

Basic Training: Weight Lifting
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 40:1-3; 1 Peter 2:21-25; Matthew 21:1-16

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight is from Matthew 21:1-16. Let's listen to the Word of God. "As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?"

Americans love sports. March Madness means weeks of basketball and brackets. The Super Bowl is the most-watched event in the country. Growing up in Indianapolis, the month of May and the 500 were synonymous. As I saw bits of basketball last week, it struck me how much we don't see...how much goes on behind the scenes. I'm not talking about the coaching or the recruiting. I'm talking about what it takes to become a top-flight athlete.

The essential is strength training. Joe DeFranco has trained professionals in every major American sport, and as he put it, "Today strength training influences every athletic program in the country, no matter what the sport – male or female." It's not just wrestlers and football players. Athletes in every sport have to train. I don't think of auto racing as a physical sport, but racers do strength training to have the physical stamina to drive at top speed for hours on end.

We don't see all the prep. We don't see pushups at the Super Bowl. They're busy playing football. I don't know many athletes who love strength training. It's a lot of pain, a lot of work, and it takes a long time for the effects of strength training to show up in your game. But when we watch any sporting event, we see the results of all that effort behind-the-scenes.

So where is this going? Today we're move out of the Sermon on the Mount for a couple weeks as we enter into Jesus' final week before His crucifixion and resurrection. Matthew covers a ton of ground in chapter 21 as Jesus enters Jerusalem. There's a whole lot of information all at once that's tough to sort out; some of it makes little sense to us now. The sports analogy helps us understand what Jesus is doing. Holy Week is Jesus' supreme act of spiritual weightlifting. From start to finish, Jesus is taking burdens off of His people and onto Himself, culminating on the cross on Good Friday.

First, Jesus tackles the weight of prophecy. He sends disciples to get a donkey and her colt to ride into town. A donkey was no way for a triumphant king to enter a city; kings rode stallions or were carried in chariots. A donkey was a sign of peace, not a conqueror. But Jesus conquers human sin and weakness not through violence but through God's peace stronger than any manmade sword. He rode the foal into town because He is here to keep His promises – the promise made in Zechariah 9:9 several hundred years earlier that the true King of Jerusalem would ride into town on a colt. That same day, in this passage, he fulfills and references other prophecies to His coming from Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. He takes every prophetic word about His role as the Messiah on His shoulders.

Zechariah 9:9 promises that the king riding into town on a foal will bring salvation. Jesus now carries the weight of that promise. Palm Sunday is the traditional day when we all shout, "Hosanna!" It's the title of a couple songs we sing and it's a lyric in many others. It's the word the crowds exclaim as Jesus passes by. It's also tricky to translate. "Hosanna" original was a cry for help. It meant, "Save us!" Over time, it came to mean to ask for salvation and, at the same time, to give thanks and praise for salvation. When they shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David" to Jesus, they are crying out for God's deliverance, thanking Jesus for providing it, and counting on Him to come through...all at once!

Not only does Jesus bear the weight of His people's cry for salvation, He takes on their expectations. They lay down their cloaks and put palm branches in the road. They're preparing His way as their King. But they're still thinking from a human point of view – they want Him to conquer their enemies and overthrow their oppressors. Jesus carries that weight. He accepts their praise as King while refusing to bow to their desire to make Him an earthly ruler.

And He's just getting started! It's as if Jesus has conquered the machines and stepped over to the free weights. The next weight is huge – Jesus adds the sacrificial system to His load. He goes to the temple and drives away all the merchants selling animals for sacrifice and all the moneychangers taking their cut as they exchange foreign currency for coins acceptable in the temple. They'd made a mockery of the temple, the place where God condescended to dwell among His people, the holiest place in Jewish thought! Yet now its courts are filled with buying and selling, people making a buck off religion. Jesus says, "Enough. It's done!"

Jesus tells His disciples that God is going to take up residence in human hearts, not in temples, synagogues, or church buildings. Believers are the church, and the Holy Spirit lives in us. There is no need for a temple any more. When Jesus clears the courts, He's doing more than protesting the greedy sinfulness of the opportunists and the kickbacks made to the religious elite. He's saying, "You need a new and permanent sacrifice. The old system is done."

Jesus takes the system of religious sacrifices – the system that has been the established way to get right with God, the system practiced for over 1400 years – and He places it on His back. What it once did imperfectly, Jesus will now do for us perfectly. As Hebrews 7:27 tells us, “Unlike the other high priests, [Jesus] does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”

He’s not done yet. He continues what He’s been doing through His ministry by lifting the burden of suffering from others. The blind and lame come to Him and are healed. The affliction they faced is gone, thanks to Jesus carrying it away from them. He even handles the weight of disapproval from the Pharisees. They are furious when little children shout in Jesus’ honor in the temple. They confront Him about it – “They’re calling you the Messiah! How can you possibly let that continue?” And Jesus replies from Scripture. They’re right! It’s the most natural thing in the world; the children understand better than the religious authorities. He faces their anger because He is who He claims to be – the promised King sent to save His people.

Throughout the rest of the week, Jesus proves Himself time and time again. Yet there’s one more weight to carry – the weight of sin. All the other weights are nothing in comparison. If this weight is left on us, everything else falls apart. If our forgiveness is not purchased, if the punishment for our sins is not removed, then all is lost and anything else Jesus did counts for nothing. All the rest is part and parcel of who Jesus is and what He was called to do, but Good Friday is the field of battle, the big game, the valley in which death will either reign supreme or be eternally defeated.

We know that Jesus is up to the task because we have seen all that He has done already. As we heard from Peter this evening, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” It was His perfection that made it possible. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Jesus’ perfection made Him the sacrifice able to atone for our sins, to cover the unrighteousness of all who would come to Him in faith. When it counted, when the true test came, Christ overcame death. As 2 Timothy 1:9-10 puts it, “[God’s] grace was given [to] us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

During Holy Week, we contemplate the incredible sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. We lament the fact that Jesus would even have to come. We lament that our sin nailed Him to the tree. We lament that even when we have faith, we often doubt and fall into sin, needing His forgiveness. But we rejoice knowing that Christ was stronger in His weakest moment than we are in our strongest. He has overcome, so we who believe will too. We rejoice in the promise of new life.

It's great that Jesus does all that weightlifting, but what does that do for our burdens? What about all the New Testament authors and Jesus Himself command us to do? In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says, "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." That sounds nice, but it's hard to believe considering everything else He said. Jesus warns in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." So which is it? Is our burden under Jesus easy or light? Possible or impossible?

Here's the key: following Jesus, trusting in Him by faith, gives Jesus our personal burdens and makes a way for us to withstand what will be placed upon us. There are two burdens we can carry. We can either carry the burden of the Old Testament law with all its rules and restrictions and guilt, or we can carry the burden of Jesus.

As Jesus pointed out time and again in the Sermon on the Mount, we've already failed to carry the burden of the Law. It is impossible. We cannot do it. I was talking to one of my Catholic racquetball buddies the other day who told me that following the rules, the Ten Commandments, was the way into heaven. And I said, "Not committing adultery is pretty easy. Not lusting is hard. Not committing murder is easy. Not being angry with someone is impossible." And he said, "You know, you're right." And there's no going back under the Law. We cannot fulfill it. Even if we could, we would have no way to undo the wrongs we've already done. The Law condemns us without mercy.

Jesus' load is light because Jesus is doing all the heavy lifting for us. He lifts the requirements of the Law. He takes away the guilt of sin. He carries our shame and punishment to the cross for us. He is the sacrifice; He is our salvation; He carries it all, all the things that would weigh us down and keep us from an eternity with God!

The load He gives to us in return is a trifle. It's nothing. It's easy to bear because as God works within us, as the salvation of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit invade every aspect of our lives, we want to live like Him and for Him. We want His joy, His peace, His kindness, His forgiveness, His self-control, His patience. When Jesus says that we must deny ourselves daily and take up the cross to follow Him, that's not a burden; it's a joy! We don't want the old life any more. We know how sin ruins us, destroys lives, destroys relationships, and we don't want it. To die to ourselves is a blessing. We were made for so much more.

For the last four hundred years, people have come to America from around the world for a better life. They have given up home, property, possessions, jobs, even family. They have learned new skills and a new language. At the end of that process, after years of work and study, they have to renounce their old citizenship to become Americans. They formally declare that they are done with their old life. Millions upon millions of people have done precisely that because what they gave up was so little in comparison to what they gained. They knew what it was to die to a life that wasn't worth preserving to gain a new life. If that's the case, then we can understand how giving up certain pleasures and desires and tempers that lead to misery is nothing in comparison to embracing the new life God has for us, full of joy and peace and, eventually, eternal life.

If you've never asked Jesus to be your weight lifter, if you've never given your life over to Him and begun the journey of following Him, do it today. He is willing to carry your burdens. But you must come to Him. You must trust in Him through faith. You must begin the journey. If you've never done that, see me after the service today and I will help you start the most important relationship you will ever have.

But there's an important question to ask as we finish up this evening: how do I carry the weight that God asks me to carry? Jesus and Paul and the authors of the New Testament seem to tell us a lot about what we should be doing and how we should be acting, things to avoid and things to do more and more. There's a lot.

And in the months and years to come, as CrossWay gets a permanent location and begins meeting on Sundays, as we reach out into the community, there's a lot of work ahead for all of us. All of us need to grow in faith. We need to learn how to reach out to others. We need to learn how to talk to God in prayer and teach others how to do it, how to read the Bible and study it, how to genuinely walk with God. It's going to be hard work to grow God's church.

There's one way we can accomplish it all. I'm going to use one more sports analogy as we wrap up: *all we have to do is keep our eye on the ball*. That's the central thing I've learned in almost every sport I've played – racquetball, tennis, baseball, golf, basketball. Keep your eye on the ball. No matter how fit you are, no matter how athletic, no matter how gifted, if you do not keep your eye on the ball, you will fail. I couldn't hit a golf ball more than ten feet until I learned that keeping my eye on the ball was more important than finding out where it went later. In racquetball, if you don't keep your eye on the ball, it will careen off of three walls and roll on the floor before you can even think of what to do next. Watching Cameron play basketball a couple weeks ago, I saw which kids could rebound and which kids couldn't. It wasn't a matter of who was tallest. It was a matter of who kept their eyes on the ball.

Jesus is our ball. He is our center, our target, our goal. He is everything. If we are disciples of Jesus, we will keep our eyes on Him. If we focus on our morals and fail to focus on Jesus, we will miss both. If we focus on good deeds and ministering to people but fail to focus on Jesus, they'll account for nothing. We can even substitute knowing good theology and reading our Bible every day with keeping Jesus in the center of our eye. I've done that. When I have, I've missed. If you keep your focus laser-like on Jesus, though, everything else will come into focus too. We'll go back to the Sermon on the Mount in a few weeks and study this in more detail. For now, simply keep in mind Matthew 6:23: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Friends, as this week begins, set your hearts and minds on Jesus. Know that He went to the cross for you. His pain is your gain if you simply trust in Him in simple faith. Come to Him in sorrow for your sin and a desire for a new life, and He will be your weight lifter.