

CHRISTIANS UNABRIDGED

by Ray C. Stedman

The title, I am sure, requires a bit of explaining. All of us have seen an unabridged dictionary, one of those heavy books, almost a foot thick, containing every word in the English language. It is a very interesting book to read. It has only one drawback -- it changes the subject so frequently. And we have also seen abridged dictionaries. There is considerable difference between an unabridged dictionary and an abridged dictionary, both in size and subject matter, in extent as well as content.

There are also abridged and unabridged Christians. There are pocket-edition Christians with print so fine that nobody can read it. There are desk-edition Christians who lie around and gather dust and are useless. Then there are unabridged Christians, who are a full and complete expression of all that is included in the Christian life. Becoming an unabridged Christian has nothing at all to do with the office you may hold in the church, or the gift you may have, or the training or education you have had. It is quite possible for a pastor to be nothing more than a pocket-edition Christian, very highly abridged. It is equally possible for a plumber to be an unabridged edition, or vice versa for that matter. The issue has simply to do with your grasp and appropriation of all that is in Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament there are certain thumbnail passages which gather up the whole of the Christian life in a very few words. They are wonderfully helpful passages, for we can lay them alongside our experience of Christ and thus know whether we are abridged or unabridged Christians. One of these passages is found in Matthew 11, beginning with Verse 28, these extremely familiar words that many know by heart.

"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." {Matt 11:28-30 RSV}

This is a summary by the Lord Jesus himself of all that is essential in the Christian life. It is amazing how it can be put in a few words. It can even be stated in smaller compass than that. Jesus put the whole of the Christian life in two phrases when he said, "Ye in me and I in you," {John 14:20b KJV}. It is all there, and it is all here as well.

You will note immediately that the Christian life falls into two very perceptible stages. There is an initial act by which the life of Christ in us begins, which leads in turn to a continuing attitude. It takes both to make a full Christian experience. There is a contact which brings about a commitment. It is like marriage. Those of us who are married know that the story all began with that age-old experience of boy meets girl.

One of the questions I have learned to ask married couples who come to me with problems in their married life is, "Where did you meet?" You can almost see the softening of the friction between them as memory goes back to that hour when boy met girl. But that is just the beginning, for the relationship goes on until bride meets groom. There a commitment is made that totally and radically alters their whole lives. This is what Christian life is like.

You will further note that these two aspects of the Christian life are marked by a double use of the word *rest*. It occurs once in Verse 28 and again in Verse 29: "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." There is a rest that is given, imparted, and there is a rest that is found, discovered. It is not the same rest. It happens to be the same word in the original Greek, but it is not the same experience, for there is a different procedure:

"Come," that is all, "Come, and I will give you rest." The second rest is dependent upon quite another activity: "Take my yoke upon you." A yoke is a heavy wooden beam that binds two oxen together and makes them a team. The yoke is an invitation to partnership and to direction. It means submission to control. Therefore, the whole of the Christian life can be put in two simple phrases:

1. It is a contact that involves receiving something, and
2. A control that leads to a discovery.

That is the Christian life.

Now look with me at those statements for a moment.

The first is a contact that involves receiving. Christianity, of course, begins with meeting Christ. You are not a Christian because you go to church, any more than you become an automobile by going into your garage. You are a Christian when you receive Christ. It is not learning a doctrine that makes you a Christian, it is not subscribing to a creed, it is not joining a group: It is coming to know Jesus Christ! The wonderful thing about that is that, as the living Lord, he is never far away from us.

When Paul stood on Mars Hill in Athens and spoke to the intellectuals of the Greek world, he said to them concerning God, "In him we live and move and have our being," {Acts 17:28a}.

No man is very far away from God, but no man can come to the Father but by the Son, and the Lord Jesus Christ is available to anyone. That is why he can say in this simple way, "Come to me." When we turn aside from our own ways, when we turn from the pursuit of our own will and look for him, there he is, waiting for us. We cannot see him but we can experience him for he is waiting to be contacted.

This invitation, you will notice, is given to two classes of people, there are those who labor, and those who are heavy laden. To read it that way sounds as though this invitation is restricted to the working people and to the poor, but it has nothing at all to do with the way you earn your living.

Those who labor, here, are those conscientious, sincere, earnest men and women, boys and girls, who are trying to be good, who recognize that God is in control of the world and that ultimately they must answer for their life before him. They know that good actions and good attitudes have certain value in protecting and delivering them from destructive forces in life, so they are trying to live good, moral lives. There are many, perhaps many here this morning, who obey the law, who try to stay out of trouble, and hope thereby to please God. They are doing the best they can, hoping to please God. But they are finding this is dull, hard work. It is to these that Jesus says, "Come unto me, all ye that are laboring, all that are working, trying hard."

The second class are those that are heavy laden. These are the people who have flung over the traces, who have given themselves to pleasure and to what we call 'wild living,' and already they are sick and tired of it. They have wrung themselves out and there is not much left. Their nights are an empty round of empty pursuits with empty people. Their days are an endless battle with the hangover of guilt and despair. We know them, these folk who are laden down, heavily burdened with the emptiness, the meaninglessness, the frustration of life. To these also Jesus says, "Come." "Come to me and I will rest you." Literally, "I will relieve you," the word has in it the thought of the lifting of a burden.

Rest comes to either of these two classes by the individual realizing that, what he is seeking to do, Jesus Christ has already done. He has done it in their place. Are you laboring to be good enough for God? Then you need to know that God stands ready to credit you with all Christ's goodness, that you can throw away your own filthy rags of righteousness. Your efforts to be good enough fall far, far short of what God requires. You know it, and he knows it; but you do not need them. God stands ready in Jesus Christ to credit you with his righteousness. That is the glory of the cross. It is a place of exchange, where what I am is placed on him, and what he is is given to me. What a relief that is. As Paul says, "We are accepted in the Beloved One" {cf, Eph 1:6}, no longer depending on ourselves but on him.

Dear, so very dear to God,

Dearer I cannot be
For, in the person of his Son,
I'm just as dear as he.

What a relief! I stop trying to work out my own righteousness and rest on his.

Are you burdened with a sordid record and a soiled life? Then you need to know that in Jesus Christ the full penalty has already been paid. You can begin life anew with the page absolutely wiped clean for he has borne the guilt, he has paid the penalty. You can realize that,

Payment God will not twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine!

If he has paid it, there is nothing left for me to pay. In the realization of that the burden is lifted, the guilt is gone. You rest in what another has done in your place. That is true rest.

The sense of relief that comes to anyone who experiences this is very real and immediate. It is what Paul calls "peace with God." Most of our songs and hymns and much of our religious testimonies are about this. It can be a tremendous sense of the lifting of a load and result in an immediate sense of joy.

I met with a young man this morning who only last night had this experience and he was fairly shaking with joy. He could hardly contain himself over what had happened in his life.

I remember well a dear woman a few years ago who was one of those shallow, rootless people living life on the surface, trying to extract satisfaction out of an empty round of pleasure seeking. When she came to Christ the sense of relief was so tremendous she did not know how to express it. She had not yet learned the religious phrases by which we express happiness. She did not know how to say "Hallelujah!" or "Praise the Lord," so she simply stood and shouted "Whoopie! Whoopie!"

Many of us can look back to that day as the beginning of days, as a day of great joy.

O happy day that fixed my choice
On Thee, my Saviour and my God!
Well may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad.

But remember this is only a beginning.

Many of us are quite content to rest the whole matter there. We are grateful to the Lord Jesus for having forgiven our sins and set us on the road, but we are hopeful that he will leave us alone from here on. We are quite content with the joy that we found then, and are ready to go on and live our life pretty much as we did before, only with the wonderful assurance that our destiny is settled. But if we are content, Jesus never is. It is not very long before we realize he is making rather unpleasant demands on us. He says a flat, "No!" about certain activities we have been indulging in, certain habits we have been yielding to. We sense within that he is not pleased, he is saying, "No." He makes us feel uncomfortable about certain pet attitudes we have. We feel convicted about our shortness with those we love, about our criticisms, our lovelessness. He urges us to become involved with people and activities that we have always avoided before. We squirm and twist, and thus become aware of the second stage of Christian life, a control that leads to discovery.

At this point Jesus Christ is exerting in your life his right of Lordship. He is the Lord of all, and your acceptance of his salvation has given him the right to be Lord in your life and now he is beginning to assert it. He is making clear that you must give up your pet delusion that you have a right to your own life. This is a false philosophy that we were born under and raised by. We feel we have a right to run our own affairs. But he makes clear that we have no such right. "You are not your own, you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20}. He is insisting we give up that fancied right, and allow him his right to make us his instrument in the work that he is doing. In other words, we must move on from being redeemed to becoming redeemers. We

become his instruments to do the work that he came into the world to do, that is, redeeming, transforming, changing men and women.

At this point a crisis usually occurs. We either submit and surrender, or we resist and rebel. If we rebel we discover we lose our sense of rest and peace, and wander out into a wilderness of doubt where we can never be happy no matter what we do. Many of us have experienced this and know how true this is. No matter how hard we try we can never be happy. We go back into the world and the things of the world and discover that what once was fun is nothing but a misery, a superficial pleasure for the moment, but leaving an unhappy sensation deep within. We try to keep up an outwardly Christian front but inwardly we are wretched, unhappy, critical, and hypocritical. Perhaps we try to ram our way to the top of whatever job or profession we are in, and thus try to satisfy ourselves with the acclaim and plaudits of men. But we never fully escape the knowledge that we shall have to stand at last before the God whom we have robbed all our lives of his right to be Lord in us and hang our head over a wasted life.

But Jesus does not invite us to this. "Take my yoke upon you," he says. If we take his yoke, if we bow to his Lordship, if we yield to his relentless love, two things begin to happen:

First we begin to learn. "Learn from me," he says. Christ himself is our teacher and under his tutelage the secrets of life begin to unfold to us. We begin to understand ourselves. We begin to understand why men act the way they do, and what is going on in the world, what is behind the strange criss-cross of currents of human life that reflect themselves in the pages of our newspapers? What are these powerful forces? How do they operate? The Holy Spirit becomes our teacher. We are taught of the Spirit only when we take Christ's yoke upon us. That is the first thing.

And the curriculum is outlined for us here, too. What is the subject matter? What shall we study? "Learn of me," he says "for I am gentle and lowly in heart." Our whole subject matter will be gentleness and humility, that is, the secrets of inner beauty. Anyone can obtain a species of outward beauty. If nature does not give it to you then you can buy it in little boxes. But it is inner beauty that makes a person attractive, that makes him wanted and desired. This is simply nothing more than gentleness and humility. Gentleness is strength under control: humility is selflessness. This is the course of study.

Then there is a second thing we discover, Jesus says. We discover rest! "You shall find rest unto your soul," soul rest! The first rest was a rest of spirit. It meant a destiny settled, a relationship assured. When Jesus Christ entered into our spirit we knew that we were his, our destiny was settled. That was the rest of spirit, but this is a rest of soul. The soul is the mind, the emotions, and the will. It is a rest that affects us mentally, emotionally, and volitionally. How does it appear? Jesus goes on to tell us, in Verse 30, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." That which seems to us to be so restricting, the yoke of Christ, that limitation he has put upon us, that control he exercises in our lives, which at first seems to be narrow, restrictive, limiting us, binding us down, holding us back, we discover, when we yield to it, to be easy and light. This comes as a delightful surprise, a discovery. We find that to yield to his control is the key to true liberty. To surrender to his desire is to find the greatest enjoyment. To give up, and to give in, is the only way to really begin to give out.

This burden of our Lord's yoke is like the burden of wings to a bird, like fins to a fish, like a motor in a car. What would you think if I came to you and said, lifting up the hood of your new car, "Why do you carry this big chunk of iron around with you? Look at all the weight it adds to your automobile! How much easier this car would be to push if you did not have this heavy motor here in the front?" You would look at me very pityingly, and would say, "My dear friend, you do not understand. It is that weight of metal that makes the difference between pushing and riding. If I did not have that I would have to push, but it is the motor that makes possible the free movement of a car." So it is the yoke of Jesus Christ that makes life worth living. It is as we submit to his control that we discover we can step out into a world of adventure and glory, a world where every day is a new experience, a new adventure of faith, an exciting time when every contact is filled with utmost possibilities, where you never know what is going to happen next, and life is filled with meaning and richness. Listen to these words of the hymn writer, George Matheson, in a prayer which fully captures this thought:

"Make me captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be;
I sink in life's alarms
When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms,
And strong shall be my hand.

"My will is not my own
Till Thou hast made it Thine;
If it would reach the monarch's throne
It must its crown resign;
It only stands unbent,
Amid the clashing strife,
When on Thy bosom it has leaned,
And found in Thee its life."

Prayer

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for opening these words to us, for the realization that only as we take thy yoke upon us, thy blessed yoke, do we ever fulfill thy intention for us. Lord, teach us to disbelieve the satanic lie that suggests thy yoke will bring restriction, narrowness, and lack of liberty. Draw us in surrender to thyself. In the area of thy present concern for us, Lord, may we say gladly, "Lord Jesus, as thou wilt. Not as I will, but as thou wilt." We pray in thy name, Amen.

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