

Being Yoked

Matthew 11:28-30 NIV - ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

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Perhaps, today's scripture sounds more familiar in this form. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 KJV) I always had mixed feelings about this passage. As a construction worker, I figured that Jesus was definitely talking to me when he said "all ye who labor." It kind of sounded like I had some sort of advantage over folks who sat in comfortable offices and just pushed paper around. But the yoke, the burden, of being a Christian didn't always seem easy. Learning of Jesus, learning about Jesus, wasn't too big a strain. If I stayed awake during enough sermons, the preacher would tell me about Jesus. It was the "turning the other cheek" and "forgiving seventy times seven" stuff that didn't seem to fit in with the promise that it would be easy. Maybe Jesus didn't really mean it. Maybe those were just ideals.

However, "rest for your soul" sounded like it was about how everything would be perfect in heaven, if I could just get there. Rest for my soul sort of fit with the cartoons about heaven – people sitting on soft clouds, in comfortable white robes, and playing harps. Every now and then you might spread your wings and fly over to a nearby cloud to visit with a long dead friend or relative. Safe. Restful. Serene. No worries, no hassles, no sweating or other physical discomfort.

In studying this passage, much more depth and much broader meaning has come to light. Jesus began by saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened." What are the burdens? Though we know that Jesus spent a lot of time and energy relieving human suffering, this isn't only about the burdens of ignorance, poverty, sickness, and oppression,. Jesus was also talking about the detailed religious obligations prescribed by religious leaders. In Matthew 23:2- 4 (NRS) Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees . . . tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others." The heavy burdens were minutely detailed rules that had to be followed in order to please God. If you were plowing your field on Friday afternoon and you lost track of time, how great was your sin if you didn't get your ox back to the barn before sunset to begin the Sabbath day of rest? And did Sabbath begin when the sun first touched the horizon, or when the sun was below the horizon, or when it was dark enough to see the first star? Did you have to tithe the herbs in your garden? Was that a crop? What about the wild strawberries that grew on your land? Were they a crop that must be tithed?

We see these same sort of burdens today in detailed religious practices and obligations. What sort of music is acceptable in worship? Can it include drums? Are we less Christian if we don't have a Wednesday night worship service? If there's a revival or a preaching mission, how sinful is it if we miss going on Tuesday night? Do we base our giving to the church on the gross or the net income? Some very real burdens in the time of Christ - and today as well – are fear caused by anxiety and the heavy load of a guilty conscience. Am I sure I know the rules? Am I following the rules exactly? How good do I have to be?

Jesus said, "If you're staggering under a heavy burden, I'll give you rest." The word we translate as "rest" has broad meanings that include not only rest, but "refresh" and "revive." Sabbath rest is an example of this. Sabbath rest includes physical rest, but it also involves mental rest, time with family and friends, time to read, time to be refreshed and revived. Jesus said that we weren't created for the Sabbath - but that the Sabbath was created for our benefit. (Mark 2:27) It isn't a matter of following detailed rules in order to satisfy the Sabbath, but instead, letting the Sabbath be a blessing to us. When we make detailed rules, we can forget that one person's rest is another's chore. For some, cooking is a chore and so some folks have a

tradition of eating out after church on Sunday. For others, cooking is a creative outlet and a relaxing thing to do. My neighbor frowned severely on those people who mow their lawns on Sunday afternoon. But me? I was thinking about how nice it would be to get out of the house and enjoy the smell of fresh mown grass.

This rest, this reviving and refreshing, is something offered to us here and now. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, ⁶ Thus says the LORD: Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16 NRS) If we walk the path of faith, if we take the journey, we're promised that we'll find it to be reviving and refreshing. The letter to the Hebrews also talks about this rest in terms of the present. ^{NRS} **Hebrews 4:1 & 3** Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to **have failed** to reach it. ³ For we who have believed enter that rest." Remember that the journey of faith takes us through many stages. We move from "How can I earn love" to "Where can I share love?" Faith that has grown to the stage of being motivated by love - is faith that frees us from fear and hatred. The result is contentment, refreshment, and rest.

Next, Jesus told us to take up his yoke. A yoke is an instrument for doing work. A yoke for carrying water allows a person to carry two buckets of water with less effort. The weight is balanced and rests on the shoulders instead of requiring strength and stamina in your arms and hands. A yoke is also a symbol of servitude. No one lives without a yoke. Some bear the yoke of being shunned by society. Jesus says, "Let me assure you that you are a child of God, made in God's image." Some bear the yoke of insecurity or guilt. Jesus says, "Fear not." Some bear the yoke of ambition, or greed, or lust for power. Jesus says, "Let me show you a life that has meaning and fulfillment."

Jesus said "take up my yoke and learn from me." It is a command. This is an imperative. Learn. We're to learn **from** Jesus. This isn't just learning about Jesus. We're to learn from Jesus by paying attention to how he lived, how he walked the path of faith. What did he do? How do we walk in his footsteps? What do we learn from his teachings? Learning is critically important to the journey. And if we learn, we will find rest and refreshment, we will revive our souls. The meaning of "souls" is also broader than we realize. The ancient Greek here can not only mean our soul as something separate from our mind and body, but it also includes our self, our life, our earthly life. Learn from me, Jesus says, and your life will be refreshed, your inner self will be revived. This isn't just about the sweet by and by. It's also about the here and now!

Finally, Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." It's easy to misinterpret this final statement. We can hear it as a way of saying that little is expected of us. We don't need to change very much. When someone dies, others may ask, "Was she a Christian?" The answer comes back, "Oh yes, we found her baptism record in her things." That's a bit too easy. The church camp song gets it right. "They will know we are Christians by our love!" Matthew Henry, a Presbyterian minister in the late 1600s, said that the yoke of Jesus is easy because it is lined with love. "The burden Jesus places on those who come to him is light because . . . its demands . . . perfectly fit human beings . . . The demands of this yoke are to love God above all and one's neighbor as oneself. Love is a gentle yoke, not burdensome or wearying, but light, easy, pleasant."¹

In this part of the text, the word "easy" doesn't convey the full meaning of the Greek. The word here means easy, yes, but also kind, benevolent and loving. An easy yoke is a kind yoke, one that fits and thus prevents chafing. The yoke of Jesus is following the law of God, yes, but the law interpreted through justice, mercy, and love. The "yoke is obedience to the commandments of the kingdom of heaven, a willingness to serve others with humility and mercy."²

Jesus promises a less burdensome way of fulfilling the law. His yoke isn't about slavish attention to minute details of religious observance so that we can be considered worthy or righteous. Rather than fulfill the law regarding the Sabbath by fretting over what is or isn't classified as work, fulfill the purpose of the Sabbath by being refreshed and revived. Jesus delivers us from the artificial burdens of human religion. If having nice "Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes" drains our budget and prevents us from being generous toward

the poor, then our priorities are backward. If we concentrate on finding the exact Biblical rule for every circumstance rather than being motivated by love for God and our neighbor, then we stagger under a heavy yoke rather than a kind or easy yoke. If we focus on a beautiful sanctuary more than on justice and mercy, the yoke is more ours than Christ's.

Yvette Flunder was raised as a Pentecostal fundamentalist but became a UCC minister. For many years she searched for the one exact biblical answer for each of life's questions. There had to be one and only one right way to pray, to sing, to proclaim the gospel, to worship. It was a heavy yoke to bear. Now, she says, "I know less and less about the one answer to every question. But I have more peace than I ever had in my life. I'm more secure even though I'm filled with more questions. I'm more at ease in my relationship with God, and I'm not ashamed, and I'm not afraid." Now she bears the yoke lined with love, the yoke of kindness and service to others. And that is the easy yoke that refreshes and revives our lives. Amen.

¹ David E. Holwerda, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2001) p 71

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 132