

“Unforced Rhythms of Grace”

Song of Solomon 2:8-13, Psalm 145:8-14, Romans 7:15-25a, Matt 11:16-19 & 25-30

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A Cherokee grandfather once said to his grandson, “There is a battle between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, inferiority, lies, hate, fear, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, hope, humility, kindness, empathy, grace, compassion, love, and truth.” The boy thought about it and asked, “Grandfather, which wolf wins? The grandfather replied, “The one you feed.”

The Apostle Paul once said to the church in Rome. **Romans 7:15-25a NRSV**

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

The Apostle Paul is giving us a selfie, a picture of the mind, heart, and soul of a Christian. We are tossed back and forth between two forces within us. We are in Christ a new creation, no longer defined by anything that corrupts us. Each of us is viewed by God dressed up in the goodness, righteousness, and glory given to us by Jesus. Yet, at the same time, deeply rooted within us remains sin, impure thoughts, and temptations. One symptom of sin is the aging and deterioration of our physical bodies that die before our soul is set free to soar with abundant life. Another symptom is broken relationships that hurt us until we are all united in harmony in heaven. Other symptoms are fear, hate, loneliness, low self-esteem, restlessness, confusion, bitterness, despair, revenge, a desire to control, sadness, lack of creativity, and jealousy. All of us are simultaneously a saint and a sinner. We are beautiful in the eyes of God because of the extreme makeover of Christ, yet broken to the core because of our sin.

There is freedom in self-awareness. There is gratitude in an unfiltered self-assessment. If you are not seeing your sin, your miserable side, the evil wolf within you, then you are deceiving yourself and the truth is not in you. The more honestly we assess ourselves, admitting our deep continuing brokenness, then the more heroic, glorious, gracious, and generous Jesus appears to us. One cannot fathom the enormity of God’s love until they grasp the ugly depth of their sin.

A healthy self-awareness helps us to not be fooled by the façade of goodness that our ego projects. A healthy self-awareness inspires our worship and gratitude for God who is constantly purifying us. The Apostle Paul said. **2 Corinthians 12:9 “I will boast all the more gladly of my**

weaknesses so that the power of Christ my rest upon me.” Transparency helps us see that our own actions make us a mess, a miserable wretch, yet helps us realize that by God’s amazing grace we are glorious, capable of everything.

The Apostle Paul ends Chapter 7 with brutal transparency then begins Chapter 8 with glorious transparency. **Romans 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** No matter how unflattering the image of us is, no matter how strong the forces are that pull us off the path of righteousness, no matter how much we feed the evil wolf, God refuses to reject us. Show God the worst. God promises that for those who have been covered in the goodness of Jesus and injected with the power of the Holy Spirit there will be no condemnation. You may at times disgust yourself, but God on account of Jesus will always call you a beloved, cherished son or daughter. In Christ there is no rejection for us and there is always love, the ultimate power, at work within us feeding the good wolf even when we fail.

Solomon wrote a song about how God views us. Solomon compares God’s love for us to a loving couple. **Song of Solomon 2:8-13 NRSV “The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.’**

The psalmist sings of God’s love that transforms us, that feeds the good wolf within us. **Psalm 145:8-14 NRSV “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and God’s compassion is over all that God has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all God’s words, and gracious in all God’s deeds. The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.**

Jesus spoke of the evil wolf within us that is never happy no matter what God does. **Matthew 11:16-19, (MSG) “How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, ‘We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.’ John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff. Opinion polls don’t count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”**

Despite the mess we made of our lives and the mess we have made in creation, immediately after Jesus describes our sin he prays for us. **Matthew 11:25-30 (MSG) “Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: “Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You’ve concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that’s the way you like to work.”** Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. **“The Father has**

given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen. "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

St. Augustine said. "Our hearts will remain restless until we rest in God." To join ourselves to Jesus means living in freedom according to God's purposes which brings rest to the soul. Without Jesus a person carries a heavy burden alone, struggling with one's thoughts, feelings, impulses, and actions. Jesus ultimately will deliver us from all our burdens.

Synthesis newsletter explains. "Who then comes to belief? Jesus is most clear in the answer to this important dilemma. Those who find and are able to live in Jesus' freedom are those who admit that they need help. These broken ones can come to Jesus, because he has made himself to be what we are. Jesus speaks to people in their true condition of struggle and perplexity—not to some ideal state which none of us can attain to. And what should be our response? We have only to come to Jesus, all of us—worn and burdened. In fact, if we didn't perceive this to be our condition, we might not be impelled to turn to him at all. The self-satisfied are not the people whom Jesus wins for God. Jesus rescues those burdened by failure and oppression, by their weight of guilt—afflicted in mind, body, and spirit. Jesus' message becomes life to those who desperately need rest through deliverance, perhaps even being "unmade"— and a new start. To be "gentle and humble in heart" is to find rest for the soul; but, it is not a rest of idleness. Rather, it is the source of true spiritual discernment and power—freeing us from the compulsion to control and from the tyrannical devices and desires of our own hearts. How to summarize what it is that Jesus offers? St. Isaac of Syria describes it as: "Among all Jesus' actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love, and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of God's dealings with us."

Charles Spurgeon wrote. "Jesus gives real, and, consequently, universal rest to every part of our spiritual being. The heart is by nature restless as an old ocean's waves; it seeks an object for its affection; and when it finds one beneath the stars, it is doomed to sorrow. Either the beloved changes, and there is disappointment; or death comes in, and there is bereavement. The more tender the heart, the greater its unrest. Those in whom the heart is simply one of the largest valves are undisturbed, because they are callous; but the sensitive, the generous, the unselfish, are often found seeking rest and finding none. To such, the Lord Jesus says, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest." Look hither, ye loving ones, for here is a refuge for your wounded love! You may delight yourselves in the well-beloved, and never fear that God will fail or forget you. Love will not be wasted; however, much of it may be lavished upon Jesus. God deserves it all. In loving God, the heart finds a delicious content. When the head lies in God's bosom, it enjoys an ease which no pillow of down could bestow. ... O aching heart, O breaking heart, come hither, for Jesus saith, "I will give you rest."

Jesus said **"Are you tired? Worn out?"** Our inner struggle exhausts us. We all join ourselves to something, love someone or something. Unless we join ourselves to Jesus, life is miserable.

Jesus said **“Are you burned out on religion?”** Do you think you need to live a certain way or meet a list of requirements or follow certain rules to be loved, transformed, and saved by God? If yes, then you will become burned out on religion.

Jesus said. **“Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”**

In realizing we cannot make it alone we come to faith in Jesus, celebrating our forgiveness and renewal. What are the unforced rhythms of grace for you? The unforced rhythms of grace. What does it mean to live freely and lightly?

Another translation puts it. **“Come to me, all of you who are frustrated and have had a bellyful and I will give you zest. For my harness is practical and my assignment is joy.”**

Listen for ways to join yourself to Jesus, to live the unforced rhythms of grace, to live freely, lightly, zestfully, practically, and joyful in a story by Idries Shah. “A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: “The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.” The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed—that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert. “By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.” “But how could this happen?” “By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind. The wind performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a stream.” “How can I know that this is true?” “It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.” “But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?” “You cannot in either case remain so,” the whisper said. “Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one”—your form or your function. What IS a stream? Its water content—or its meandering shape and purpose? In allowing yourself to be transformed by life, by God’s action, you may sometimes feel you are losing your essential self. But this doubting and questioning is all part of casting yourself on the Divine wisdom, willing yourself to be carried over to the next stage. Are you willing to join yourself to Jesus?”

Jesus said. **“Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”** Amen