

THE YOKE'S ON YOU

MATTHEW 11:28-30

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INTRODUCTION¹

Have you ever had someone play a practical joke on you? I have a pretty good sense of humor and I love a good joke, but I hate it when the joke's on me! Wednesday, March 15, 1995, was one of the biggest days of my life. I was voted on to the faculty of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary by the Board of Trustees. Being a seminary professor has been a dream of mine for many years. Finally, the realization of that dream came about. You can imagine the pressure I felt when, on Monday night of that week, I answered the phone at my house and the distinguished voice on the other end identified itself as belonging to one of the trustees. He said he wanted to ask me a few questions. I lost it! I asked him to hold while I changed phones. I dropped my little girl whom I had been holding. I screamed at my wife. My mouth went dry. Horrifying thoughts raced through my mind. What if I messed up? What if I answered incorrectly? What if I made a fool of myself? What if I didn't measure up to his standards? I really was feeling the pressure! You can imagine how relieved I was when I returned to the phone and heard one of my colleagues snickering on the other end. He was just having a little fun, and the joke was on me!

On a more serious note, the devil seems to be the cosmic comedian of our day and the joke is on many of us. He is telling people they have to meet a certain standard in order to be accepted by God. He is saying we have to keep a bunch of rules and regulations in order to get into heaven. And, we really feel the pressure. To the heavy hearts of people feeling that kind of pressure, Jesus spoke these words in Matthew 11:28-30:

¹This sermon originally was preached with the aid of an actual miniature yoke.

²⁸“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (NKJV).

He’s making the same call today: he invites you to accept him as the only way to know God instead of being the object of Satan’s joke by trying to measure up.

The “yoke” was part of the harness used to pull a cart, plow, or mill beam. It was the means by which the animals’ master kept them under control and guided them in useful work. The term “yoke” came to be used widely in the ancient world as a metaphor for submission, usually to a teacher. But in this text, Jesus didn’t use that metaphor simply to tell people that they needed to let him be their teacher. Instead, he chose the metaphor as a way of calling people to come to him as the only way to be right with God as opposed to the way insisted upon by the religious leaders of the day.

These particular words of Jesus did not become clear to me until I was pastoring in Mississippi. One afternoon, as I sat on the front porch of a wise, old saw-mill operator in our community, I noticed this miniature yoke hanging on the wall. When I inquired about it, he began to explain how the yoke was used. His explanation fascinated me. It made me think of this passage of Scripture.

Since that day, every time I look at this yoke I am reminded of some important truths regarding what it means to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I want to share those truths with you today, because some of you are really tired of trying to measure up, trying to meet somebody’s standard for getting into heaven, trying to figure out what it means to know God.

TRUTH #1: THE YOKE REMINDS US THAT WE CAN’T MEASURE UP.

The first thing I learned about the yoke was that it was designed for two animals. One animal usually was not sufficient to pull a load. The strength of two animals was necessary. That was the reason for the design of the yoke. Many jobs simply were too heavy and too laborious.

Jesus was calling to a group of people who were really tired of trying to carry the load of the religious standards of their day. It was all but impossible even to learn all the traditions imposed by the religious leaders, much less to keep them all. People simply could not measure up! In the language of the New Testament, the word “weary” carried the idea of working to the point of utter exhaustion. It refers figuratively to rigorous work in seeking to please God and know the way of salvation. “Heavy-laden” indicates that, at some time in the past, a great load was dumped on the person, causing him or her to become weary over time. Together, the two terms present the idea of a person who, at some time in the past, was taught that he or she had to measure up to a certain standard in order to earn God’s approval.

Some of you likely are carrying that same burden today. It often manifests itself in strained relationships, depression, stress, feelings of inadequacy, and other conditions that tell us that we don't measure up. We try to get rid of the burden by trying harder -- climbing the career ladder, impressing other people, taking on more jobs at church, adding new spiritual disciplines to our lives. The list goes on. Underlying all of it is an unrecognized drive to meet God's approval. And, we really feel the pressure, pressure that drives us to do things we really don't want to do.

Today, Jesus wants you to know that you can't measure up. There's no possible way. Just as it was impossible for any first century Jew always to obey every law and tradition taught by the religious leaders, it is impossible for you to make a grade high enough to get you into heaven. And, it is frustrating and exhausting to attempt such a feat.

TRUTH #2: THE YOKE REMINDS US THAT JESUS DOES MEASURE UP.

The second thing I learned about the yoke was that the two animals on which it was placed were different. One of the animals always was more experienced than the other. The second animal essentially was a learner. The experienced animal was schooled in the commands of the master. So, that animal provided the direction, leadership, help, and training for the unlearned member of the team. By itself, the younger, less experienced animal did not have the wisdom or skill to respond to the commands of the master.

That truth illuminates a striking contrast that runs throughout this passage. "Unto me" means "to me alone" and not to another. The contrast further is seen in the other pronouns: unto me—and I will give—my yoke—learn of me—I am gentle—my yoke—my burden. Jesus was contrasting himself with the religious leaders of his day! He not only claimed to know the only way to have a relationship with God, he claimed to be the only way to have a relationship with God.

Do you know God's standard for getting into heaven? Perfection! That's right -- perfection! Jesus said, "You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). I'm not sure about you, but that standard leaves me with a little problem: I can't do it! And, when you try to measure up to that standard by keeping a bunch of rules and regulations, by trying to be good enough, by trying to be religious enough, you make a futile attempt at trying to reach God on your own. You and I do not have the strength, ability, experience, wisdom, or skill to meet God's standard for getting into heaven. But, just like the experienced animal in the yoke, Jesus Christ does meet that standard!

The word "meek" and the phrase "humble in heart" appear to be synonymous, contrasting Jesus and the Pharisees. While Jesus demonstrated meekness and humility, they exhibited extraordinary pride, love for places of honor, special titles, and the exercise of authority over others (see 23:5-12). The point of the contrast is that Jesus' spirit is more conducive for reception of God's salvation. A proud man cannot know God (cf. Mt. 5:3-5; Ps. 138:6). Instead, God gives the grace of intimate knowledge of Himself to the person who realizes that he can't make it to God on his own.

TRUTH #3: THE YOKE REMINDS US THAT WE CAN MEASURE UP WITH HIM.

The final thing I learned about the yoke was that the two animals worked together to accomplish the task. While the more experienced animal provided the leadership and direction, both animals worked together to pull the load.

Jesus promised that this cooperative effort would be a refreshing experience for his tired followers. In verse 28, the “rest” that he offered was a “resting up” or “rejuvenation” from the weariness of carrying the burden of trying to measure up. In verse 29, the offering of “rest for your souls” is the promise of a realization of a deep existential peace, a shalom, or sense of ultimate well-being with regard to one’s relationship to God and his commandments (cf. Jer. 6:16; see also the “rest” of Heb. 4:3-10).

This truth simply means that you and I can stop doing things for Jesus and start doing things with Jesus. When we get in the yoke with him, we measure up to God’s standard because he measures up! When Jesus Christ was crucified, he took the punishment for our inadequacy, our inability to measure up to God’s standard. When he rose from the dead, he made it possible for us to have a relationship with God through his life. That reality, my friends, is both rejuvenating and refreshing compared to the heaviness of trying to be good enough on my own.

Jesus is God’s chosen way to have a relationship with him. In verse 27, Jesus had just acknowledged to God, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Then, he broke into this awesome invitation to take on his yoke and get some rest! Jesus wasn’t trying to give people another load, another yoke, to carry. He simply was inviting people to get in his yoke! There, he would be the experienced, mature member of the team, and the person who responded to his call would be the rested and refreshed learner!

The word “easy” in verse 30 is better translated “kindly.” “Burden” here is contrasted with “heavy laden” in v. 28. These are kindred words which together present the idea of work that is lightened by Jesus’ help. To be sure, the yoke of Christ involves work, but it is the work of love and joy. While Jesus asks much, he provides the power for you and I to respond.

My friend Don Miller, a great prayer warrior of our day, helped me to understand how serving Christ diligently could be reconciled with this rest provided by Christ. He pointed out that once you’re in the yoke with Jesus, several things become a reality:

- ...you have one leader -- him;
- ...you have one load -- his;
- ...you go in one direction -- his;
- ...you never walk or work alone
- ...you can never fall or fail;

...you can never quit;
...you can't get out or look back;
...no task is too small or too large;
...the load is always behind you; and,
...the results are his problem.

These truths, my friends, are refreshing realities!

SUMMATION

All of us have heroes in our lives. One of mine is Dr. Roy Fish, retired professor of evangelism at Southwestern Seminary. Besides my father, Dr. Fish has impacted my life more than anyone on the planet. During my years at Southwestern I embraced him as a model to emulate. When I heard him teach I said, "I want to teach like that." When I heard him preach I said, "I want to preach like that." When I was with him witnessing I said, "I want to win souls like that." I wanted to be like Dr. Fish.

One weekend I was at the DFW airport waiting to board a flight to the Texas panhandle where I was to preach revival services. As I sat in the waiting area, lo and behold I looked up and there came my hero and mentor walking down the terminal! And my heart leaped and beat even faster when I saw him turn in to my gate and begin to check in on the same flight. After checking in he came over and sat next to me. Our conversation revealed that we were going to the same area for similar purposes.

After a moment Dr. Fish asked me what seat I was sitting in. After I told him, he paused a moment and then said, "Come with me." When your hero tells you to follow, you don't ask questions. So I began following him down the terminal and boarded an elevator. When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, I saw a big sign that read *Crown Room*. We stepped off of the elevator and immediately were greeted by a bell hop who said, "Hello Dr. Fish!" And then he glanced at me as if to say, "Are you lost?" or "Who are you?" But Dr. Fish responded with a greeting, pointed to me and said to the young man, "This is Jim, and he's with me."

We made our way to a nearby counter, behind which were a couple of airline employees. One of the girls immediately looked at Dr. Fish and said, "Hello, Dr. Fish!" I was beginning to get the impression that he had been here before. Immediately she glanced at me with the same questioning manner as the bell hop. Again Dr. Fish responded with his gracious greeting, pointed at me and said to the girl, "This is Jim, and he's with me. Could you see if you could get us seats together on the flight?" And in that moment—maybe for the first time in my life—I understood what it meant to be able to get access to someplace that you wouldn't be able to go unless you were with somebody with some clout!

I don't know all of what heaven is going to look like. But sometimes I picture arriving there and standing at the entrance to a 'Crown Room.' I see myself walking side-by-side with my Savior into the room and up to where the Father is sitting. I can almost see the God of the universe look at Jesus and say, "Hello, Son!" And then I imagine the momentary fear as He glances at me as if to say, "Who are you and why are you here?" But I'm flooded

with peace and joy when I hear my Savior say, “Father, this is Jim...and He’s with Me!” That’s what I picture when I think of being in the yoke with Jesus.

So, the cosmic killjoy known as the devil continues to play the ultimate practical joke on people today. He convinces them that they must measure up—make the grade, walk the line, play by all the rules—in order to meet God’s standard and get into heaven. Consequently, so many people are so very tired of trying to do just that. And, they are so frustrated because no amount of effort ever seems to be enough. That load is so heavy!

On the other hand, Jesus Christ has measured up by dying on the cross for our wrongdoing, our failure, our inadequacy. And he invites everyone who is tired of carrying the load to come get in the yoke with him. There, he provides the experience, wisdom, skill, and ability to know God and to live a life of faithful service to him.

The choice is yours. Either the joke’s on you...or the yoke’s on you!