

Title: Straining at the Oars: Rest, Character, and Trust in the Storms of Life

Sermon Summary: Drawing from the accounts of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water in Matthew 14, Mark 6, and John 6, the pastor explores what it means to truly rest in Christ, grow in character, and trust God through difficulty. Using the relatable image of children who resist naps but desperately need them, the sermon challenges believers to examine whether they are spiritually fussy and worn down, and whether they are genuinely growing in Christ-like character. The pastor emphasizes that Jesus modeled both compassion and prayerful solitude, and that God often allows his people to strain at the oars not out of indifference, but to develop their faith and refine their character. The sermon calls believers away from a consumer-minded faith and toward a life of service, rejoicing, and trust in God's sovereign purpose.

Key Points:

- Rest is not merely physical but spiritual, and believers often neglect the kind of soul-rest that comes from surrendering anxieties and plans to God
- Jesus consistently prioritized teaching over miracles, and his followers should reflect that same priority in how they share their faith and make disciples
- Jesus dismissed the crowd after the feeding of the five thousand because he wanted to leave them with something to contemplate, not merely full stomachs
- Jesus withdrew to pray on the mountainside despite being the one person who might seem least in need of prayer, modeling that prayer is essential for staying spiritually on course
- God allows seasons of struggle, like the disciples straining at the oars against the wind, as a means of building character and deepening faith
- Rejoicing is described as a safeguard for the soul, and believers are called to practice it even when circumstances are difficult
- True transformation comes not from conforming to the world but from the renewing of the mind, and character development requires intentional, ongoing effort

- The phrase "It is I" spoken by Jesus on the water carries theological weight, echoing the divine name "I AM" and reassuring believers that God is present in the storm
- Witnessing flows naturally from genuinely knowing Jesus, and fear of sharing faith often stems from an underdeveloped relationship with him
- Planning is not discouraged, but believers are called to hold their plans loosely with a posture of "Lord willing"

Scripture Reference:

- Mark 6:30-56, which recounts the return of the apostles, the feeding of the five thousand, and Jesus walking on water
- Matthew 14:22-36, which includes the account of Peter walking on water
- John 6:16-22, which adds detail to the walking on water account
- Matthew 11, in which Jesus invites the weary to come to him for rest and to take on his yoke
- Romans 12, referenced regarding transformation through the renewing of the mind rather than conforming to the world
- Philippians 4, referenced regarding Paul's repeated call to rejoice as a safeguard for the soul
- James 4, referenced regarding the posture of saying "Lord willing" when making plans
- 1 Corinthians 6, referenced in the reminder that the body belongs to Christ and is to be used to honor God
- 1 Peter 1, referenced regarding the testing of faith purifying the heart like gold

Stories:

- The childhood experience of being forced to take naps and resisting rest, used as an analogy for how believers resist spiritual rest even when they desperately need it
- The feeding of the five thousand, used to illustrate Jesus's compassion, his inclusion of the disciples in ministry, and his priority of teaching over simply meeting physical needs
- Jesus walking on water and the disciples crying out in fear, used to illustrate how God is present and active even when his people are struggling and cannot see him clearly

- Peter stepping out of the boat onto the water, noted as a detail Matthew preserves that left a lasting impression and illustrates bold but faltering faith
- Abraham's obedience in preparing to sacrifice Isaac, referenced as an example of resolute trust in God even when the path forward is painful and unclear
- The pastor's personal account of attending a couples shower, feeling fatigued afterward, taking a nap, and then realizing he had neglected to check on a friend whose wife was gravely ill, used as a personal illustration of how fatigue and lack of prayer can cause believers to miss opportunities to serve