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## MAYBE LIKE THAT TOY SUBMARINE Matthew 11

One day a couple of weeks ago Laurie and I took care of our little granddaughters for a day. We had them from about 9 in the morning until the end of the day. It was a blast. By that I mean it was tremendous fun, but it was also a blast of activity. Two year olds seem to have two states they exist in, sleeping and moving. If they are awake they are going. They love repetition. And they have a boundless capacity for what they consider entertaining activity. One of our neighbors gave us a toy plane that has several buttons you push that produce different sounds. Ella calls it Michael's plane. That's not surprising since every plane is Michael's plane in her world. So one time I pretended to fly the plane like it was attacking her so she ran to Yammaw. I had come from out of the kitchen on this sortie. So Ella said, "Kitchen, again." I had to go back to the kitchen and make another attack run. Over, and over, and over again. I believe I must have flown 20 sorties before we moved on to a different game.

We had endless fun. At the end of the day Toby and Anna arrived to pick the girls up and take them home. We hated to see them go. But after they left we both collapsed on the couch, looked at each other and said, "I'm exhausted." We had planned to go out that evening, but there was zero chance of that happening. We were utterly worn out and had zero energy for that. We needed REST.

Everyone understands how demanding it is to take care of 2 children under the age of 3. But an awful lot of us live our entire lives on the edge of exhaustion. That's because we are chasing something and the pursuit is wearing us out. Singer Madonna was quoted in a New York Times interview back in 2015 saying, "I feel like a gerbil on a wheel. I feel really drained."

When you feel like you're on the hamster wheel and there's no way off, when you feel drained, what you need is rest. Every human is attempting some things that are beyond our resources, and that drains us, it can make life a struggle to just survive. Let's think about rest as we look at Matthew 11.

## JESUS ANSWERED JOHN'S DISAPPOINTMENT

In chapter 10 Jesus launched his men on a short term mission trip. In this chapter he continued his own travels around the Galilee area as he kept on preaching. By

this time John the Baptizer has been arrested and is in prison. John had drawn the ire of King Herod by calling him out for his blatant moral failings, including divorcing his wife and stealing his brother's wife. While he is in prison John sends some of his disciples to Jesus and has them ask, "Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?" In other words, are you really the Messiah, or did I get that wrong?

This is surprising given what John himself said earlier. John 1:29-30 tells us that John said of Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" Then in verse 34 he said, "I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

John said that Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One. But now he is asking if Jesus, is, in fact, the one. He knew for certain that Jesus was special, that he clearly had divine power, but he's wondering if maybe he got it wrong. Maybe Jesus is some sort of prophet, but not Messiah. What has happened to create that doubt?

John had an expectation of what Jesus was going to do, and Jesus was not meeting that expectation. This is a fundamental issue that every person who puts faith in God will encounter at some point. Life does not go the way we want. We pray and ask God to act, and it seems reasonable that if God is really there, he really has the ability to act and he really cares about us, that he will answer our prayer. He will save us and fix the problem we have encountered. But God does not answer. In fact, we get no hint of help from him and we end up disappointed. We start to question if God is even there at all, or if he is whether he cares about us. John was going through exactly that process.

Jesus didn't seem to be doing what John expected. He wasn't creating a movement that would challenge and overcome Rome and establish a heaven on earth in Judea. In fact, he was alienating the leaders of Israel rather than rallying them, and the Romans took zero note of him. On a personal level, John himself was in prison and Jesus was doing nothing about it. John likely didn't think the Messiah would leave crummy Herod unchallenged. He's supposed to be the King of the world, the Ruler of all, so why was he letting Herod run roughshod all over John? Why didn't he do something?

You have to be really old to remember this, but there was a time when Kellogg's had a toy submarine that you could get with their cereal. At first they offered a deal

on a 4.5 inch sub where you had to send in a box top with a quarter, then later there was a smaller one included in the box for free. They were advertised on TV, and it seemed so exciting. You could have your very own real submarine. On the commercials it was amazing what it could do. Then you got the real thing. It was this tiny plastic submarine that you would put baking powder in. When you put it in water it would sink. Then water would get inside, react with the baking powder and create carbon dioxide bubbles, which would cause the toy to rise to the surface. As soon as it got to the surface it would capsize, the gas would escape, and it would sink to the bottom again. That's all it could do. Sink, rise to the surface, capsize, sink, then repeat. It didn't come close to matching the drama and excitement the commercials seemed to promise and my feverish boy brain dreamed up. It was more than a little disappointing. Uh, so Rick, you're saying that Jesus was like a plastic cereal box toy? Well, for John he was quite a bit more disappointing than that.

John is scratching his head and wondering if he somehow got it all wrong. Could Jesus be just another forerunner like John was, and maybe the real Lamb of God was yet to show up on the horizon? What John saw happening in his own life and in the world did not match up with his expectations.

I love that Jesus didn't say, "Sheesh, John, where's your faith? I expected better from you." Verses 4-5 say he told John's guys to relay this message. "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." In other words, you weren't wrong. I am doing the miracles you would expect Messiah to do. I'm exactly who you thought I was. So don't give up. God's plan is going forward.

## JESUS PRAISED JOHN

After this exchange with John's followers Jesus turned to the crowd and asked them, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" Many of the people who were listening to Jesus had first gone to see what John had to say. So Jesus asks, "Did you go out there to see a reed swayed by the wind?" A reed swayed by the wind would not be worth making any effort to see. It is the normal course of events.

Jesus asks, "Did you all take the trouble to go all the way out there in the wilderness for nothing? Did you go to see something as ordinary as a bird catching a worm or a fish swimming in the sea? No, you went out there to see something highly unusual, something that doesn't come along every day." Was it some celebrity, or some rich guy dressed in clothes immensely better than you could

ever afford? No, they weren't going out there just to see some well known wealthy person. They went to see a prophet. It had been 400 years since God had sent a prophet. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity, for who knows when God will send another one.

In fact, Jesus said John was more than just any old prophet. He was specifically foretold by God. Malachi quoted the Lord in Malachi 3:1 saying, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come." Malachi 4:5-6 says, "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents." In Matthew 11:14 Jesus said, "If you are willing to accept it; he is the Elijah who was to come." In other words, John filled Malachi's prophecies.

But wait. In John 1:21 some priests and Levites, who were mostly opposed to John and kind of irked by him because he made them look bad, said to him, "Who are you? Are you Elijah?" John said, "I am not." Well that sounds like John said he wasn't Elijah but Jesus said he was. John meant he was not literally Elijah somehow reincarnated. The prophet had not physically returned to this world. But look at Luke 1:17. An angel had appeared to Zechariah, who was the father of John the Baptist. This was before John was born, and the angel had come to inform Zechariah that he and his wife were going to have a remarkable son. In verse 17 he said of the coming baby, "He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." In other words, the boy would grow up to be a prophet like Elijah who would fulfill the prophecy of Malachi 4:5.

So John said he was not Elijah in the literal sense. But Jesus said he was Elijah in a metaphorical sense, for he was like Elijah. Elijah had proclaimed the truth in a spiritual wasteland, a barren place where few were obeying God. John also proclaimed the truth in a wasteland, a barren place where few were obeying God. He did, indeed, prepare people for the coming of Messiah. Thus John lived and ministered the same way Elijah did. He came in the spirit of Elijah and in so doing fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi 4:5

In verse 8 Jesus said, "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John." So the question is, what percentage of people have been born of women? How many of us were given birth by a woman? Well, that would be 100%

of us. Every person ever born was given birth by a woman. That means that no human being has ever been greater than John.

Someone might object, "How great can he be? He's in jail!" Jesus says, "From the time of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it." All the Jews were expecting the Messiah to come be a powerful, conquering king who would trounce any and all opposition. But Jesus said something surprising. The kingdom of heaven is being opposed, and will continue to be. Violent people like Herod are doing all they can to stop the kingdom, and so they put John in prison. They will continue to attack the kingdom by opposing and eventually executing the king himself.

### JESUS CRITICIZED HIS GENERATION

Beginning in verse 16 Jesus asks, "To what can I compare this generation?" He wasn't using the term generation the way we typically think of it. In his culture it could mean "group of people." He's talking about his fellow Jews, especially those who were their leaders.

The leaders had a problem. They didn't like John the Baptizer. But he was wildly popular. The problem for the leaders was if they opposed and criticized him, if they claimed he wasn't really a prophet, they would face disapproval from the masses, because they thought John was terrific. So they publicly kind of reserved judgment on John, but they really opposed him.

So in verse 17 Jesus said they were like kids taunting others, "We played the pipe for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn." Jesus is really needling his opponents here. He's saying, "Nothing can ever make you happy. John came along and he was this wild man, living an austere life, roughing it out in the wilderness. You rejected him saying, 'he's a crazy extremist.' Then I come along and try to reach the sinners and you say, 'look at him partying with the lowlifes. He's just a party animal.'"

In other words, nothing could ever make you happy. You made up your mind to reject anybody who isn't you, even if they are obviously chosen and gifted by God. But, he says, "Wisdom is proved right by her deeds." By that Jesus meant, criticize John and me all you want, but you're going to be proven wrong by the way we live. John's message and faithfulness, Jesus' message, faithfulness and power, would clearly demonstrate they were exactly who they claimed to be. That was sort of a first century version of "the proof is in the pudding." Meanwhile, the actions of the religious leaders would prove their own terrible hypocrisy.

Then Jesus called out the people of the region who had witnessed his miraculous power. They'd seen the incredible things he had done, yet they still had not put their faith in him. He said because of this the day of judgment would not be a happy one for them. He said if Gentiles in places like Tyre, Sidon and Sodom had seen the works Jesus did, they would have believed in him. But the people of Galilee mostly did not.

## JESUS BROUGHT REST

Jesus brought the section to a close by praying and thanking his Father, that though he might face opposition and rejection, the Father's plan was not in jeopardy. The majority, especially the powerful people in Judea, had not accepted the message. But the Father enabled the "little children" to see it. Friday night Ella and Cara spent the night at our house. Yesterday morning we had the Anchorman breakfast. As the guys were all sitting around the table and we were about to discuss a passage from the Bible, little Ella came tooling into the room, walked around the table to me and put her arms up for me to pick her up. It was a sweet moment for old Yapaw (me). But no one invited her to sit in on the discussion and share her thoughts about the biblical passage we were looking at. We briefly paused so the guys could appreciate how ridiculously cute and precocious Ella is, but then it was time for her to join Yammaw and go upstairs. Jesus said that the Heavenly Father had done something astounding. The most educated, intelligent, trained, religious and influential people somehow were missing who Jesus was, despite the abundance evidence he was giving through his works. Instead the common, uneducated and much less religious folk were the ones who were getting who Jesus was. It was as if all those sophisticated adults missed what was going on, but the two year olds were getting the picture.

Then Jesus made the profound offer in verses 28-30. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." The little children, the poor and insignificant people who were looked down on by the elites and seen as too unintelligent and unsophisticated to understand much of anything, were the weary and burdened. They knew that they could never reach the level of the elite religious leaders. They tried their best, but it was far from good enough.

They knew, because the elites let them know, that they didn't count in the eyes of the ones who mattered, and certainly didn't count in God's eyes. Their failures and inabilities weighed on them. They wished they could be better, but they knew that was a pipe dream. Jesus invited those people to come to him, and said if they did,

they would find rest for their souls. He would not put more burdens on them. He would not give them even more laws to obey. He would not tell them they needed to try harder to meet his standards. All that would do is defeat them even more.

He invited them to come to him and learn that he is gentle and humble. He meant that he would accept them tenderly just as they were. All he asked was that they come to him. Just believe in him and trust that he was telling the truth. If they would do that they would find that delicious rest that we all long for. A yoke was often used to represent the teaching and philosophy of a rabbi. Jesus says, “take my yoke, believe what I tell you, and you will be amazed to discover that it is light, it is no burden at all. Instead of more wearying, demanding, never-ending work, you will find rest.”

### APPLICATION

This passage has some crucial things to say about rest. Yahoo news carried a story a year ago about the effect of sleep on us. It reported that a sleep research team at Oxford University has released findings that during the hours we are asleep the brain actually shrinks its synapses by up to 20%. They believe this is a process of pruning out unnecessary memories and information and said that without this we would become overloaded with extraneous information and be unable to cope.

So obviously we need to sleep, but we need rest not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well. Really we are talking about peace. We need peace in our souls to be at rest. And there is a definite lack of that for people in our society. Last June the *New York Times* carried an article that claimed this is now “the United States of Xanax.” It quoted Sarah Fader, a social media consultant in Brooklyn talking about her own struggles with anxiety. She said, “If you’re a human being living in 2017 and you’re not anxious, there’s something wrong with you.”

Mark Buchanan began his book, *The Rest of God*, this way, “The world is not dying for another book. But it is dying for the rest of God.” The battle to be at peace and to have rest in our souls, actually is mostly waged in our minds. In Romans 12:2 Paul said the process of being transformed, which includes being at peace, involves the “renewing of your mind.” Ephesians 4:23 says we have been taught in Christ to “be made new in the attitude of your minds.”

There are two aspects of how we think that have enormous impact on our ability to have rest in our souls, to be at peace, that we can see in this passage.

## BELIEVE IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN PLAN

We can see this in the experience of John in this chapter. He had hopes, dreams and expectations of what God was going to do. It seemed like all was going according to plan when Jesus launched his ministry. But then things went seriously sideways. Jesus wasn't what John was expecting and John ended up in prison. He would die in that prison. John began wondering if something had gone wrong.

Jesus' message to John was that he was exactly who John had thought he was and that he was carrying out God's plan. He was fulfilling the prophecies even though it didn't look the way John expected. John had to trust that God's plan was working, accomplishing exactly what he wanted, even though it meant that John himself experienced circumstances that were worse than merely disappointing.

Ira Glass, host of the show *This American Life*, not long ago was speaking to a group of about 100 people. He said that all of us start out our adult life with a plan. Call it Plan A. Glass said Plan A is "the fate you were sure life had in store" for you. He asked for a show of hands of those who were still following Plan A. Only one woman raised her hand. She was 23 years old. In other words, everyone basically was on to at least Plan B. No one's life had gone the way they thought it would.

The overwhelming majority of adults who are well along in their journey through life will attest to the fact that it has not gone the way they thought it would, and often not the way they hoped. I have been surprised by the number of people I have talked to through years of ministry who would say if they had it to do all over again they would do things differently.

Even more to the point most of us can identify any number of things that have happened to us that we wish would never have happened. Life has handed us our share of disappointment. That's true for most of us, maybe for all of us. We can mostly identify with John, sitting in that prison thinking, "I saw this going differently in my mind." We can identify with him wondering what has happened to God's plan.

Our tendency is to think that our ability to be at peace, to have rest for our souls, is a function of our circumstances in life. How are you supposed to have rest for your soul when you have had to survive a barrage of losses, setbacks, ordeals and even tragedies? And how are you supposed to be at peace when the threat of more such losses and cataclysms is always hanging over you?



It seems apparent that if our peace, rest for our souls, is dependent on our circumstances, then we will never be truly at peace. We will never have rest. Something bad, something terrible, could happen to us or to those we love dearly at any moment and utterly destroy our peace and rest. Just the possibility of those threats, in fact, ruin our ability to rest.

Disappointment is inevitable in life. The best that we can hope for is we get old, our hair turns gray or falls out, our joints hurt, we get arthritis, our eyes diminish so we can't see like we used to, our skin wrinkles, though we eat less than we ever did we inexplicably get fatter, systems in our body quit working as well as they once did and then finally we die. That's the best we are going to get!

If our peace is predicated on having life go as we wish it would, having pleasant circumstances and a happy ending, we will never be at peace, and we will lose faith in God, for we will feel he has failed us. That tells us that to ever be at peace and have rest for our souls we are going to have found that peace and rest on something other than plan A and good circumstances.

We have to ground our rest in trust that God's plan is moving forward, for God is in charge. He is good, and he is sovereign, and that's why we can rest. Think for a moment about 3 movies that have been made in the past 10 or 15 years. One is The Truman Show. In it Jim Carrey played a man who lived an idyllic existence until he discovered that his whole life was a reality TV show, being run by producers and watched by huge audiences. Then there is the Matrix, where Keanu Reeves played Neo, who learns that humans are actually being kept in a dream state by a matrix of computers that feed off their energy. Then there is The Adjustment Bureau, in which Matt Damon plays a Congressman who learns there is an agency of forces greater than human that are determining the outcome of his life. He fights against their decision that his relationship with a woman he loves must end. What do these movies have in common? They all reflect that sense that somehow our lives are not in our control, that there are forces moving the pieces around on the board.

While the Bible insists we have will and make choices that are meaningful, in truth, God is in control. He is sovereign in all that happens. Ephesians 1:11 insists he works everything out in accord with his will. This gives us the hint to where rest is found. It requires 2 things. First, the acceptance of his plan. Like John, we are going to have to say what we most want is that God's sovereign will be carried out.

We will have to look beyond our personal interests and care more about what God is doing. In effect, like Jesus we will have to say, “not my will, but yours be done, O Lord.” We have to care most not about our comfort and enjoyment, but about fulfilling God’s purpose for us, which means that we reveal his character and bring honor to him. We have to want most of all to do his will and bring him glory. John would have to say, “It’s not my desire to be in prison, but if this is your will, Lord, then this is what I want.”

Second we are going to have to trust him. We will have to believe he is good and is carrying out his loving plan even when we can see no way that could be possible in our circumstance. This is what it means to live by faith. Living by faith is how we find rest for our souls. I was recently talking to Michael about his job as an airline pilot. I know that today’s airliners are highly automated to the point where they can almost fly themselves. I know that pilots actually fly the planes on takeoff and landing, to keep their ability at those flight evolutions in case of any emergency. But I assumed that beyond that they mainly monitored the aircraft systems and the radios as the plane flew its programmed route. Michael informed me that actually the pilots are quite busy. They do have to deal with the radio and with changes in their flight profile as instructed by controllers. He also told me that the plane doesn’t always do things the way the pilots want them to. The automation isn’t perfect. So the pilots are quite busy. It made me reflect on the fact that I put tremendous faith in pilots every time I fly. I trust that they know what they are doing and can get us safely to the right destination.

That’s exactly what we must do in every aspect of life. Trust that God is piloting our lives and that he will get us safely to the right destination. It is only when we do so that we can find true rest. Until we do that we will be white knuckling our way through life, fighting for control, threatened by all manner of forces and incidents that we fear might deny us the destination we desire. Mark Buchanan wrote, “There is no rest for those who don’t believe God is good and sovereign.

### TRUST IN GOD’S GRACE

One issue in this matter of rest for our souls is the fact that all of us are dominated by a desire to be approved. There is a big emphasis in the Bible on having righteousness. People sometimes think that is irrelevant to them. They don’t care about righteousness. It has nothing to do with what life is all about. They couldn’t be more wrong.

Have you ever been rejected? How did you feel about that? You likely hated it. Have you ever been humiliated either by something you have done or by what

someone has done to you? How does that feel? Most of us can remember incidents where we've been humiliated or rejected for the rest of our lives. Those things are burned into our souls. Why do they hurt so bad and leave a permanent scar? It is because we have an insatiable, constant need to be approved and accepted. When anything suggests that we don't measure up in some way it hurts us, it wounds us deeply.

What is righteousness? It is the state of being right. It is measuring up to the standard that is required to gain approval and acceptance. I submit to you that every single human being is continually driven by the need to somehow get affirmation that they are approved. It lurks in the background in almost everything we do. It dogs our every action and most of our thoughts. I will share a couple of things from my life that point to this reality.

I recently had a dream that I hated. In this dream I was still in high school and I was playing baseball, trying to earn a spot on the varsity team. In this instance inexplicably my baseball glove suddenly turned into a left hander's glove. So I had to play with this awkwardly ill-fitting glove intended for a right hand on my left hand. Then I found I could not seem to do the simplest things in baseball, things I've pretty much been able to do in my sleep. Somehow I couldn't catch. I was covering second base and a ball was thrown to me, but I couldn't even get my glove on it. Then I had a chance to throw out a runner who was caught between first and second. All I had to do was throw the ball to the first baseman. It is the easiest throw in baseball. But somehow the ball flew way to the left of the first baseman and bounced about two thirds of the way there. In my dream I was feeling horribly distressed and embarrassed. I was looking bad, I was failing at things that I should be able to do easily and it was killing me. That dream was about not measuring up, about failing and not being approved. I hated it.

Here's one from real life. Weddings are very stressful for me. This is a lifetime event for the couple and if I mess up it will never be forgotten. A couple of times over the years I've fouled up at the climax of the wedding. In one when it came to the end where I present the new couple for the first time, I mispronounced their name! I've remembered those foul ups for years. I will never forget them. I wish I could. They were embarrassing. I looked stupid, and I felt like I was most definitely not approved.

We will never be at peace until we have a solid sense that we are approved. In other words, we will never be at rest until we have righteousness. And this is precisely what Jesus was talking about at the end of this chapter. Jesus' audience

understood what we need most of all was to be approved by God, to be righteous before him. No matter how much approval we get from people it's never enough, because we need God's stamp of approval. They were operating under a familiar system that said the way we get that is by earning. Follow all the rules, do everything right in God's eyes and he will declare you righteous.

Don't you find that every day of your life you have those thoughts that you just aren't good enough? You can see ways that you simply don't measure up, and surely can never measure up to a holy God's demands? The people Jesus addressed were weary because they had been trying their best to gain that approval, but it wasn't enough and they knew it. In fact, they were resigned to the fact that it never would be. And they knew if they didn't get that approval, nothing would ever be enough for them. Their souls would never be at peace and they could never truly rest.

Jesus' promise was astounding. To all of us, to every human trying so hard to somehow measure up, every weary, exhausted human despairing that they would ever be approved for good, Jesus says come to me and you will find rest. You will find the righteousness you need so deeply. In my grace you will be accepted by the Father and you can rest in his unconditional, boundless love. At last you can have rest for your weary soul.

I find so many Christians are striving, working so hard to make themselves better, more holy. Their souls are being exhausted by the pursuit of holiness. They forget that Jesus absolutely did not say, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you a lot more to do. You don't know the half of it. You really need to up your game, and honestly, I doubt you've got it in you to pull it off." He came to give you rest. Here is one thing I know. When I am resting, I am not laboring, working, striving.

Perhaps you saw in the news that Friday was Match Day for graduating medical students. This is a day where these soon to be doctors find about about their future. After med school they become residents, but where they do that is not totally up to them. They submit their requests for the program they would like to a sovereign authority. On Match Day they find out which program they are matched with. They have no choice at that point. They must go. To fail to match is a complete disaster, and that does happen. So Match Day is a day fraught with tension and uncertainty. But it wasn't for Toby. Programs are not supposed to reveal their choices to students. So most have an idea and a lot of hopes for where they might go. But Toby was in a rather unique situation. His first choice program had been doing

back flips trying to let him know that they wanted him. In fact he had several programs going to some lengths to get his attention. He knew he was already accepted by his first choice. So coming into the day he was pretty relaxed, pretty much at rest, because he was righteous in their eyes. In a sense, for us every day is Match Day. But Jesus has already let us know what's going to happen. Because of his kindness, his grace, we are declared righteous, we are accepted. He has said, "Relax, come to me and I will give you rest for your souls." Not tension, uncertainty, demands, burdens, much more work. Rest. So we can put our faith in Jesus, come to him, and find peace in our hearts and rest for our souls.