

The Great Invitation

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0:00] Our guest preacher today, Paul Levy. Paul, as you heard already, if you were here this morning, Paul's been up with us this weekend. He was speaking yesterday at our Didasko Presbytery Church's Conference up in Stirling, and we've greatly enjoyed his ministry then.

And also this morning, Paul is the minister of the International Presbyterian Church in Ealing. We've been friends for a very long time, and he's been here in the past, but not for a long time. So it's high time he's been back with us, and we've enjoyed that.

So we're looking forward, Paul, to hearing you again this evening, and thank you for coming. Paul's going to be speaking on some verses from Matthew's Gospel, so perhaps you'd turn there with me now, and we'll read together in Matthew chapter 10, Matthew chapter 11, sorry. And if you don't have your Bible with you, or your visitor, then there's some Bibles on the sides, and at the back, at the front, red Bibles. Do pick one up and follow along. You can see where we are, and you'll be able to understand much better what we're talking about. I'm going to read from Matthew chapter 11 at verse 20 on those visitor's Bibles. I think it's page 816.

And reading through to the end of the chapter, and it's these last verses of the chapter that Paul's going to be focusing on. But we read, And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You'll be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and for you.

[2:12] At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. And no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Please turn with me to Matthew chapter 11.

[3:26] Matthew chapter 11 that Willie read to us. And let me thank you again for your welcome. This is a really encouraging church. I'm encouraged by your faithfulness over generations, by your courage in the last few decades, and by your generosity in so many ways.

And I go home with a full heart. It's been really good to be with you. Do pray for us in West London, preaching the same gospel, loving the same Lord Jesus. But thank you very much. And I want to speak from Matthew 11, from verse 28, really, to verse 30.

There's a Greek legend. You've probably heard about it. There's a man who was given a task to do by the gods. And it's a particularly cruel punishment in the afterlife.

And his punishment for all eternity was that he would have to push a boulder up a hill. And each time he'd get to the top of the hill, the boulder would slip through his grasp.

And it would go right to the bottom of the hill. And he'd have to start all over again. And I suppose after a few hundred years of doing that, you would be pretty weary, wouldn't you? Weary from trying and never succeeding.

[4:42] But sometimes life is like that, isn't it? You get up. You shower. You have your breakfast.

You get out of the house. You commute. You go to work. You do your job. You come home. You eat. You tidy up. Life can be like that, can't it?

So it goes on that life seems to be constantly coming back to the same place. Matthew Arnold said that human beings, men and women, are a foiled, circuitous wanderer.

Round and round we go. Only to come back to where we started before that. Before. Sometimes life is like, isn't it? Trying to push a boulder up a hill. And it seems to slip through our fingers.

And religion doesn't actually help. Listen to what Jesus said about religion in Matthew 23. This is how he described the religious leaders of his day. He said the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders, they sit on Moses' seat.

[6:13] So do and observe what they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but they do not practice. And here it is. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear.

They lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. That's what religion does. What God intended to be a great blessing to human beings becomes a burden.

And so that's how it was under the yoke of the religious teachers in Jesus' day. It was like that in the time of the Reformation, wasn't it? Under the medieval church, that which was supposed to be a great blessing, became an intolerable burden.

And that's often how it is in church. You commit Christianity into a religion which becomes a burden that is put on people's shoulders, which actually they can't carry.

But it's not religion that we need as human beings. It is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And that's what makes these words at the end of Matthew 11 so wonderful.

[7:20] It is a great invitation. It is an invitation to you tonight, whoever you are, to come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Let me read it to you.

Matthew 11 and verse 28. Jesus says, Now by any standards, that is a remarkable invitation.

But what I want to show you tonight is that it is full of the most intriguing paradoxes. Paradoxes are two truths, side by side, that seem to be contradictory but aren't.

And so the first paradox is who the invitation is from. Who is this invitation from? It is from the master, who is a slave. A master, who is a slave.

The first thing you do is that you get an invite. We've been invited to a wedding. What's the question? Who's the wedding? Who's the invitation from? Come to me.

[8:43] Come to me. For I am gentle and humble in heart. The words gentle and humble, they are servant words.

This invitation to you tonight is from someone with a servant heart. He's not a tyrant. This invitation is to you from someone who is gentle and humble.

And these words reveal to us the heart of the Lord Jesus. And it's a servant heart. Now let's look at the context. And you go back to verse 27. And there's a great paradox. Look at how Jesus describes himself in verse 27.

He says, doesn't he, all things, all things, absolutely everything have been handed over to me by my Father. The invitation, I am gentle and humble.

But the verse before says all things, absolutely everything has been given to me. So here is someone with a servant's heart who's humble and gentle and claims that he is the master of the universe, the Lord of all.

[9:54] That's a huge paradox, isn't it? I'm humble and lowly. I'm the master of everything. In fact, that is the heart of Christianity. A lot of people think that Christianity is serving God.

And it is in a sense, but before that, it is God serving us. So Philippians chapter 2, that glorious passage, where it says this, that Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself and he made himself nothing.

He made himself nothing. being emptied himself and emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man, being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And therefore, God has raised him and exalted him to the highest place of all. There is this paradox that the Lord of all has become the servant of all.

And that's who sends the invitation to you. Let's explore this for a moment. Jesus is presenting himself, isn't he, in these verses, as the one who is to be the world's burden bearer.

[11:15] Notice, it's a global invitation. It's much bigger than just you or me. It's a great global invitation. Jesus is inviting everyone to come to him with their problems.

Verse 28, Come to me, all, who labor and are heavy laden. Now, we all know people, don't we, who have the weight of the world on their shoulders.

I find it's good to avoid people like that, really. But here is Jesus and Jesus invites the whole world to come to him. All you, all of you come to me, all of you are weary and burdened and he offers to take the weight of the whole world off their shoulders.

That is a massive claim for anyone to make. For any human being to make, and that is, the most unnerving thing is the quiet and unassuming way which he makes this claim.

Come to me, all of you. Down through the centuries, all across the world, come to me, come to me when you're weary and heavy laden. I know a little bit of what that's like as a pastor.

[12:24] You get people coming to you with their problems. And when people do that, it can be pretty emotionally and psychologically draining. But here is Jesus inviting the whole world to come to him with their problems.

And naturally, the question that you've got to ask is, is Jesus up for it? It's a massive claim. How do I know that I can trust Jesus with the weight of my world? How do I know that I can trust Jesus with my problems?

Because all of you have got problems, haven't you? All of you have got burdens that you carry. All of you have got loads. And sometimes, those burdens seem, don't they, at times too much for us to carry.

We say to ourselves, and maybe I'm nearest and dearest, I don't know how much longer I can go on. One British psychiatrist has said that two-thirds of the UK are suffering from anxiety.

It's a huge weight to carry, isn't it? Anxiety. Fear. Do you know what it is to be fearful about life? Anxious about the week ahead? This burden that I carry about myself.

[13:35] Malcolm Mugridge was a cynical atheist before he became a Christian. And he said this about himself. He said, I felt myself to be a prisoner of my own self-centeredness.

That is what sin is. The dark little dungeon of my ego. He says, to be turned in on oneself, imprisoned in one's egocentricity. Oh, what a burden, what a bondage that is.

Do you agree with that? The great philosopher Sting of the police said this, in this desert that I call my soul, I always play the starring role.

Thomas Cranmer in the Book of Common Prayer calls this an intolerable burden. Sin is an intolerable burden. More than I can bear. So does your conscience feel guilty?

Doesn't your heart at times get bowed down with a sense of shame and failure and guilt? Well, I'm really glad you're here tonight.

[14:40] Because this promise is for you. If you haven't got any problems tonight and life is just a breeze, well, you've come to the wrong place. But if you're weary and burdened and carrying loads that you can't carry and feeling you're not living up to your own standards, let alone anyone else's, Jesus says, verse 28, now how do we know that we can do that?

We go back to the earlier verses. Notice something strange in verse 25. The whole passage is full of paradox. Verse 25, he says, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father and no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Look at the end of verse 27. It doesn't sound very humble, does it? Think about what Jesus is saying here. He is saying, no one, nobody, knows anything about God except me.

That's not very humble. That's what he's saying. Nobody knows anything about God except me and those I choose to reveal myself to. That is a huge paradox.

[16:00] That is an outrageous thing to say. How does that square with being gentle and humble? C.S. Lewis, in thinking this through, said this, Jesus is worse than Hitler or Stalin.

He's a megalomaniac of the first order if this isn't true. The whole world belongs to me. The Father has put everything to me and no one can know God unless I reveal God to them.

So Mohammed doesn't know anything about God. Buddha doesn't know anything about God.

Nobody knows God except me. That's what Jesus is saying.

And the only way anyone can ever know anything about God, Jesus says, is if I decide to share, to reveal. That doesn't sound very humble.

That sounds outrageous. C.S. Lewis goes on, if you ask Buddha, are you the son of Rama? He would have said, you're still in the veil of illusion. If you ask Socrates, are you Zeus?

[17:02] He would have laughed at you. If you asked Mohammed, are you Allah? He would have beheaded you for blasphemy. But here is Jesus and look what he says, verse 27. No one knows the son except the father.

And no one knows the father except the son and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal him.

That is an outrageous thing. It's an absolute exclusive claim.

That the only way tonight that you can know God is by coming to the Lord Jesus. And if you haven't come to the Lord Jesus in trust of him, you don't know anything about God. If I can put it this way, God does not put himself in the public domain.

He hides himself from the wise and learned. And in verse 25, he reveals himself to babies. You can't put God in a test tube and discover him there.

God can only be known in the person of Jesus and to those whom Jesus makes himself known to. It's an absolute exclusive claim.

[18:21] But it's universal. He says, come to me, all of you. All of you who are weary and burdened and you can't cope in this fallen world because you're rebels against me.

Come to me and you will find rest. God is not a, he's not an object of inquiry. God is someone who beckons you and calls you and invites you in Jesus Christ.

And the only way that you can come to know God is to come to Jesus, which is the one thing the elites and the academics of our society, they just won't do, will they? God refuses to be known in the way that they demand.

He hides himself. If you want to know God, look what it says. He reveals himself to children who come in simple repentance and dependence and faith and trust crying out to Jesus, please lift my load.

And so the answer to our human need is not religion, it is a relationship. Have you noticed the words that he used? Look at the type of words that he used to describe this relationship. Father, son, children, babies.

[19:41] They're family words. The church of Jesus Christ is a family. Come into the family, Jesus is saying.

It's not philosophy that you need in life, it's the family of God. And the only way that you can come to know God is to come to me. It's a huge paradox. I'm gentle, I'm humble, I'm meek, and I'm mild, but I'm the only way that you will ever know anything about God.

I am the one whom God has committed everything to and I'm the only one who can lift your load. So come to me and I will give you rest. And so the first thing to understand tonight is this invitation is coming from the master of the universe who loves you so much that he has taken human form and he has gone to the cross to take the whole load of your sin and your guilt and your shame and he's put it on his shoulders and the Lord of all has become the servant of all and God can only be known in him and God has made himself known in Jesus.

And so our job as the family of God is to make Jesus known. Our job as people who've come to understand the gospel is to know Jesus and to make him known.

The second paradox is the master who is slave calls you to the work which is rest. The master who is slave calls you to the work which is rest.

[21:10] What's the invitation about? It's about work. It's about taking his yoke upon you. A yoke is a farming implement. It's how they would plow fields in Jesus' day.

They'd put the yoke over the animals. They'd pull the plow. There'd be two animals together. The stronger animal would lift the load for the younger animal and he would guide the way for the less experienced animal.

And Jesus is saying if you come to me that is what it's going to look like. Coming under my yoke. Coming under my control. Coming under my sway. Coming under my direction.

And it's work. Maybe that is why tonight you're not a Christian. It's not that you don't think it's true. And it's not because you don't think that it's relevant. If you know anything about Christianity you'll know that it's relevant. You'll know actually there's nothing more relevant than what Christianity offers you.

[22:20] Everyone in our world wants to know how to be gentle and humble in heart to serve one another in love. In the kind of dog-eat-dog world we live in this is the very message that the world needs to hear.

Nobody in their right mind thinks that Christianity is irrelevant. Any fair-minded person I think who looks at the evidence is not going to say that Christianity is not true.

But the problem is it's too hard. It's too difficult. Gandhi said, didn't he, I'd become a Christian if I could find one. And he admired Jesus Christ.

He admired the teaching of Jesus but he thought that Jesus set the bar too high. And maybe you're here tonight, you're sitting in church and it's not that you don't believe it's true and it's not that you believe that it's irrelevant but you just think I'll never be able to keep it up.

What Jesus asks is impossible. What does Jesus ask of you? That you come under his yoke. What does it mean to follow Christ?

[23:25] It means to submit to him mentally and morally. To come under his yoke means that he is the one who dictates our beliefs for us.

He's the one who dictates our behaviour for us. And so that means if you become a Christian that you'll have to stop sleeping with your girlfriend because the Bible teaches that sex outside of marriage between a man and a wife is not in line with God's commands.

And you say, well, that's really harsh isn't it? Haven't you heard about the sexual revolution? No one lives like that anymore. But who is the master of all and who is the slave of all?

Do you remember what he's like? He is gentle and kind and he is the one who made you and he made you for himself and he says, come to me, take my yoke upon you and my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

My associate minister got really fed up with the shoes that I was wearing. He says, I wear shoes really, really badly or scruffy shoes. So he gave me his wedding shoes. They're the poshest shoes I've ever had.

[24:42] They are terribly uncomfortable. All right? They look great but they're really uncomfortable. Is that what living like a Christian is? Uncomfortable shoes? No, it's not. Jesus says, take my yoke upon you.

My morals actually fit because I am the moral governor of the universe. And if Jesus says that sex outside of marriage is wrong, well, you'd better listen because what is Jesus like?

He's kind and he's gentle and he's got your best interests at heart. And you will find that as you take Jesus' yoke upon your shoulders, even though it'll make you stand out like a sore thumb in our world, you'll find that it's an easy yoke and it fits.

How many broken hearts and damaged relationships maybe even in this room would have been very different if you'd taken the yoke of Christ upon you rather than run riot and throw that yoke off? How many damaged homes in this great city would not be breaking and fractured and hurting if Jesus' yoke had been taken upon?

[25:59] Forgiveness is another one, isn't it? Jesus calls us to forgive one another in love. And that is really painful and that is agonizing. But what's the alternative?

Revenge? Internalizing anger? Bearing a grudge? What does that do to you? What has that done to the people around us in our culture?

It's hard to take the yoke of Jesus on our shoulders to live as a Christian in the world but Jesus says you will find that when you do it, it fits. My yoke is easy.

The apostle Paul summarizes this yoke wonderfully in Philippians chapter 4. He describes the yoke of Christ and this is what he says in verse 12 and 13 of Philippians chapter 4.

He says, I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound in any and every circumstance. I've learned the secret of facing penalty and hunger, abundance and need and I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

[27:01] That is what it means to come under the yoke of Jesus Christ. That when you become a Christian, your life is not your own anymore and he can direct you where you're going.

It means he might tell you to come out of medicine or teaching to become a gospel minister. You're used to plenty and suddenly you find yourself in want.

And you can do that because if it is Jesus' yoke, you can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Whatever call he makes on my life, whatever direction he wants to take my life in, whatever demands he makes upon me, his burden is light.

There's a lovely verse, there's a lovely quote from the Puritans about Jesus' yoke and it says this, it is no more burdensome than wings are to a bird or a wedding ring to a bride.

Have you seen a new bride when she comes back from her honeymoon to the Tron? What's she like? She comes in after her honeymoon and the wedding and she's got her hand on this and she's waiting to you and you say, oh, how was honeymoon?

[28:20] She goes, oh, this ring. Oh, this ring. It's weighing me down. It's such a burden carrying this ring. No one says that, are they? Or you see the birds flying over Calvin Grove.

What are they like? These wings. Oh, they're such a burden. That's not how birds are, are they? That's not what the Christian life is like.

Jesus calls the shots, but it's not wearisome. Yet so many of us as Christians, we go around with faces dragging on the floor, bemoaning how terrible life is.

Dragging ourselves to church. It's such a privilege, isn't it, to be a Christian? It really is. Take my yoke upon you, Jesus says.

Learn of me and you will find that my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Here's the third thing. Who is this invitation for? The invitation is from the master who is slave.

[29:27] It's inviting you to the work which is rest. But who is it for? It is for losers who win. I don't know if you go on the BBC website.

It's kind of a great fictional website these days. But you go on the BBC website and it's quite shameful to admit it. You know, it's an award ceremony, isn't it? You go on the award ceremony and you can look at the photos.

There's a gallery of photos of the award. I'm sure you're all into this. And you go to the film premieres and there's photos. You do it. You're probably not willing to admit it. But there's the movers and the shakers out there and you can see what they're wearing.

Who are the kind of people they take photos of on those kind of galleries on the websites?

Everyone likes to be seen with the winners, don't they? Okay. You go on Instagram.

I'm sure you're all on Instagram. And what are the types of photos that people put on Instagram? When they've just got up in the morning? With them brushing their teeth?

[30:37] No, isn't it? They're all photos of people looking at their best. Winners. Who does Jesus mix with? Jesus mixes with losers.

Losers like you and like me. Come to me, all you who struggle. Come to me, all you who haven't got your act together. You who can't do what God wants you to do, who fail him over and over and over again.

And Jesus says, come to me tonight and I will give you rest. Come under my yoke and I will help you shoulder this load. Come to me, Jesus identifies, doesn't he, with little babies. Look at verses 25 and 26.

He distinguishes there between the wise and the learned and the little babies. Who would you rather be with? Who would you rather have for dinner? Somebody who knows a little bit about something.

That would make, wouldn't it, for an interesting dinner party. Or where would you rather be? In the creche with the snotty kids? And Jesus says, God hides the truth from the wise and learned and he reveals them to snotty-nosed little kids.

[31:49] All right, it's a little babies he's talking about there. What does he mean? Is it positive discrimination for under 12s? Is this

anti-intellectualism? Is Christianity anti-intellectual and obscurantist? And you don't have to use your mind. You don't have to think about it. You just feel the vibes. Is that what this is about? No, of course it's not that. If that were the case, the Apostle Paul, what about the Apostle Paul?

What about Blaise Pascal? Some of the greatest minds in history have been Christians. It's not about intellectual powers. That's not what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about this.

If you are so wise in your own sight and you are so self-sufficient and you look down your nose at these poor Christians who need this crutch to lean on that Christianity is only for the feeble-minded you say.

If that's your attitude, if you are too wise and too learned and you can cope with life and you don't need this prop called Christianity, well, this invitation isn't for you.

[32:54] And in fact, Jesus has got some other things to say to you which are not very nice at all. Somebody was telling me about they'd been in Australia and they'd gone to a maze.

You know what a maze is? And as they went around the maze, they'd been there for an hour or two and it was a little bit frustrating and there was an exit with a sign on it in the maze and it said this, Exit for the elderly and disabled and those who have given up.

And what they didn't know at the time was that was the only way out of the maze. And the only alternative was to keep going round and round and round until you got the message that the only way out of the maze was to admit that you were disabled, elderly and the only way out was to give up.

And the only way for you to get off the treadmill of life and the only way for you to enter into the rest which Jesus offers us and to have God's presence in your life, the only way to enter into that rest is to admit that you've not got your act together.

There's a lovely story about Rabbi Duncan. He was a Hebrew professor in the Free Church College in Edinburgh in the 19th century.

[34:22] He was a very, very eccentric man. There's some great stories about him. And John Duncan was so good at Hebrew he would just preach from his Hebrew Bible and his students, they loved him.

He was really eccentric and they thought, I bet he prays in Hebrew. He was an astonishing intellectual. So one night they went outside his bedroom as he was going to bed and they thought he'll pray in Hebrew.

They check it out and they listened at his door and this is what they heard. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child.

Pity my simplicity. Suffer me to come to thee. And so let me ask you this. At the close of this Lord's Day, have you done that?

Have you got on your knees beside your bed and said, gentle Jesus, meek and mild, the master of the universe, yes, but meek and mild, humble, gentle and kind, Lord of all who has become the servant of all, the one who flung stars into space, but he became the burden bearer for your sin and your guilt.

[35:42] And he took your rebellion and your corruption and he put it on his own shoulders. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child. Pity my simplicity.

Suffer me to come to thee. And so tonight, will you come to him? Maybe you've sat in this church for weeks and months and years, maybe you're here for the first time tonight, it's wonderful that you're here.

But will you come to the Lord Jesus tonight if you've not before? You know it's true. You certainly know that it's relevant.

And perhaps you thought it was too hard, but you don't have to do it on your own. Look around you, there's the family of God with you to help you. Won't you come to him tonight? It's an invitation from Jesus, but it's one of those invitations that requires a response.

And so if you've never come to him before, will you come to him tonight? You can cry out where you are.

[36:53] You can cry out, I come to you, Lord Jesus. I am weary and heavy laden and I need you to take my burdens away. I need to take your yoke

upon me and you promise me rest.

Jesus says to you tonight, come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we do thank you.

we thank you that you are the God who invites, that you are the God who has given us this wonderful invitation full of grace.

We thank you for these wonderful words from your son. Forgive us that we don't take these words to heart. Many of us tonight, we need to confess to you that we seek to lift heavy burdens which others have laid upon us.

[38:19] we put heavy burdens upon ourselves. We live with a measure of guilt and anxiety that we don't need to. Help us to cast all our cares upon you tonight because you care for us.

We thank you that Jesus is our burden bearer. Help us to come to you to know that our sins are forgiven, knowing that Jesus died for us and so make us wholeheartedly willing to live for you.

We pray for those tonight who are here who are battling in submitting to the yoke of Jesus Christ both mentally and morally. We know that there is a cost to living as a Christian and yet it is wonderfully, wonderfully worth it.

We pray for that for our children and for our young people that they will take the yoke of Christ upon them. And Lord, we thank you so much that it is through Jesus that God has made yourself known, that you have made yourself known.

And we pray, Lord, for this church family that as they know Jesus, they will make him known in this great city. And we pray this for his sake and in his name.

[39:33] Amen. Amen.