

# Finding Rest in the Merry-Thon

December 12, 2017

by David Schrock

For many, the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas leave us grateful but gassed. In the name of holiday festivities, December means attending multiple Christmas parties, traveling to see family and friends, and standing in line to get the ever-elusive “perfect gift.”

As much joy as Christmas brings, if we aren’t careful, holiday cheer can sap our energy and steal our joy. It is a great irony that the season of light often feels heavy. What can we do to find rest in this annual merry-thon?

## UNLIKELY CHRISTMAS VERSE

Though we don’t think of [Matthew 11:28](#) as a Christmas verse, it is. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” tells us why Jesus came. Although earthly labor is a good thing, in a fallen world our best works leave us tired and increase our unrighteousness before a holy God ([Isa. 64:6](#)). Therefore, like drinking water from the Dead Sea, our greatest efforts to find rest leave us thirsty.

To this universal problem, Jesus offers a solution. He invites us to come, that in service to him we may work under his easy and light yoke. Such a promise of rest is at the core of his gospel and fundamental to his incarnation.

Significantly, Jesus’ invitation follows the announcement of his arrival. Earlier in Matthew 11, a weary sinner sends a message to Jesus asking about his identity. The inquirer is John the Baptist, and his good works have successfully landed him in Herod’s jail. Of course, John isn’t perceived to be a “sinner” like the woman in Luke 7. He is a faithful prophet of God who suffered much for the sake of righteousness. In Jesus’ own estimation John is the cream of the old covenant crop ([Matt. 11:11](#)). Nevertheless, as a fallen son of Adam, he is weary and heavy laden.

So John sends his disciples to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?” Jesus replies with a Christmas catena—not cantata (those come later)—of Old Testament verses. Citing Isaiah’s “gospel,” he declares: “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” ([Matt. 11:5](#); cf. [Isa. 26:18-19](#); [29:18-19](#); [35:5-6](#); [53:4](#); [61:1](#)).

Jesus doesn’t give John a straightforward yes. He gives him something better. He recalls the Word of God, which foretells his coming. Isaiah’s prophecies have come true in his life and ministry. John isn’t suffering in vain. Instead, Jesus is offering him rest.

## PUT AWAY THE RUNNING SHOES

Twenty centuries later Jesus still offers us rest. Yet Americans have so commodified Christ's birth that rest has been replaced with running. Even if we know the reason for the season, Black Friday sales and white elephant gifts make us red-faced and green with envy. We need to rest and reconsider the race we're running.

What if we spent less time *doing* Christmas and more time *delighting* in Christ? What if instead of gearing up for the marathon, we put away our running shoes and took time to rest in the boots of gospel peace? You won't need a gift receipt for that purchase.

Rest will look different for every person and every family. I don't know what it might mean for you, but Jesus does. He is the one who provided a straw-filled stable for two road-weary teenagers about to witness the final fulfillment of [Isaiah 7:14](#). He is the one who quieted John's fears with an appeal to the Old Testament. And he is the one who invites you and me to take up his light and easy yoke, so that we might rest awhile with him.

This December let's not take advantage of Jesus' advent to do more stuff. Instead, let's take advantage of the holidays to press into the spiritual rest that Christ gives us in his advent.

## RESTORING REST TO THE RESTLESS

To put this meditation into practice, here are five things you might do to cultivate spiritual rest.

1. *Unplug.* While there's a place for Christmas specials and live nativities, doing something smaller, with less pomp and circumstance, may be exactly what you need to cultivate rest. Such a change might give you the margin you need to be still and know that he is God.
2. *Say no to something old.* If your schedule includes multiple family meals, Christmas parties, and gift exchanges, find one (or more) to which you can say no. We are finite creatures, and it is good for us to draw boundaries.
3. *Say yes to something new.* Sing Christmas carols in a nursing home. Serve meals at a local mission. Take groceries to a needy family in your church. Christ's invitation to rest is not a call to complacency; it is a chance to work in his strength ([Col. 1:29](#)).
4. *Feed on the Word.* As much attention as we give to savory meats and holiday treats, we should give more attention to God's Word. This might mean reading Advent scriptures or picking up a book on Christ's birth. However it looks, spiritual rest always involves hearing the promises of the gospel.
5. *Pray.* With your family or with others, carve out time to praise God for the birth of Christ. Pray for the persecuted church and those who are suffering this Christmas. Pray for missionaries and for those who don't yet know Christ.

Whatever you do this month, put Christ at the center. And whether you finish the month rested or restless, take comfort that ultimately his life, not ours, secures our Sabbath rest. In this month's merry-thon, remember that Christ has come to be the good news of great joy for weary people.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

This [post](#) originally appeared on The Gospel Coalition's website.