

---

## Work Hard Yet Relax During the Race of Faith

A sermon on Hebrews 4:11 and Matthew 11:28-30 by Coty Pinckney |  
preached at Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte NC, August 17, 2008

---

No one in the history of mankind has run 100 meters as fast as Usain Bolt did yesterday. And yet – did you see the head-on shot of his race? He looked completely relaxed.

This coming Saturday night, watch the men's marathon. Ryan Hall will run over 26 miles, averaging well under 5-minutes per mile. That's fast. Indeed, looking around, I don't think there's anyone here this morning who can run one mile that fast. Yet while making that long, sustained effort, his stride will be fluid and his face relaxed.

Are these two anomalies?

No: All good coaches teach their runners to relax.

When trying to run as fast as we can, we have a natural tendency to grimace, to tighten the mouth, the neck, the shoulders. But all that is counterproductive. All that slows you down.

In order to run fast, you must relax.

Why is this? It is actually quite logical, for two reasons.

First, if I am going to use every ounce of energy to achieve my goal, I must not waste any of that limited supply of energy on something irrelevant. Now, I don't run with my jaw, or my fists, or my shoulders. So those must all relax, they all must use no energy, so that all of my energy can be focused on those parts of my body that must work hard if I am to run fast. To achieve the supreme physical effort, we must relax every part of our body not necessary to that effort.

But tightening other muscles not only wastes scarce energy, it also hinders us from running faster. When we run, our leg muscles are alternately contracting and relaxing. Tightness in one part of the body easily leads to tightness elsewhere, hindering the necessary relaxation, and slowing the runner. Tightness in the shoulders also has a direct slowing effect, as we'll see next week.

So we have a paradox: running fast is hard. It requires a great deal of energy. We must work hard if we are to run fast. And yet, we must relax in order to run fast.

Is there a parallel in the Christian life?

By all means. During the service we read passages from Hebrews 4 and Matthew 11, that say, in part:

Make every effort to enter God's rest!

I will give you rest – Take my yoke upon you!

On the surface, these sentences don't seem to make much sense. The first sounds something like: Work real hard to go to sleep! Many of us know from experience that this is counterproductive. Then Jesus promises rest – right before telling us to act like beasts of burden.

What is He talking about?

He's talking about a central truth of the Christian life – what Ray Stedman calls a "revolutionary new principle of human behavior."

This morning we want to look at these two passages, and learn about this paradox of work and rest. We'll do this under two headings, one for each passage:

Hebrews 4: Striving to Rest

Matthew 11: Resting while Striving

### Striving to Rest

Hebrews 3 and 4 is a lengthy, sustained, complicated argument focused on this theme of striving to enter God's rest. Sometime in the next couple of years I hope to preach through Hebrews; at that point we will look at this text in detail. This morning, I only want to help you understand the main point, and why it is so important.

In chapter 3, the author quotes Psalm 95, saying, in part:

**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness. . . . As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'"** (Hebrews 3:7, 8, 11)

This psalm tells of the Israelites who, on their way to the promised land, displayed their lack of faith in God through disobeying Him. They grumbled against Him, they wanted to return to Egypt, they refused to enter the promised land, fearing the giants.

But Psalm 95 is more than history. It also contains a promise. The Holy Spirit, speaking through David, says: "Believe! Trust! Don't harden your heart like they did! And you will enter my rest!"

With that in mind, then, let's read Hebrews 4:9-11

**So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. 11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.**

So: Entering God's rest involves resting from our works. And we must work hard to rest from our works. We must strive to rest.

Entering God's rest clearly pictures eternal salvation: Entering His presence, dwelling with Him forever in the new heavens and new earth. To enter God's rest is thus more important than anything else we can imagine.

But it would be a mistake to think of our entering God's rest as only something future. We enter His rest NOW, in this life.

David surely understood that. Remember Psalm 23?

**The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.**

This is a picture of living a life resting in God. Who is the actor in this psalm? God – again and again and again. David trusts in God's promises, while God leads and guides, showering His love on His servant all the way into eternity.

When we enter God's rest, we trust in **His** work, we lean on **Him**, we depend on **Him**.

So listen: Striving to enter God's rest today is working hard to trust in God's promises, every minute of every day.

We trust initially, through believing the Gospel: that God created us for His glory; that we all reject that purpose and rebel against Him; that He sent His Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of all who would believe in Him hereafter; that the

benefits of that sacrifice accrue to everyone who will repent and believe this Good News.

Subsequent to salvation, we continue to trust every minute of every day. Because in this life we are ALWAYS tempted to lean on our own resources, to lean on our own understanding. We must acknowledge that we CANNOT save ourselves, nor can we make ourselves into the type of person we desire to be, nor can we accomplish ANYTHING for God through our natural resources.

We can never merit salvation through good deeds, nor can we ever merit God's commendation through acts we do in our power.

So when we enter God's rest, we confess to God: "I am a sinner; You are the Savior. In my natural self there is no good thing, only darkness – You are all goodness and light. I can ONLY become what I want, I can ONLY become what YOU desire, through Christ in me: changing me, working out His purposes in me. So may my work apart from Your power cease. May your power take over."

As Ray Stedman says:

We do not have what it takes, and we never did. The only one who can live the Christian life is Jesus Christ. He proposes to reproduce his life in us. Our part is to expose every situation to his life in us, and, by that means, depending upon him and not upon us, we are to meet every situation, enter into every circumstance, and perform every activity. We cease from our own labors.

But this is not easy. We must **strive** to depend continually on God. We always are tempted to act in our natural selves, apart from God's power. So we must strive to enter God's rest by continually checking ourselves:

- When your spouse speaks in an angry tone, and you're tempted to lash back in kind: Pray, seek God's power, turn to the Word ("A gentle answer turns away wrath"); speak words of peace.
- When you're complimented over something you've done, and are thus tempted to exalt yourself, to think how great you are: Pray, seek God's power, turn to the Word ("Apart from Me you can do nothing," "he who humbles himself will be exalted.")
- When a challenge is presented to you at home or at work, and you must plan a response, and you're tempted to rush right in and figure out solution using your own resources: Pray, seek God's power and insight, and turn to the Word ("If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.")
- When faced with moral failure in your own life, and you're tempted to say, "I can overcome this! I will discipline myself, I will improve myself!" Pray, seek God's power, turn to the Word ("Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.")

Striving to enter God's rest is to live a life of active dependence upon God, disciplining yourself to turn to God, to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit, to lean on Him.

As John Piper says:

Do you see the great lesson here? The Christian life is a life of day by day, hour by hour trust in the promises of God to help us and guide us and take care of us and forgive us and bring us into a future of holiness and joy that will satisfy our hearts infinitely more than if we forsake him and put our trust in ourselves or in the promises of this world. And that day by day, hour by hour trust in God's promises is *not* automatic. It is the result of daily diligence.

A marathon runner must continuously monitor himself, asking: "Is there some tightness in my jaw? Relax! Are my shoulders coming up a bit? Drop them!"

Just so, we too must monitor ourselves, saying, "Relax! Relax! Relax! Don't flex a single unnecessary muscle. Relax! Strive to enter God's rest!"

### Resting While Striving

Hebrews 4:11 tells us to work hard at entering God's rest, at depending upon him. If I stopped the sermon here, you might conclude that there is no hard work in the Christian life, other than the hard work of making sure we enter God's rest.

But other passages tell us to work hard for God – yet to rest in Him in the middle of such work.

For example, in Colossians 1:29 Paul says, "I toil." He toils! And he is not here discussing the toil to enter God's rest. He's discussing the toil he faced in spreading the Gospel.

There is no doubt that Paul worked hard. He details in his letters many of the obstacles he had to overcome: Beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, death threats, rejection, exposure to the elements – and eventually execution.

So Paul worked his tail off.

But what is the difference between Paul and, say, the rich young ruler? The rich young ruler, remember, tells Jesus he had kept all of God's commandments from his youth. We might be tempted to laugh at that – but he is unquestionably sincere and, undoubtedly, those looking at his life would conclude that he was an upright, honorable man.

But he has a nagging feeling that all that obedience isn't good enough. He feels that he needs to do something more.

So he asks Jesus: "What must I DO to inherit eternal life?" He WANTS TO toil for God! He says, "Give me some task to do – I'll do it!"

How does Jesus reply? Jesus does not tell him to go do some great feat requiring perseverance, danger, or hardship. Instead, He tells him to do the easiest thing in world. Indeed, all he has to do is to give one command to a servant, and it's done.

And yet this easiest task in the world is exceptionally hard.

Jesus says, "Get rid of everything that you think shows that you are important. Give it away." And Jesus does NOT say next, "Then you'll be worthy of the task I give you." Instead He simply says, "Then FOLLOW me."

Jesus doesn't want your striving. He doesn't need your toiling. He wants **your trust**.

Those who don't have faith in Christ strive to live up to some standard, and fail. They then either fool themselves into thinking they are what they aren't, or they justify their failures – "I'm only human" – or they feel overwhelmed, finding it impossible to live up to their own standards.

What about Christians? What happens when we strive, apart from God's power?

We too become burdened. We are so busy, we are working so hard, we are toiling and striving – and all the joy of the Christian life has left us. We get caught in a fog of unbelief, through which we can't see God – so we go through the motions, saying all the right things, doing all the right things, but we're not really trusting God. We are not striving with His power; we are flailing away with our own power. And so we are weary, burdened, wondering how in the world God's work can go on without us.

To such people Jesus calls out:

**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)**

Rest! That sounds wonderful!

But look at Jesus' very next words:

**Take my yoke upon you.**

Try to imagine that you have never heard these words before. What would you expect Jesus to say after "I will give you rest"? You surely would not expect Him to say, "Now work like a beast of burden!"

So we might respond: "God, I'm *burdened*! I need rest – not a yoke! I can't handle more hardship, more effort, and more hard work!"

What does Jesus say to this? He first of all goes on:

**"Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from Me."**

He is the one who can teach us how to take up work and rest at the same time. For Jesus rested – and He worked.

And He goes on to say:

**For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**  
(Matthew 11:29-30)

So when faced with a task that must be accomplished, we are not to grit our teeth, saying, "Yes, I can! I can do it."

We must admit: "I cannot do this! I am unable! In my natural self, I will fail!"

And turn to Him. He is our yokemate. It is HIS yoke. We are paired with Him. And He pulls. So when we pull – it's really by his power.

That is how Colossians 1:29 continues: Paul says,

**For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.**

This is the difference between the rich young ruler's toiling and Paul's toiling. Christ wasn't at work in the rich young ruler. He was at work in Paul. And He works in us!

For, as Paul says earlier in Colossians, this is the mystery of the Gospel, the mystery hidden for ages, now revealed to all: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

As a runner relaxes every muscle except those involved in running, we must relax from our won efforts, and so that God works through us.

- So do you need speed? Someone with more speed than Usain Bolt dwells in you, and is empowering you.
- Do you need endurance? Someone with more endurance than Ryan Hall dwells in you and is empowering you.

And you need Him – every minute of every day. You need Him – at every task. At *every* task.

We have a tendency to think of God as our ace in the hole. We'll pull Him out in desperate conditions, but outside of those relatively rare occurrences, we are fine, thank you. We consider ourselves reasonably bright, fairly well-read, somewhat talented, sufficiently educated, and overall pretty nice, good people who can accomplish quite a bit on our own. But we know that crises may come into our lives which we couldn't handle – a death, a disability, a loss – and we know that eventually we will face that final crisis, our own death. We certainly acknowledge that we need God at those points. But the rest of the time? Our attitude is, "I'm ok. I can handle it."

When you say that, you are like a runner talking back to his coach: "I run better when I clench my jaw. It feels natural for me to tighten my shoulders!"

You can't run that way – and you can't live the Christian life that way.

Every runner should trust his coach, even though that coach is fallible. But in the race of faith we have the perfect coach. And He tells us: "You do **not** have the resources to run this race. Don't think you only need Me for the final five yards, to help you

across the finish line. You can't start without Me. You can't accelerate without Me. You can't maintain your speed without Me. Apart from Me you can do nothing. So look to Me! I'm pulling with you, making My yoke easy. You are not working for Me. I am working in you and through you, for My glory."

Friends, this was revolutionary for me in the mid 1980's when God first opened up these truths to me. I had thought of the Christian life as devoting time and energy to God's cause. And I considered myself able to do much for Him. God first shattered my self-assurance by showing me I couldn't even succeed in marriage apart from His power. Then he gave me a series of excellent teachers who explained, in somewhat different ways, these key biblical truths.

I have studied these truths time and again, and since have taught them repeatedly.

But listen: *I still struggle with this!*

When running the race of faith, I still clench my jaw and tighten my shoulders. That is, I still keep stepping out under my own power. I still fall too easily and too often into a *prayerless striving*, acting as if my hard work will accomplish God's purposes.

Back when I used to run marathons, Beth and I would plan for her to drive to different sections of the course. I wanted not only her cheers, but also her observations, telling me if she noticed any tightness: "Your jaw is tight! Drop those shoulders!"

I still need similar reminders from you – "Rest in God! Trust Him! Lean on Him continually! Pray without ceasing!"

## Conclusion

Where are you in this? My friend, you need these reminders too.

We will conclude with two final exhortations, two final reminders, to three types of people:

First: Are you striving to please God, hoping He'll let you into His presence? There is no way you will ever impress God. There is no way you will ever please Him – apart from His work in you. Jesus says: "Come to me! Enter my rest! Stop all this counterproductive activity." Admit that though God created you for His glory, You've toiled to glorify yourself. Admit that you are thus a sinner, deserving God's judgment. Trust in Christ and in His death on the cross to cover your sin. Come to Him! Enter His rest.

Second: Are you saved, but caught up in the trap of trying to live up to the ideal Christian life on your own?

Or third: Do you – like me – have a right understanding of the biblical doctrines of salvation and sanctification, yet you keep leaning on yourself and not on God?

To these two groups, Jesus says the same:

"My yoke is easy. My burden is light. Depend on Me. Turn to Me for the strength to pull on this yoke. Rely on my Word. Trust My promises. I have begun a good work in you – I will complete it."

Make every effort to enter God's rest. And then: In the work He gives, lean, lean, lean on Him.

Trust His promises. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Even if you walk through the valley of shadow, He will be right there. In the daily temptations to anger, to annoyance, to lust, to pride – He is there, providing a way out.

So follow Him. Trust Him. Delight in Him. Relax. And work hard – by His power – in the race of faith.

The Ray Stedman quote is from *What More Can God Say?* (Regal, 1974), p. 52-53. It can also be found online at [www.raystedman.org](http://www.raystedman.org). The Piper quote is from his sermon on Hebrews 4:1-11, which is available online at [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/26/965\\_Be\\_Diligent\\_to\\_Enter\\_Gods\\_Rest/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/26/965_Be_Diligent_to_Enter_Gods_Rest/)

Copyright © 2008, Thomas C. Pinckney. This data file is the sole property of Thomas C. Pinckney. Please feel free to copy it in written form, but only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice.

This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, posted on the internet, copied for resale or incorporated in any products offered for sale, without the written permission of Thomas C. Pinckney, [www.desiringGODchurch.org](http://www.desiringGODchurch.org), c/o Desiring God Community Church, PO Box 620099, Charlotte, NC 28262.