

OpenTheo

The Greatest Invitation Ever Made - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows us how the heavy burdens we carry in life can be taken from us when we trust Jesus Christ. John explains that in its place we take the light burden of obedience to Christ as our Lord.

Transcript

(music) Think with me of some of the burdens we bear, there is the burden of our anxieties and of our fears, the burden of our temptations and maybe of our responsibilities, there is the burden of our loneliness, so what some people like to call the existential angst.

(music) Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. Whilst John Stott impacted the church across the world, his home church was always all souls, laying in place in the heart of London's West End, and it's from 600 sermons he preached there marking his centenary with some of his most powerful messages.

(music) It's always good to receive an invitation. It will be something of an honour to be told that it's the greatest invitation ever made. You may wonder, what's the catch? Well, John Stott is offering us the greatest invitation ever made, and it's completely genuine.

I imagine that all of us like to receive invitations, whether it's an invitation to a meal or a party, to a theatre, to a concert, or maybe even to church. Some of you may be here tonight simply because you have been invited by a friend to come. Usually at the bottom of an invitation are the cryptic letters RSVP, and most of us know very well enough French to realise that it is a request for us to reply in due course to the invitation.

I remember hearing some time ago about a couple who had found political asylum in this country, from one I think of the Central or Eastern European countries, and whose knowledge of both English and French was very limited indeed. So when they received an invitation to a wedding that had at the bottom RSVP, they hadn't the foggiest idea what it meant. The husband racked his brains for a while until illumination seemed to

dawn upon him, and he said, I know what it means.

Remember, send wedding presents. [laughter] He thought it was a demand. In reality, it was an invitation or an offer.

So I have the privilege tonight of bringing to you in the name of my master, Jesus Christ, the greatest invitation that has ever been made, and was made by him. Maybe you'd like to look at it again in the New Testament. I think if you take the Bible that's there in your seat and turn to the second part of it, I won't read it all, but I think I will read from verse 25.

Matthew's Gospel, chapter 11, verse 25, and these are the words of the greatest teacher who has ever lived, Jesus of Nazareth. At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, that you have hidden these things and the wise and clever and revealed them to babies. That is simple and honest seekers after the truth.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father. Nobody knows the Son except the Father, and nobody knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.

And here is the invitation. 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, because 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. These surely must be among the tenderest and the most appealing words that Jesus of Nazareth ever uttered.

I think it is no wonder that we read the common people heard Him gladly. They marveled at the gracious words that preceded out of His mouth. These words have been immortalized, the sum of this by handle in the Messiah, in the aria in which with consummate skill he links with them words from Isaiah.

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, come unto him. I am sure you remember. They were also taken in the 16th century by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer from the German liturgy of Archbishop Herman of Cologne, and were incorporated in the Anglican Communion Service.

And still today when we come to the Holy Communion, we hear what are called the comfortable words of Jesus, "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." For others, these words are popularized by the famous religious artist Harold Copping. One of his most famous pictures is of a great multitude gathered on a hillside, Jesus standing before them with His arms are stretched in invitation and welcome, and the caption underneath, "Come unto me." The words came home to me recently because less than five months ago, some of you know, I had the privilege of

being on South Georgia island in the South Atlantic, not far from the Antarctic. I visited Grüt Wichen, which is an old whaling station founded by Norwegians in 1904 and long ago abandoned.

It's on at Grüt Wichen that the great explorer, Ernie Schaffleton, died and was buried. And there behind the whaling station is a tiny little Lutheran church surrounded by elephant seals and king penguins. They went into the church and there on the east wall in Norwegian, where the words come unto me, "All you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Now whenever we receive an invitation, we probably want to know a number of things about it, and I want to ask some questions of my text and the Bible, these words of Jesus, because it's always good to question a text in order to find out what it really says.

We want to know from whom the invitation comes, to whom it is addressed, what the nature of the invitation is, whether there are any conditions, and so on. So my first question is, who is the invitation from? Who is it that is inviting us to come to him? Well of course the answer is obvious, it is Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. But it's rather interesting that in the chronology of Matthew's gospel, this great invitation is issued just after Jesus has advanced some quite extraordinary and even stupendous claims.

Not only is he called the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Lord of the universe his father, and added that the father has committed all things into his hands, but Jesus continued, "Nobody knows the son, as he called himself, except the father, and nobody knows the father, except the son, and he to whom so ever the son chooses to reveal him." In other words, that existed, he said, "Between himself and the one he called his father a unique reciprocal relationship, so that nobody knew the one but the other and those to whom the son chose to reveal him. Only he knows God, he said, and only he can make him known." The claim you see was absolute and exclusive, and no other religious teacher in the whole history of the world has ever dared to make such claims. And yet is Jesus' advanced, this great claim, the uniqueness.

There was no bombast, no fanfare of trumpets, no exhibitionism, no kind of ostentation, the wonderful thing about Jesus is that he was the humblest of men. He gave himself in the service of others without any reserve, and on one occasion he even got on his hands and knees and washed his disciples' feet. And it is, you know, this combination of self-centricity in his claims, "I, I, I, nobody knows the father except me," and so on, with the humility of his character and conduct.

It is this combination of self-centenness and unself-centenness, the self-centenness of his teaching, and the unself-centenness of his life. It is that combination that constitutes the greatest evidence that Jesus was who he said he was, the son of God, made flesh. So there is our first question and its answer.

From whom does the invitation come? It comes from one who claimed to be God the son,

made flesh, made a human being. Which brings us to our second question, is the invitation addressed? Well, of course it is addressed to us, it is addressed to all human beings, and as Jesus issues the invitation to us, the picture of us that he paints is not at all complimentary. He describes us as if we were a lot of oxen who were laboring under a misfit yoke and are bearing a heavy and even a crushing burden upon our backs.

Jesus assumed in other words that all human beings are burdened. And I for one do not doubt the accuracy of his diagnosis. Think with me of some of the burdens we bear, there is the burden of our anxieties and of our fears, the burden of our temptations and maybe of our responsibilities.

There is the burden of our loneliness, so what some people like to call the existential angst. And then there is the sense we sometimes have that life has no meaning, the burden of meaninglessness. But above all there is the burden of our failures, of what traditionally are called our sins, and therefore of our guilt.

And I reckon that if we know ourselves as, I think to some degree I know myself, we have all done, said and thought things of which in our better moments we are profoundly ashamed. So what a burden these things can be. Does our conscience never feel its guilt? Is our heart never bowed down with a sense of shame? Have we never cried artists, the Church of England, makes us in the communion service, the burden of them that is of our sin and guilt is intolerable? That is we can bear it no longer.

Because if we have never come to know and feel these burdens, I think we shall never come to Christ. We shall never accept His invitation, because we shall never see our need of it. It is the burden he invites to come to him and to whom he promises rest.

As he said on another occasion, in a different context, those who are healthy don't need a doctor, but only those who are sick. So just as we'd never go to the doctor, and as we're sick or think we are or know we are, so we shall never go to Jesus Christ, unless we know our need of Him, the burden of our sin, our rebellion against Him, our spirit of independence and arrogance, and so our guilt. The very first step to Jesus Christ is the humble step of admitting we need Him.

And I know that there is nothing that keeps people out of the Kingdom of God more than our own pride, self-sufficiency, self-confidence, the imagination that we can do very well without Him. Thank you very much. So there is the answer to the second question.

To whom is the invitation addressed? It is addressed to those who are laboring and are heavy laden and who know it and admit it. Which brings me to the third question, what does Jesus offer us? Will He office to ease our misfit yerk? He offers to lift our burden to give us rest and to set us free. Indeed, we want to add nobody, but He can do it.

Because He is portrayed in the New Testament as the world supreme burden bearer.

Because He bore our burden when He died on the cross. Listen, if you will again to these words of the Bible, many of which I think whatever your background may be, you will know.

From Isaiah, the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of our soul. There is the burden of our sin transferred to Jesus Christ. Or again, John the Baptist, behold the Lamb of God who lifts up and carries away the sin of the world.

Or again, in the letter to the Hebrews, he was once offered to bear the sins of many. Or again, the letter to Peter, he bore our sins in his own body on the tree. By my friends, this is the very essence of the Christian good news that God came after us Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

He took our nature upon Him and became a human being like us. He then lived a perfect life of love and humility and unselfishness. His life unstained by any sin or selfishness.

Then on the cross, as He died for us, He identified Himself deliberately with our sin and guilt. In the startling language of the Apostle Paul, He was actually made sin for us, made sin with our sins, so close with the identification. And then in words even more shocking, He was made a curse for us.

He bore in his own innocent person the judgment that our sins deserved. He became our substitute. He plunged into the God forsaken darkness that is hell in order that we might be spared and forgiven.

Now on the ground of His burden bearing on the cross, on the ground that is of His sin bearing death, He offers us a full and a free forgiveness. Our burden can be lifted because He bore it when He died. Do you know these eloquent words in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, which is all about a man bearing a burden? A man called Christian, he's like this, up this way then the burdened Christian run.

But not without great difficulty because of the load on his back. He ran thus until he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a supple-cut. "So I saw in my dream," says Bunyan, "the justice Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do till he came to the mouth of the supple-cut where it fell in, and I saw it no more." Then was Christian glad and lights him and said with a merry heart, "He has given me rest by his sorrow and life by his death." Then he stood still a while to look and wonder, but it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden.

He looked therefore and looked again, even until the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks. So from whom does the invitation come? From Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be the son of God, made flesh, to whom it is addressed? Is it

addressed to us if we acknowledge that we are weary and heavily burdened? What is he offer to ease the burden, to lift it, to remove it, because he died for us? Which brings me to my fourth and last question, what does he ask from us? And the first answer, of course, is nothing. We can contribute nothing to our own forgiveness.

That's why we need to be forgiven. We cannot earn our own forgiveness by anything that we do. All we have to do is to come to him.

Salvation or forgiveness or a new life is a gift, absolutely free and utterly undeserved. But there is no substitute you know for this personal coming to Jesus. And I venture to ask whether you've ever done it.

Have you come to Christ in order to receive his free gift? He says, "Come unto me if you're laboring and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But he gives rest to those who come to him, acknowledge their need of him and receive from him this gift. Now there are some of us, maybe some here tonight, who are preoccupied with the externals of religion. I trust myself for a number of years, so I think I know what I'm talking about.

These people come to church. They come maybe to Holy Communion, or they come to a clergyman in order to seek his advice, or they may come to the Bible, or they may come to a religious meeting. They come here and come there and come to the other place, and they've never come to Jesus Christ.

It's perfectly possible to come to church and never have come to Jesus Christ. But his invitation is that we come to him and don't stumble over the simplicity of this invitation. It's possible to come to church and never to have come to Jesus Christ.

You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stott on the greatest invitation ever made, which he'll conclude next week. This is the Gospel, the very heart of Evangelical Truth. And that's also the title of our book recommendation for this week, Evangelical Truth.

You'll find details on the homepage of our website, at christenradio.com/johnstott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries, thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his bookworlds to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott founded, go to premier.org.uk/johnstott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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