

### **My Yoke is Easy--My Burden is Light**

There is a wonderful legend concerning the quiet years of Jesus, the years prior to his visible ministry. The legend claims that Jesus the carpenter was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. People came from miles around for a yoke, hand carved and crafted by Jesus, son of Joseph. When customers arrived with their team of oxen Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team, their height, the width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders. Within a week, the team would be brought back and he would carefully place the newly made yoke over the shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges and fitting them perfectly to this particular team of oxen.

That's the yoke Jesus invites us to take. Do not be misled by the word "easy," for its root word in Greek speaks directly of the tailor-made yokes: they were "well-fitting." The yoke Jesus invites us to take, the yoke that brings rest to weary souls, is one that is made exactly to our lives and hearts. The yoke he invites us to wear fits us well, does not rub us nor cause us to develop sore spirits and is designed for two. His yokes were always designed for two. And our yoke-partner is none other than Christ himself.

Running throughout all scripture from the beginning to the end is the theme that ours is a burden-bearing Christ. Jesus is not just a Lord whom we burden, and we do, but a Lord who actually solicits our burdens. In order to be effective in our lives we must give our burdens to Christ, who frees us from our excessive worry & stress.

Jesus takes on different types of our burdens. Christ who sets us free from the burden of sin. Because Jesus came to live with us on this earth, he has compassion & understanding for us as we deal with the daily burden of life & death. But listen afresh to the words of our Lord: "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Here is an invitation that all of us can use, an invitation to a life of joy, peace, wholeness--an invitation to a life of Christian freedom. Jesus bids us to come. It is not an order, but rather a request. We can ignore it, if we choose. Jesus wants us to transfer the yokes we are carrying to him. He wants to give us another yoke, one which is light & which will help us to truly carry our burdens. Jesus wants us to allow him to be our constant companion & to transfer some of the weight we all too often try to carry on our own.

The burdens we all carry need to be given up & Jesus offers to help us by sharing the load with us as we travel along life's pathway. We are all enslaved to different things: jobs, social class, ambition, guilt, money, consumerism, to name a few. We, like the people of Israel long, are enslaved to the various Pharaohs of our day. They are taskmasters as hard as the Pharaohs of old, demanding just as much obedience and allegiance. He alone can bear the load of holiness.

How many ministers have we known, myself included, who undertook the joyous burden of the ministry years ago, only to discover the awesome burden of keeping ourselves fit in study and education and prayer—resisting the kind of temptations that come from a lax ministry or self-indulgence. All are not called to the ordained ministry, but all are called to ministry. There are disciplines that go along with that. All of us are under the burden of righteousness. Ask Paul, ask Martin Luther, ask John Wesley. All in their own way attempted a life of righteousness and it almost brought them to their knees in despair. We give up. In our own way we say “Lord, we have been going to church for so long and we have been praying so hard, and there seems so little answer, just let us rest and leave us alone.” This Christian life can be a burden.

Let me tell you a story. During World War II there was a man in a small town who had volunteered to be a salesman for war bonds. It was a thankless job. He had to go around to his friends and ask them to buy more bonds than they already had. One day he was at his desk eating lunch when he received a fateful telegram from Western Union. The news was what he feared the most—his son was missing in action. The moment that he had dreaded for so long was now upon him. He went home and broke the news to his wife and they had a prayer together. John had an appointment that afternoon to talk to someone about war bonds. Despite his personal depression, he decided to keep the appointment.

He went at 3:00 to the office of a rather prominent and wealthy man in the community. “Bill,” he said, “I will get right to the point. You are a man of some means. You could be doing more and I hope that you do more.” Came back a rather abrupt reply “Now listen. Don’t ask me to do more than I am already doing. I am doing all that I can and I am weary. I will continue at my present level, but I will do no more. Don’t ask me to do more.” “Well, if that is your final answer,” John said. Came the response “It is.” So he left his office.

That evening the news came out in the paper that John’s son was missing in action. The recollection of the afternoon’s conversation echoed in Bill’s mind, “I am doing all that I can do. How can you ask me for more? I am doing all that I am going to do.” The words swirled around in his mind. That night he wrote a message to John. It read: “Sometimes each one of us is a fool and is selfish. Today I was both. I had no idea of the burden under which you labored this afternoon. Whatever is needed, you can count on me.”

All of us feel the burden of righteousness and from time to time we say: “Lord, I cannot take another step.” And we cannot, unless we go to God in prayer and ask Him to remove from us the burden of self-righteousness. When times are hard we are called upon to do hard things. Yet, we need to be more like this man and realize to whom it is that we are speaking when we declare that we are doing all that we can do and are going to do. We are speaking to Creator God who gave God’s only son to the cross.

You see. We might be relieved from the burden of sin but we are not relieved from the burden of the cross. Jesus does not take the yoke upon himself; rather he shares the burden with us. And he promises the yoke will be easy around our shoulders and the burden will be light.

Christ relieves us from the burdens of sin and righteousness so that we can then be free to do the real work that he has called us to and that is bearing the burden of someone else. All the Old Testament from the Mosaic Law to the Prophets is fulfilled in one word: "You are to love one another as Christ hath loved you." This is the demand of the gospel--the demand of love. The difference is that once you have answered Christ's call to obedience, in faith, then the demand becomes not a burden, but a joy.

There are great and good works to be done at home, at work and in the world. It may seem impossible that you have been chosen to perform them. But yoke yourself with Christ and the two of you will do them and more.

Jesus speaks these words about yokes & burdens to those who labored to do the work of the law. The apostle Paul tells us that we are not saved by the law, by our striving to be righteous, or by our own efforts. We are saved by faith, by believing in Jesus Christ. The risen Christ was & is the living proof of how taking the yoke of Christ works out for us. It begins for us at our baptism in which we die to self and rise to Christ. Indeed it is not a painful transaction. In baptism we are brought into the fullness of life with God. The taking of this yoke upon ourselves is accepting what God gives us in love & grace. Faith shows that such a yoke is easy to take, because it is shared with Jesus.

Theologian Frederick Dale Brunner writes, "A yoke is not a sitting instrument....Jesus does not say, "Take my easy chair & learn from me." Jesus rather says, "Take my yoke & learn from me. We followers of Jesus are not left with a mattress or a vacation, but rather we are given a fresh way to bear the responsibilities. How can our faith community bring our fresh ears to hearing what the burdens are that Jesus wants to help us with?

Jesus tells us, in today's words, "Don't stress." Come unto me. My burden is light & what is more, you don't have to carry it alone because a yoke is meant for two. Become a yoke fellow with me. Let me help you carry that burden, which you have placed on your shoulders. In carrying it together we are forever linked.

I wonder if we are willing to pray hard enough and long enough that the church may be a place where God's people are called in love to bear the burdens of others. I am convinced that you are willing. Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Amen.