



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Exploring Matthew: A well-fitted yoke

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Matthew 11:16-19 & 25-30

16 "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: **17** " 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' **18** For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' **19** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. **26** Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. **27** "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **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."

In the second of this short series in Matthew, we delve into the 11th Chapter, which essentially does two things:

- It explores various responses to Jesus and his kingdom message
- It concludes with a renewed invitation to those who read these words to accept his grace and rest.

Chapter 11 is one of two chapters which focus upon establishing Jesus' authority. We read these words against the background of people in Jesus' day who were burdened by the excessive demands of religious leaders, who claimed to be actively faithful to God's love in the way they exercised their authority.

Our reading in Matthew 11, verses 16–19 and the concluding words in 25–30, may appear to have little to say to each other. In the first, we have a cameo about children who cannot agree on the games they play. Children played in the marketplaces and often disagreed about what game came next.

Children are fun as they grow. As grandparents five times over, we have renewed our interest in card games like 'snap' and the perennial 'snakes and ladders'. Have you ever played with children who want to change the rules as they go, especially if they have not yet learnt that losing happens to us all at some time or other? Incidentally, it is not only children who play in such a way. We observe such games every day in Canberra, Washington and London.

Looking closely at Matthew 11, the two passages may relate to the reception given to both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Early in the chapter, we have been told that John the Baptist is now in prison.

John and Jesus are of course relations but, according to popular perception, they could not be more different. John is the austere wilderness prophet whose fasting and diet were far from inviting. On the other hand, Jesus was known to enjoy a good meal with all kinds of company.

The second passage is found at the end of Matthew 11 and provides our familiar text: "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." (Matthew 11:28-30)

These often quoted words are capable of being misunderstood. Imagine listening to someone saying that following Jesus is easy because, unlike the Pharisees, he is not too particular about how we live. Such an interpretation does not stand scrutiny against the total sweep of the teaching of Jesus, who calls us to take up the cross and follow him.

The 'easy yoke' is all the more perplexing when we put it into its biblical context of the strenuous demands placed upon disciples in Chapter 10 and the rejection that is also depicted in Chapter 11.

In a former responsibility, I was often called in to help facilitate the way through a difficult situation of conflict and, invariably, such a meeting took place a considerable distance from home.

Depending upon the challenge of the day, I would set the car radio to a station which had the word 'light' in it. This station would not play hard rock or really thoughtful classical music. I even avoided intense debates on current affairs, but listened to soft music from the 1960s and 70s.

- Such music demanded little
- It allowed me to think about other things
- It was not in any way complex or difficult

When Jesus talked about his way being easy and his burden light, is this what he was saying? Was he suggesting little importance be attached to the obligations and demands of God?

The answer is clearly 'not so' but, as we read this text, we keep in mind the religion of the day which was perceived as oppressive, with its panoply of rules and regulations.

Jesus offered an alternative way as the starting point for following, which seemed light when compared to the onerous regulated religion.

David Hill reminds us that "Jewish legalism could be very burdensome to many ..."

The invitation of Jesus would by nature be a condemnation of those who loaded people with burdens that were hard to bear. We hear the strong words of Luke's Gospel, addressed to the Pharisees and religious leaders:

"And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." (11:46)

THE YOKE OF JESUS IS DIFFERENT

Jesus knew all too well that people felt overburdened by the tedious and tiring emphasis upon rules and regulations. People were weary in their quest for acceptance and Jesus Christ offered a way of release in the form of a new yoke.

We may be familiar with the agricultural usage of the term 'yoke' when referring to beasts of the field, used for planting, ploughing and general duties. However, at the time of Jesus the term was also used with reference to 'the yoke of the law' in various aspects of rabbinic teaching and would resonate in the minds of those who first heard or read these words.

Such a yoke could enslave people. Our yokes might be priorities and allegiances to which we attach great importance, other than Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

Are we in danger of becoming enslaved by the very tools that are meant to make life easier? Is the cellular telephone not a tool, but an addictive piece of hardware that holds us hostage? One piece of research suggested people check their electronic devices on average once every 6 minutes!

One use of the Jewish phrase meaning to be 'yoked to' relates to 'entering into submission to'. When we understand this, we better comprehend how the law could become burdensome and heavy upon people's lives.

There is a distinction between how Jesus introduces this concept, compared to the way it was used by the Jewish leaders of the day. They saw it as all about learning the law whereas Jesus makes it a way of invitation: 'Come to me'.

There are similarities in the way we regard the yoke, for example there is no discipleship without a task. But those who come to him will find that the yoke Jesus places upon us will never be irksome or crushing.

- **It will not leave us feeling defeated**

So many aspects of religion can leave people feeling that, no matter how long they live, they could never achieve what is being required of them. There are broken patterns of Christian religion which make faith and witness more a matter of rule and regulation, rather than delight in following Christ.

- **It will be appropriate to our lives**

Jesus was familiar with a carpenter's shop and would have been aware of how important it was to have a well-fitted yoke. In the agricultural world of the day, ox yokes were made of wood and the oxen would be brought to the carpenter, the necessary measurements taken and the yoke made appropriate to the beasts. It was rather like having a suit made to measure! This was not only out of care for the oxen; but also necessary for the good management of the business the farmer was operating.

- **It will be liberating**

For many people, religion has become anything but liberating. Indeed, it has placed shackles upon people's lives.

The burdens of religious practice have been compounded by the struggle to find forgiveness and to forgive those who hurt us, in addition to the incessant search for salvation. St Augustine wrote, "I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are wise and very beautiful; but I never read in either of them: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden.'"

JESUS INVITES US TO TAKE HIS YOKE UPON OURSELVES

Jesus never forces his way upon us; our text is invitational. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our lives. This is the yoke of the kingdom of God and, as with all invitations, we can accept it ... or we can refuse it.

Sometimes we receive invitations that we know are politely sent, with no real expectation of being accepted. Only the other day, I received an invitation to a meal and function being held in Nashville, Tennessee. Now, however much I might want to attend, it's a long way to go for a feed!

- **God will never force his will and purpose upon us**

The aspect of choice is very precious to us in our tradition and it has a warmth about it which goes back to the very nature of the ministry of Jesus. The word 'Come' speaks of the response of faith—and 'take my yoke' is about practical obedience.

- **His will and purpose can be our delight**

Once a person has chosen to follow Jesus Christ and then live out the way of discipleship, there can be a handing over our lives to a better will and purpose, which can in the best sense emancipate our lives, setting us free in a way we never thought religion ever could do.

- **It requires acceptance on our part**

Just as two oxen pulling in different directions is unhelpful, so we must acknowledge that the demands of Christ upon our lives ask that we do not pull in an opposite direction to God's will and purpose. To take upon ourselves the yoke of Christ is to submit to his leadership.

In our Methodist tradition, the Covenant Service, which John Wesley encouraged and was also endearing to the Moravians, picks up the same thought when the congregation is invited to make their covenant:

"Beloved in Christ,
let us again claim for ourselves
this covenant which God has made with his people,
and take upon us the yoke of Christ."

The first Covenant Service was held on Christmas Day, but I don't think we would get away with that today! It does point to the fact that we have often too closely linked the concept of covenant to legal agreements, rather than the best sense of spiritual willingness to share together after the pattern of Christ.

No-one clarifies the relationship between personal discipleship and how it might be understood and shared in the community better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his two books *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*.

In *The Cost of Discipleship* he leads us through the dangers of cheap grace and, by reflecting upon the cross, he focuses our thinking and formation on the power of Jesus' teaching.

Bonhoeffer wrote, "Grace is costly because it compels a person to submit to the yoke of Christ, and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy, and burden is light.'"

The secret of living this life of discipleship is being filled with God's Holy Spirit so that the life we live is, in every sense, the life of Christ.

Ralph Earle in his commentary concludes, "When our hearts are filled with God's love, we delight to do his will. Someone has rightly said, 'Love makes all burdens light.'"

A WELL-SUITED YOKE ENABLES MEANINGFUL SERVICE

We yoke ourselves to whatever we consider to be the most valuable aspect of life. Just as in the carpenter's shop, a yoke needed to be properly fitted, we must consider what a poorly-fitted yoke will do.

- It will hinder effective discipleship
- It will make us slaves to religion
- It will prevent us from experiencing the joy of Christ

A well-fitted and well-suited yoke describes our lives when truly connected to Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and will produce:

- **A consent of will**

The voluntary handing over of our lives to Jesus Christ happens in a moment, but also as we give ourselves to him continually.

Earlier in this passage (v.v. 25-27) Jesus Christ maintains that God the Father reveals according to his will and that only he (that is Jesus) understands the Father. He shows us God's way, but requires the consent of our will.

Our willingness must be expressed every day. God has written such opportunities into the fabric of life. In willingly consenting, we clear the way for creative, helpful and healing service.

- **A consecrated purpose**

The way of Jesus is not lighter because it demands less. In the Sermon on the Mount, he taught his righteousness "surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law" and, without it, we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

There is one phrase in this text which I believe to be very important—that is "rest for your souls". This rest is not merely a cessation from toil, but a peace that comes as we consecrate our lives to him. It is a deeper rest of God.

Consecration is a profoundly religious word, used in relation to bishops, or churches in traditions other than ours, and in reference to Holy Communion. It is considered to be about 'making holy'. It infers the setting apart from a common usage to a sacred purpose. By receiving and embracing the way of Jesus, we may consecrate our lives to a new and distinct purpose, neither heavy nor burdensome.

A popular 1960s song took an old Scottish story and made it a hit. The story tells of a man who came upon a little boy carrying a much smaller boy upon his back in difficult circumstances. He said to the boy, "That's a heavy burden for you to carry." The boy replied, "That's no' a burden, that's my wee brother."

Our service in the way of Jesus Christ can drain away our strength and become the exact opposite of what Jesus wants from our life and witness. Only by offering ourselves once again to the way of Jesus can we know what it is to both enjoy and delight in his way.