

“Yoke’s on You! (Metaphorically Speaking)”

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Overbrook Presbyterian Church

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Scripture Reading: Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”



Sermon: “Yoke’s on You! (Metaphorically Speaking)”

Metaphors help us understand life using creative imagery. A person doesn’t just get mad, they “fly off the handle.” A job isn’t just easy, it’s “a piece of cake.” But sometimes an image or metaphor just doesn’t work anymore. Times change. A common household item or normal everyday activity isn’t so common or normal anymore. We might still use the idiom, but its original reference has become obsolete, or forgotten completely. For instance, most cars come with power windows standard and have for years, yet we still talk about “rolling up windows.” Almost no one is using a hand pump to get their water and yet when we talk about putting money into the economy to give it a boost we speak of “priming the pump.” And in this age of digital clocks, keeping time on an hourglass where time is measured in falling sand, is almost unthinkable, yet we still speak of “time running out.”

In this passage, Jesus uses a metaphor that doesn’t really work for most modern-day readers because a yoke is an old-school farm implement and most of us don’t understand what one is or how one is used. So, to begin to understand what Jesus means here, we should turn to our trusty dictionary for enlightenment. According to Merriam-Webster, a yoke is “a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (like oxen) are joined at the head or necks for working together.”¹

A yoke would be used to connect two oxen together so that not only can the farmer lead them, but also ensure that they pull in the same direction. And by having two draft animals pulling together as a unit, you double your plowing power. In a time when farmers tilled their fields by using oxen to pull a plow, that image of a yoke was a meaningful one. But in this day when most American farmers use tractors or other mechanical means to till their fields and harvest their crops, that original image is lost on most readers who just see the yoke as a symbol of burdensome labor. So, whatever that image meant to Jesus’ original audience, most modern readers take the light yoke to mean that following Jesus is easy. Being a disciple is not hard.

Except almost everything else in the gospels contradicts that idea.

Growing up I was always taught that this passage was a reference to the law of Judaism That the law was a burden and Jesus removed that burden. Where the law was geared towards winning God’s approval through strict obedience to a set of rules, Jesus sets people free from that law so that now all you have to do to make God happy is believe. But that understanding of what Jesus said is at best, oversimplified and at worst, incorrect.

For starters, let's establish that we are saved; redeemed; made right with God by God's grace and not by how well we keep the law. That much *is* true. But for Jesus that does not translate to an "anything goes" way of life. The law still matters, but for Jesus, the law is not an end in itself.

In the Old Testament, God gives the Israelites the law in order to help this group of former slaves to govern themselves and be a community together set apart from the rest of the world. How do you show that you're close with God? You keep your actions clean by holding to a moral and ethical lifestyle that honors God's intent for the world, and you keep your life literally clean by washing with water, not eating animals that eat trash, and in general avoiding dirty things. That's what sets the Israelites apart from almost everyone else around them. That's what the law was meant to do.

But over time, those general rules started to get really complicated and religious authorities put more emphasis on properly keeping them all than on worshiping and serving the God who gave them. Jesus comes, in part, to correct that. But he doesn't come to do away with the law. He says so himself in the sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."²

So then what *does* Jesus mean by "Take my yoke upon you ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light?" Over and over Jesus actually shows that being a disciple will be not easy, but *challenging*. He tells the parable of the talents where those who do more with what the master gives them are rewarded with even more responsibility.³ And it's Matthew's Jesus who describes the invitation to inherit the Kingdom being extended to those who provide for the hungry and thirsty, who clothe the naked and welcome the stranger and visit the sick and imprisoned because "as surely as you've done it to the least of these you have done it to me."⁴ And it's Matthew's Jesus who departs with the great commission challenging the disciples to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."⁵

Now who here thinks any of that sounds easy? Who thinks any of that sounds anything other than burdensome? So, what in the world does Jesus mean when he says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light?"

Well, let's remember what a yoke is designed to do: keep two beasts of burden together so that they use their energy to help one another and not pull against one another. So, when we take on Jesus' yoke we are joining him in the work he is already doing. We are strapping in beside him to become part of his team. Jesus says "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me..." That doesn't mean "carry my yoke," it means, "share my yoke."

New Testament scholar Douglas Hare writes that Jesus invites his disciples not just to learn from him by listening, but by watching him and doing what he does.⁶ "The yoke," he argues, "is not one that Jesus imposes, but one he wears! ... [Jesus is saying] Become my yoke mate and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it."⁷

Jesus isn't saying "Here's your work. Good luck with that!" He's saying "Come and join me. Let's share this load together." Jesus offers himself as a help and support to accomplish all of the hard work of discipleship that he has laid at our feet. Yes, we are to care for the oppressed and the poor, welcome the stranger, provide for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned. And those things are going to be hard. But what Jesus promises is that he will get right down there in the dirt with us, and pull part of the load, do

part of the heavy lifting, so that the work we must do is not so burdensome, because we don't have to do it alone. He will give us the strength we need when we feel weak, the courage we need when we are afraid, the wisdom we need when we just can't figure out what to do next.

And that's especially important to hear in a time when we are confronted with the need to sacrifice to help keep others safe. In a time when we are confronted with the need to own the places and times when we've benefited from our privilege and from systemic racism, to begin to set things right. It's especially important in a time when our brothers and sisters express opinions that are different from our own or that we find offensive; and when our society is so divided as a result.

Jesus calls us to love and care for one another, even our enemies. In fact, the greatest of all the laws, according to Jesus, is that we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we love our neighbors as ourselves.⁸ The world is a challenging place, maybe more so now than ever before. And we are called to love the world and reflect the light of Christ into the world. And that will be a huge job. It'll be a tough row to hoe, a pain in the neck, an uphill battle, but it is not our job to do alone and it's not our responsibility to shoulder unassisted. We are called; invited to be partners with Christ in that hard work of loving the world, to learn from him; to find solace in him. To put on his yoke, and to work beside him, pulling together with him in the direction he is going.

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.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Yoke." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Edited by Frederick C. Mish, Tenth ed., Merriam-Webster, 1993, p. 1373.

² Matthew 5:17, NRSV

³ Matthew 25:14-30, NRSV

⁴ Matthew 25:31-46, NRSV

⁵ Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV

⁶ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Interpretation: Matthew*. Louisville: John Knox, 1993. 129. Print.

⁷ Hare, Douglas R. A. pg. 129.

⁸ Matthew 22:35-40, NRSV