to how his own ministry is received—not by the crowds of regular people who flocked to both John and Jesus, eager for a new way of life, but by the religious insiders guarding a system that worked very well for them but not so well for the majority of the people. John, though eccentric, lived a simple and austere life, preaching repentance and righteousness, and for that, they dismissed John as having a demon. Conversely, Jesus lives a much more normal life, sharing meals with, among others, tax collectors and sinners, preaching compassion and mercy; yet the same people who criticized John for being too strict call Jesus a drunk and a glutton. For those in the condemnation business, you're literally damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus directs his toughest challenges not to those who are labeled as sinners but to the religious people who think God approves of them more than everyone else. These are the people who, having studied scripture the most, should have the best understanding of God's Law of *communal* flourishing and the prophets' call to justice for the *whole* community. However, when God's messenger and even Son of God himself show up, all they do is criticize

one for being too stern and one for being too compassionate. To go in either direction, they would have to admit they have room for improvement and be willing to change. Yet they refuse to grow in grace toward others or in humility themselves, even though time and time again, the God whose word they study refrained from punishing their pathologically disobedient ancestors. God sets an example of mercy, but they don't follow it. Although they are wise and intelligent, they don't perceive the good news; but those who are weary and carrying the heavy burden of their expectations do.

Like all of scripture, the end of this passage is rightly understood when we keep it in context. We might be weary for many reasons and carrying all sorts of heavy burdens, but Jesus is speaking specifically of the religious requirements of these critics who refuse to find value either in John's rigorous solitude or Jesus' generous inclusion. They have set a standard that is essentially impossible for most people to even *try* to reach—a standard that *they* would claim comes straight from God but that is really manmade. Think of some of the rules that prior generations had of what constituted good Christian behavior: no playing cards, no rock music, no dancing—or at least no doing these things on Sundays...but we'd have to sort through which of those rules came from Jesus and which came from grandma. Those might seem like small things, but what about defining righteousness by how often you attend church, or how much money you put in the offering plate, or how closely your family structure resembles someone's perceived ideal...all works that have been credited with earning God's favor—falsely, of course. If we're the ones placing those expectations on others, Jesus says we've missed the mark. If we've been pressured to meet those requirements, Jesus has good news for us.

Jesus invites us to set down the heavy burdens of self-earned righteousness that don't earn God's favor anyway, but do wear us out. Learn from him, he says, for he is gentle and humble, he promises rest for our souls, and in comparison his burden is light. That is not to say that it always comes naturally to us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to serve one another, to forgive seventy seven times...but it is easier than trying to score enough points in a game where the goalposts are always moving, where not even John the Baptist or Jesus himself were good enough to silence the critics. When we set down those manmade burdens, our hands are open to receive the grace of God. When we set down those burdens, our hands are free to take the yoke that Jesus offers. And that's the other good news: Jesus' way is not just a new burden to carry but a yoke—a partnership where Jesus shares the weight with us. May we let go of what is weighing us down so the Lord can lift us up.