

The Yoke

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I) Matthew 11:25-30

II) Introduction

A) *The carpenter*

- 1) The old farmer entered the little village and asked a young boy where he might find the carpenter's shop. The boy pointed west down the dusty road. The farmer nodded in gratitude and walked that way leading two young oxen by hemp ropes.
- 2) A small sign had been posted on a fence post in front of the courtyard of the carpenter's workshop. It read, "My Yoke Fits Well." He had found the right place. The sign was the only advertising that the carpenter used, although word of mouth had spread the carpenter's reputation for quality work throughout the region just as it had for his father. The young carpenter was working in the courtyard chiseling a large piece of wood which did not have much shape yet but the strong, careful hands worked confidently on the rough board as if it were already a work of art.
- 3) "Shalom," said the young carpenter. He had seen the farmer coming long before the boy had pointed to the shop. "Are you thirsty? I have fresh water for both you and your animals."
- 4) "Thank you. Yes, I am thirsty."
- 5) The carpenter put down his tools, wiped his hands and picked up a large water jar and two bowls and carried them toward the farmer and his oxen. He dipped a bowl into the water and gave it to the man then poured a generous amount into a trough. The two young oxen instinctively started drinking.
- 6) "I would like to hire your services sir, to make a yoke for my oxen. I understand that your yokes fit well," he said glancing up at the sign.
- 7) The carpenter smiled. "Yes, I make yokes and if you believe what you read, they do fit well." He smiled and dipped a bowlful of water for himself and took a long drink.
- 8) "I would like to use this team of oxen for the spring planting. They are almost full grown. Of course, they will continue to fill out with age but their bone structure will remain the same."
- 9) "Of course," agreed the carpenter. He put down the water jar and focused his attention on the two fine animals.
- 10) The farmer continued. "They are twins but the one with the spotted ear is a bit stronger and the other is a bit feistier."
- 11) "Will you excuse me a minute." The carpenter picked up the water jar and brought it back inside the courtyard. He disappeared inside the workshop for a moment and then emerged with a measuring rope.
- 12) "So you can make a yoke for me?" the farmer questioned.
- 13) "Of course, you won't be able to plant if you don't have a yoke will you?" A smile spread across the farmer's face.

- 14) "No I won't, no I won't. Thank you, thank you very much."
- 15) The young carpenter went to work. He slowly walked around each animal as they continued to drink. He used his measuring rope to calculate their height, length, shoulder width, neck size and many other measurements that the farmer did not understand their purpose. After the measurements appeared to be completed the carpenter asked if it was OK to take the oxen for a little walk.
- 16) He led them, walking first and then running. He turned them back toward the shop and when they were about 20 yards from the water trough he called to the farmer to pour the rest of the water from his bowl into the trough.
- 17) The carpenter wrapped the ropes around his hands for a good grip as the oxen heard the pouring water and picked up their pace. His sandals glided like skis on the dusty road as the oxen dragged him toward the water trough. He gave both of them a good pat on the back as they dropped their heads for another drink.
- 18) "These are good animals and should serve you well for a long time. You were right, the one with the spotted ear is stronger but the other is definitely the leader. Normally I would put the leader on the left side of the yoke but the one with the spotted ear has a tendency to turn right so I will put him on the left. This one is about half a hand smaller than his spotted ear brother but I can easily compensate for that with the yoke."
- 19) "How long will this take?" asked the farmer.
- 20) "O, if you come back three days after Sabbath it will be ready."
- 21) The carpenter and the farmer shook hands. The deal was made.
- 22) The work went well. Sycamore wood was the best for making oxen yokes. It was strong and light. The curved bows which fit under the necks of the animals had been formed and set out of green branches and then dried in straw over the winter. A good yoke properly separates the animals. If they are too close they will get in each other's way while they work - too far and they will see-saw back and forth. Slowly, after all the planing, chiseling, drilling and sanding the yoke was complete.
- 23) The farmer returned with the oxen on the third day after the Sabbath just like he had promised. Once again the carpenter greeted him with a warm, "Shalom" and a gracious drink of water.
- 24) After the initial greetings, the carpenter brought out the new yoke. It looked more like a smooth wood sculpture than a piece of farm equipment.
- 25) After the oxen finished drinking, the carpenter led them out to the middle of the path and put the one with the brown spotted ear on the left. Carefully, he lifted the yoke and slid it onto the powerful animals. He whispered words of peace.

- 26) To the farmer it was a wondrous thing. The form of the yoke appeared to fit perfectly. If a yoke was improperly made the potential of painful pressure sores would develop on the skin of the animals. Even the smallest irritation could create these sores and prevent an ox from being able to work the rest of the season. This could mean financial ruin for the farmer.
- 27) The carpenter gently slid his hand underneath the yoke to make sure that the enormous weight that the animals would be pulling would be distributed evenly over the skin. If it wasn't, pressure sores would emerge sooner or later. With a rope tied to the rigging in the center of the yoke he had the farmer pull hard while he checked to see if there was even pressure on each of the animals.
- 28) "That's good. I just need to make a few minor adjustments." He pulled the yoke off the oxen's shoulders and carried it back to the shop. It didn't take long for him to return.
- 29) "That should do it. Now if the spotted ear ox seems to be pushing the team to the right, just tighten this strap down a bit and that should solve the problem. Of course, if there are problems bring them back and we will find out what is wrong and fix it." A well made yoke will easily outlast the working life of the oxen.
- 30) The farmer shook the young carpenter's hand and thanked him for the good work. The carpenter watched as he led the young oxen back to the farm to begin the planting season. When they reached the end of the road they met another man who was leading two oxen. The old farmer pointed to the west, back down the dusty road.
- 31) The young carpenter went back into the courtyard and picked up the large water jar and two bowls. Good farmers know that they need good carpenters. Otherwise, there will be no harvest.

III) **Come, all who are weary**

A) ***Two invitations***

- 1) In Matthew 11, Jesus gives us two remarkable invitations. At first glance they almost appear to be contradictory in nature but they are not. The first...

B) ***Matthew 11:28***

- 1) **Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."**
- 2) Are you here this morning carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?
 - (a) *Are you exhausted from all the pressures and difficulties in your life?*
 - (b) *Are you filled with anxiety and question whether or not God even cares about you? Or are you skeptical that he has the power to do anything about your struggles?*
- 3) Jesus' invitation to come is an invitation to unload all your burdens and find relief from your exhaustion and anxiety.

C) ***John the Baptist***

- 1) Our text comes on the back end of a series of communications exchanged between John the Baptist and Jesus while John was in prison. John asked, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"
 - (a) *Of all people, we would not have expected John the Baptist to have this depth of doubt or questions. After all, he was a great prophet. So, if John had questions and doubts it should be no surprise that ordinary people like you and me would be exhausted in our own struggles.*
- 2) Jesus' invitation to come is not a promise that you will avoid having any problems or that you won't have to deal with the struggles of life.
 - (a) *We will still face conflict, illness, lack of resources, opposition, disappointment, injustice, unfairness and sin.*
- 3) You see, Jesus did not change the course of John the Baptist's journey and he will not necessarily change yours. Jesus simply promises to give us rest.
 - (a) *Rest from the oppression of the big questions.*
 - (b) *Rest from our anxiety over money, troubled relationships, shame, grief, the past, and the future.*
 - (c) *Rest from our exhaustion of trying so hard, failing, succeeding, striving, starting, quitting and just living.*

IV) The Yoke

A) Rest - yoke

- 1) The second invitation of Jesus may seem contradictory to the first.
- 2) Jesus said, "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."
- 3) How is it that Jesus offers rest from the weariness of carrying the burdens of life by inviting us to put on his yoke which invariably means, more work?
- 4) The late Ray Stedman, the long time pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California said this,
 - (a) *You become a Christian by coming to Christ, but you learn how to live the Christian life by taking Christ's yoke upon you. You cannot really live the Christian life until you assume the yoke of Christ.*
- 5) Jesus invites you to find rest for your soul by taking on his yoke.
 - (a) *It is a yoke that is especially measured, crafted and fitted for you - with your unique gifts, strengths, weaknesses, burdens, idiosyncrasies and opportunities.*
 - (b) *It is a yoke that makes it possible for you to carry the burdens of life that God allows without developing pressure sores.*

B) Easy - light

- 1) Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
- 2) Jesus does not remove the issues of life that burden us and exhaust us.
- 3) In his book, The Easy Yoke, Doug Webster said,

(a) *His easy yoke is neither cheap nor convenient. The surprising promise of the easy yoke was meant to free us from a self-serving meritorious, performance-based religion. It is easy in that it frees us from the burden of self-centeredness, liberates us from the load of self-righteousness, and frees us to live in the way that God intended us to live. The easy yoke sounds like an oxymoron. Plowing a field or pulling a load is hard work" and nowhere does Jesus promise soft ground for tilling or level paths for bearing the load. What he does promise is a relationship with Himself. The demands are great but the relationship with Jesus makes the burden light.*

c) Jesus the carpenter

- 1) The Bible tells us that Jesus was a carpenter by profession. Scholars speculate that he specialized in making farm equipment because of this text in Matthew about taking his yoke upon us.
- 2) They also point to the fact that Jesus used so many farm and agricultural metaphors and parables in his teaching as a support for the theory.
- 3) Whether or not Jesus actually crafted yokes in his carpenter shop doesn't matter. What is important is that Jesus understands the burdens you are under and the big questions that you face. He knows that you are exhausted and offers rest for your soul.

v) Conclusion

A) Yoking

- 1) There is one other important fact in Jesus' metaphor of the yoke that we cannot overlook. It is this,
(a) *Oxen are always yoked in pairs.*
- 2) In ancient times the same two oxen were paired together throughout their lives. They learned to work together, adjusting and compensating for each other's strengths and weaknesses.

B) So who are you yoked with?

- 1) The apostle Paul warns us in 2 Corinthians 6:14
(a) *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*
- 2) The application is pretty simple. A Christian who is yoked with a non-believer will not be working toward the same kingdom goals and objectives. The value systems and world view will be in conflict and not even a yoke formed out of friendship or even love between the two will prevent the problems of being unequally yoked.

c) The perfect yokefellow

- 1) Jesus calls us to put on his yoke because we are to be yoked with fellow believers who compliment each other's gifts, and strengths and weaknesses for the work of the kingdom of God.
- 2) Here is the good news! Not only are we to be yoked with our brothers and sisters in Christ, **we are invited to be yoked with Jesus himself.**

- 3) We are tied, we are bound together with the one who knows our griefs and sorrows - he knows what needs to be done to relieve the pressure points of our lives so that the burdens feel light.
 - (a) *By his words and example, he gives us courage to keep going when we are plowing the hard rocky ground or pulling a heavy load.*
- 4) When we put on the yoke of Jesus we become more like him.
 - (a) *We learn to imitate his gentleness and humility so that we too are gentle and humble in heart.*
- 5) You see, the weight of the world is on **his** shoulders. That's why our burdens are light! But if you are to be yoked with Jesus then you must do what he said,
 - (a) *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

D) Invitation

- 1) Jesus invites you to find rest in him.
 - (a) *This is not a call to laziness or inactivity. All that would do is make you weaker to carry the burdens of life and vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one.*
- 2) Jesus invites you to put on his yoke.
 - (a) *It is a finely crafted yoke designed and built to fit your own unique physical, emotional and spiritual frame. His yoke always fits well.*
 - (b) *Jesus has already carried the crushing weight of the consequences of your sin. Now he invites you to work the fields, plowing the ground so that there will be a harvest.*
 - (c) *Jesus invites you to,*
- 3) *"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."*

VI) Prayer

- 1) Lord Jesus you know those who have come this morning exhausted from the burdens of life. There are those beat up by pressures in their marriage or parenting. Some who are burdened with being too busy, too little finances or too much criticism. Some who have big decisions to make and are confused. Some who wrestle with big questions and doubts about their life now, their past and future.
- 2) Some are in great pain by the pressure sores of sickness in the family, emotional or mental health issues - grief over the loss of someone they love or the fear that they may lose someone.
- 3) All these and other burdens exhaust us. We hear your invitation to come to you and find rest - to take on your yoke.
- 4) So right now hear our prayers of confession to take off our ill-fitted yokes and our overwhelming burdens. We desire to put our full trust in you - to wear your yoke and walk in your way.

- 5) We come now to you, Lord Jesus, carpenter of our soul, and Lord of our lives, Amen.

VII) Song: Near to the Heart of God

VIII) Benediction

- 1) Wear the yoke of Christ so that you will find rest for your souls and learn to be gentle and humble of heart like Jesus. It is then that you will find that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Plow on, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.