

Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

EASY?

I want us to focus in on that last verse.

Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Okay, so what is easy about taking up a cross and following Jesus? I might say that his yoke gives us a sense of purpose. I might say that his yoke helps us through the difficult times.

But, I would not say that his yoke is easy.

We need to remember that Jesus also said the way to salvation is not a wide superhighway. It is the narrow, rocky path. (Matthew 7:13-14) Jesus also said that foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20)

I don’t know about you, but none of that sounds very easy to me. More than that, if we try to follow the way of Jesus, we soon learn personally that his way is far from easy. Loving enemies, doing good to those that persecute you and serving humbly does not come easy to me!

So, how can Jesus say that his yoke is easy? Maybe we have a problem with translation.

In this particular case I would want to ask the folks who translated the NRSV (and many other translations) why they chose to translate this particular Greek word “easy”.

There are some alternative translations that seem to make more sense. For example, we could translate, “my yoke is *good*” or even “my yoke is *gracious*.”

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I think that last translation makes the most sense. Grace is about the goodness of God. We believe that the grace and goodness of God prevail in the long run.

But, in the short run the walk of faith can be a real struggle. It can be anything but “easy”.

Once again Peterson’s dynamic translation in *The Message* is helpful. He paraphrases this verse,

“Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

THE YOKE’S ON YOU

Most of us don’t really know about yokes. We’ve seen them in pictures, but most of us have not yoked a team of oxen and gone to work in the fields.

Of course, in the agrarian world of Jesus’ day this was not true. This was a very familiar image. Animals yoked together could pull a load that would be impossible for one animal to bear.

In other words if we are yoked together with the Spirit of Christ, the burdens of life are easier to bear.

The word yoke was also used metaphorically by the Jews to speak about adherence to God’s law. If someone was yoked to the law, they were faithful to God’s commandments, and this made life better.

The law was supposed to be a means of grace.

TURNING YOKES INTO BURDENS

But, the religious leaders had taken the law, a means of grace and turned it into a burden. For example, they turned the keeping of the Sabbath from a time of rest and recreation into a burdensome set of rules and regulations.

They substituted the rules of men for the gracious teachings of God. Tradition became more important than the law. They turned a yoke that was supposed to be helpful and supportive into a yoke that was a burden. (Matthew 7:6-12)

I have seen this happen many times. Religious leaders who have a distorted view of the Christianity have caused great harm to people both inside and outside the faith.

Christians have said and done the most ungracious things in the name of Jesus. Those who were supposed to be religious leaders have truly turned out to be wolves in sheep's clothing.

That's what Jesus was talking about in the first part of our lesson for today. He said that the "wise and the intelligent" didn't have a clue about the kingdom of God. In contrast God chose to reveal what the wise and intelligent couldn't figure out to the "infants".

REVEALED TO INFANTS

Who was Jesus referring to in this passage? The "wise and intelligent" are the religious leaders. They know everything about the Hebrew Bible, but ironically they know nothing about the nature of God.

The "infants" are not religious leaders. In fact some of them are not even a part of the Jewish nation.

But, when they meet Jesus the Spirit of God changes them. The glory of God's grace is revealed to them, and they are saved. This is a recurrent theme in Matthew's gospel. The insiders, the Jewish leaders have no clue when it comes to God's kingdom. They reject Jesus.

And yet the outsiders, those who are beaten down and broken by life embrace Jesus. They are the sick and the lame, the lepers and the demon-possessed, the tax collectors and sinners.

Like little children they are able to see their need for salvation. They trust him. They follow Jesus wherever he goes and with no questions asked because in one way or another they have nothing left to lose.

One commentator wrote, "There is something about the pain of human suffering that tills the soil for the fertile seed of Jesus' words. If Jesus had an advertising billboard it could have read, 'Troubled? Make the change to Yoke Light!'"

Though I have studied the Bible my entire life, sometimes I think that I have understood the grace of God in Jesus Christ most clearly not in the rarified air of the study but when things were not going so well in my life. I think I have understood the depth of God's salvation best when life was at its worst and (in a sense) I had nothing left to lose.

I understood the love of God best when I felt like a little child, an infant who needed help in every way. Indeed, Jesus did say that unless we become like little children we cannot enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:13-15)

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I remember a story about the greater preacher and teacher, William Barclay. Barclay was a young preacher when his mother died, and he asked his father how he thought this would change his preaching. And Barclay's father said that it wouldn't change what he said, but it would change how it said it.

The gospel must be preached in the context of compassion. We must proclaim the good news of God's word with a sense of humility and gentleness. Notice that this is how Jesus describes himself to those who need to have their burdens lifted. Jesus is gentle and humble in heart.

I have come to believe that this gentle and humble attitude is way more important than merely having orthodox beliefs.

COLD ORTHODOXY

Now don't misunderstand. Orthodox beliefs are important. If we believe the wrong thing about God, we often behave in a way that is sinful. We do need to focus our mind on God's truth as well as having a heart of compassion.

But, we cannot let orthodox beliefs become the be all and end all life. Cold orthodoxy can become a distorted faith that (as Jesus put it) strains at a gnat and swallows a camel.

We can become so involved in the technicalities of our own debates that we neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. (Matthew 23:23-24)

Jesus was indeed humble and gentle, but that did not mean he lacked the courage to confront injustice. The whole gospel of Matthew emphasizes how Jesus was in almost constant conflict with the religious leaders of his day.

For example, in the passages that precede our lesson for today Jesus sharply criticizes the religious leaders lack of sincerity. They said that John the Baptist was too strict in his ascetic and judgmental ways. But, then they said that Jesus was too loose because he ate and drank with sinners. It was catch 22. No matter what you did when it came to those religious leaders you were wrong!

So, apparently those leaders were not really interested in what God wanted. They were interested in control. They were using religion as a way to advance their own agenda. And Jesus is very harsh in his criticism. He said their duplicity made them worse than even the worst examples of paganism. (Matthew 11:16-24)

We too should tremble when we read these passages. It is possible that we are doing the work of the devil in the name of God. It is possible that we are (to coin a Mark Twain expression) "good" men and women in the worst sense of the word!

JUDGMENT AND SALVATION

You may have noticed that our lesson for today has a rather abrupt shift. In verses 25-27 Jesus is talking about how the wise have no clue and that only the infants whom God chooses can understand what the kingdom of God is all about.

And then in verse 28 the mood shifts dramatically. All of a sudden the talk of judgment is gone, and there is an open invitation to experience the grace of God.

Once again the translation of Eugene Peterson captures this sudden shift in the text. He paraphrases the verse in this way,

“Jesus resumed talking to the people but now more tenderly.”

Once again we see an important principle. Jesus judges those whom He loves. Jesus judges us not to destroy us but to warn us of impending danger and cause us to go in a different direction. Jesus says come to me and go away from that which will destroy you.

You sometimes hear people talk about a “come to Jesus meeting”.

This is a way of saying that we are going to confront someone concerning his or her bad behavior. It is a time of judgment.

I often thought that this was an odd name because these meetings seemed to have very little to do with Jesus and everything to do with how I had failed in some way.

But, maybe there is also grace in judgment.

If we see a child headed toward a cliff, will we say,
“Now Joey, don’t do that.”

Of course not, we will fairly scream at the top of our lungs,

“Stop. Go in another direction. If you keep going that way you are going to die!”

We don’t say that because we want to judge the child or harm his or her self-esteem. We say that to save him.

I look at the judgment of God in much the same way. We see in Jesus that God agonizes over our faithless ways. Jesus calls us to repent. Jesus calls us to come home to a loving Father who is willing at any moment to take us back.

All of us need to hear that message.

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All of us, religious and irreligious alike, need to hear this message on a daily basis.

COME

If you have never memorized a verse of Scripture, I suggest you memorize the invitation in verse 28. Jesus said,

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus says come. It doesn't make any difference who you are or how you are. Jesus says that “all” can come.

It reminds me of that old hymn of invitation, Just as I Am.

We come to Jesus just as we are. We come to Jesus with all our conflicts and fears and doubts. We come to Jesus because we have come to the end of our rope and are hanging on by our fingernails.

Jesus gives all of us an opportunity to come.

The invitation is for the self-righteous who are burdened by their own religion as well as those who find themselves beaten down by life. We don't have to keep going the way we are going. Jesus says come to me.

Come home. Come home and lay your burdens down. Lay your burdens down and I will give you rest.

REST

I like that phrase, “I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired.” These days I find more and more people who can identify with that phrase.

The weariness we feel is more than just the hustle and bustle of the modern world or the challenges that each of us face in life. It is a profound sense of discouragement. It is a longing that comes from a deeper need.

Some people like to say with a tinge of anger and exasperation, “God won't give us more than we can stand.” I think that's a misunderstanding of Scripture and a misunderstanding of God.

God isn't in the business of laying burdens on us. God is in the business of taking burdens off of us! I think God in Christ says,

“All of you have had more than you can stand. You are overburdened. You are sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Quit trying to make it on your own. Come to me. Trust not in your own abilities and efforts. Trust in my grace and forgiveness.”

THE FREEDOM MEAL

It appropriate that the words of Matthew 11:28 are often used as an invitation to communion. We come to the Lord’s Table not because we are worthy. We come to the Lord’s Table because we are sinners, broken by life and by our own bad behavior.

It is at the Lord’s Table that we learn once again that true faith is not a do it yourself project. It is a work of sheer grace. We remember that his body was broken for us. His blood was shed for us.

But, even body broken and blood shed could stop the love of God as revealed in Jesus. Instead, those wounds became the means of grace.

That setback became the greatest triumph the world has ever known. In this sacrifice we see glory, salvation and life eternal.

And this gracious meal calls all of us, out of *thanksgiving*, to live in a different way. Instead of being a slave to our desires and the demands of others, we lay down our burdens and take up the cross of Christ. We recognize that the love and grace of God calls us to a new way of life that is gracious.

This is the yoke of Christ. It is life lived in harmony with a God who is best revealed by a life of sacrificial love. It is the freedom to live by the grace we have known in Christ Jesus. It is the freedom to put down our many burdens and serve others without reserve.

Tomorrow many of us will get together for the traditional Fourth of July picnic. We’ll cook steaks (or tube steaks) on the grill. We may watch fireworks.

And many of us will not think about the true meaning of the celebration. It will just be a day off, a time to be with family and friends.

But, for some of us, in our better moments we will know better.

It’s not just a temporary reprieve from work and the routine of life. It’s about freedom. Because of the sacrifices made for us by others we have the privilege to live in this country.

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The Fourth of July picnic is not just a picnic. It is a simple meal that celebrates the fact that God did shed His grace on this country.

So how do we respond to this national grace? Did men and women die so that we can do whatever strikes our fancy? No.

Freedom comes with responsibility. Out of *gratitude* we are called to care about our country and sacrifice for our country. "Freedom isn't free" as the bumper sticker puts it.

The key word is gratitude. Without gratitude there will be no service. Without gratitude there will be no freedom. Without gratitude our country could eventually fail and fall.

This is true not only of our country but also of our faith. Out of gratitude we are called to serve Jesus. Out of gratitude we are called to take up a yoke.

It will not be an "easy" yoke. That is a bad translation and bad theology.

But, it will be a gracious burden.

It will be a burden that takes all other burdens away. It will be the freedom to serve Christ and not our own vain desires. It will be the freedom from guilt.

It will be a hope that lasts forever.

So today I invite you once more to a freedom feast, the Lord's Table. At that table Jesus tells us,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

I think that invitation includes just about all of us!

Amen.