

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” These famous words have been providing Christians comfort ever since Jesus uttered them. They make me think of that painting lots of churches have in their nursery: a meek Jesus gazes fondly at a little sheep he’s holding while a gaggle of toddlers play by his side. Out of context the effect of these words is sedate and serene. But in context, Jesus’ words are charged—in context, Jesus is angry.

But before we deal with angry Jesus, we have to figure out first what a yoke is. Not being an agrarian society sets us back here, so everyone pull out the dictionary of agricultural and horticultural equipment in the pew back in front of you, and flip to the section on antiquated modes of tillage and transport. Okay fine. I’ll just tell you: a yoke is an ancient wooden contraption that links two oxen side by side to help them pull a heavy load. If you’ve heard the expression, “yoked together,” this is where that comes from. There is also a human yoke, which is a single bar across the shoulders, often used to carry a couple buckets of water.

Clearly Jesus is referring to a yoke metaphorically, but for a little fun we could take him literally: maybe we can yoke Eric Ringham, John Lauber, and John Rydeen together for the next annual meeting—see what happens! Metaphorically, a yoke is the set of teachings a philosopher or Rabbi gives to his students. Rabbis in the first century, like teachers today, had different philosophies and methods of teaching, some Rabbis were more rigorous than others; and supposedly the more rigorous the Rabbi, the better the education. Students then figuratively bore the yoke of their teacher as they learned from him.

So when Jesus claims that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, the implication is that someone else is offering a hard yoke and a heavy burden—in short, someone’s instructions are soul-sucking and really hard to follow—and that makes Jesus angry.

Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Jesus and the Pharisees quarrel constantly. You’ll remember that the Pharisees were highly educated lay-leaders whose purpose was to instruct and enforce the laws of Moses. Now the laws of Moses, which you can find in the Old Testament, are complicated. But the Pharisees, well aware of Israel’s recent history of exile, were afraid that any transgression of the law would cause God to reign down a fiery wrath that would send them all straight back into exile. So, to stop people from breaking the laws of Moses, they added more laws around them in order to keep people from breaking those core laws. Think of it this way: if you don’t want people to fall in a pit, you put a big fence around it so that they can’t even get to the pit.

The problem is that these laws of Moses, which were already hard to follow, became even harder with all the new laws added around them. It got so that the Pharisees’ new laws distorted the original purpose of the old laws. Take for example, the Sabbath. The Pharisees had constructed a massive web of laws around the Sabbath in order to keep people from working. They limited how many steps people could take, how much people could interact with their livestock, even what level of assistance people could offer a troubled neighbor. All these laws were in place to keep people from breaking the one main law: rest on the Sabbath. But Jesus challenges them on this. He essentially tells them that the number of laws surrounding the Sabbath have become so burdensome that people are no longer able to rest on the Sabbath. Everyone was too worried about breaking the laws to actually rest.

However well-intentioned the Pharisee’s additions may have been, they distorted the law of Moses and Jesus has had it. Toward the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus directly indicts

the Pharisees for placing heavy burdens, hard to bear, on the shoulders of others while they sit back and never lift a finger themselves. The Pharisees' yoke became hard, a heavy bar across the shoulders of their fellow Jews.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus accuses the supposedly holy Pharisees of being blind to the working of God in their midst: the Pharisees criticized John the Baptist for being too weird and too obsessed with repentance, and they criticized Jesus for being too forgiving, and too friendly with sinners. To this, Jesus thanks God for concealing the meaning of Jesus' teachings from the wise and intelligent and instead revealing it to infants. These Pharisees, who should know more about the workings of God than anyone, have missed the point. God's law was meant to give life to the people, but the Pharisees have turned God's laws into a life-sucking hard yoke and heavy burden.

Having blasted the Pharisees for their heavy burdens, Jesus addresses the spiritual infants, his disciples: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The yoke of the Pharisees was a series of laws piled on top of the laws of Moses. So what then is Jesus' yoke? Think way back to the ancient history of last February when Pastor Jen preached for a few weeks on the Sermon on the Mount. *That* is Jesus' yoke. It's easy stuff, light stuff, stuff like: adultery isn't just cheating on your spouse, it's looking at someone the wrong way; murder isn't just killing someone, it's being angry at someone; don't retaliate, actually let people hurt you more; love your enemies, pray for your persecutors—simple stuff. Jesus essentially takes those laws of Moses and cranks them up to eleven. The Pharisee's yoke is hard; Jesus' yoke is impossible.

It seems Jesus has no business claiming that his yoke is easy and his burden is light if his instructions are even more extreme than that of the Pharisees! How could anyone ever find rest in Jesus with all those expectations from the sermon on the mount? If both Jesus and the Pharisees are out to intensify the laws of Moses, what is it that separates Jesus from the Pharisees?

The answer is simple: grace. Jesus says, "come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you *rest*." You see, the yoke of the Pharisees was heavy, it was oppressive to those who carried it. The prophet Isaiah writes, "The yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken." (9:4) This is what Jesus did, he took the oppressive yoke of the Pharisees, broke it, and replaced it with a yoke designed especially for weary humanity.

So tell me, are you weary? Are you carrying a heavy burden? Maybe you're weighed down by a broken friendship. Maybe you're being crippled by addiction. Maybe you're straining under your debts. Maybe you're crushed by test results. Maybe you're overburdened with shame and self-loathing. Maybe you can't find the strength to take even one more step under the load you carry. Jesus says, come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you *rest*.

You see, my friends, the world is filled with heavy yokes. In Jesus' time, heavy yokes came from the Pharisees and the Roman Empire. Today, we still feel hard yokes and heavy burdens under shame, guilt, anxiety, sin, death. There was no forgiveness, no help in the heavy yoke of the Pharisees; there is no forgiveness, no help, no comfort under the yoke of shame,

sin, and death; but under Jesus' yoke, there is *always* forgiveness; there is *always* help; there is *always* comfort.

When Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, he freed us from these heavy burdens and hard yokes. Jesus overcame death: you no longer need carry the yokes of shame and anxiety, you no longer need strain under the weight of sin and death. By Jesus' death these hard yokes no longer have the last word—they no longer define you.

Make no mistake, Jesus has a yoke he wants us to carry, because without a yoke, we would have no way to face the powers of this world. Jesus doesn't pull us out of our reality. We still have to endure the hardships of this life—shame, anxiety, sin, death, they may not have the last word, but they still exist. But by his yoke, by his teachings, Jesus equips us to handle those hardships. The irony of Jesus' yoke, that is his teachings, is that they are too heavy to carry alone; but by the power of Christ within us, through the grace he extends us daily, Jesus helps us carry his yoke.

What sets Jesus apart from the Pharisees, ultimately, is that by grace Jesus *enables* us to carry his yoke. Without Jesus, we could never follow his teachings, but with Jesus, we find that we can. Through grace, through Jesus' forgiveness, we are freed from shame, sin, death, the heavy burdens that crush us. When we falter, when we feel like we can't carry Jesus' yoke, he is there to offer us forgiveness, help, and rest, to welcome us into his arms and declare to us, "I am gentle and humble in heart and with me you will find rest for your souls."

Amen.