

“Easier Than You Think”

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Matthew 11:28-30

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Sermon titles don't typically start with the word “And,” but this sermon is yoked to last week's sermon and it completes an important thought:

Christianity is not complicated, just hard, **and** it's easier than you think.

Two sides. One coin. Let's unpack.

I'm indebted to Peter Williams, who reminded me of Jesus' words in today's lesson after last Sunday's sermon. Those words are important and rightly famous for what they reveal about Jesus' life and ministry and for how we can live our lives as followers of Jesus.

Jesus was a first-century Palestinian rabbi, and in those days and in that place, a rabbi's “yoke” was the way they interacted with Torah and the other teachings of Judaism. Their yoke was what kept them in touch with their guide for life. A rabbi's yoke allowed them to plow straight furrows through life and bring forth righteous and nourishing fruit for themselves and to help others do the same.

So a rabbi's yoke was inevitable – everyone has a way of interacting with their religious tradition – and a yoke is necessary and useful.

Or not.

Yes, observance matters.

Yes, ritual gives expression to realities beyond words.

Yes, general principles need refinement.

Yes, all of that counts.

But none of that should obscure the fundamentals of the religion Jesus inherited, lived, and taught, which he summarized as:

love God above all else and

love your neighbor as you love yourself.

That's the hard part.

It's also the easy part – the easy yoke that Jesus spoke of – because it cuts through the clutter of personal baggage and religious minutiae, and it gets at the heart of what all great religions try to do: answering the questions of how we are to relate to ultimate reality and how we are to interact with one another.

Why am I here?

What's my purpose?

How do I know that I'm doing the right thing?

On the one hand, Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Mt. 7:13-14).

And on the other hand, 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (11:29-30).

Can both be true?

I was listening to Rabbi Shai Held the other day discuss his book, *Judaism Is About Love*, and he made the point that many of us have difficulty holding two competing ethical claims together simultaneously. When one claim cuts across the grain of the other, we tend to honor one at the expense of the other. As Rabbi Held put it, "Family first often becomes family only."

When Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves, he's not giving us a pass: a yoke is still a yoke. It connects us to realities outside ourselves. A yoke is not the absence of a burden. It is a means for carrying one.

Jesus doesn't promise us a life without burdens. He promises us a different way of carrying them.

People often carry the weight of

- having to prove themselves;
- having to be right;
- having to control what cannot be controlled;
- believing they must earn God's love and acceptance.

And Jesus says, in effect: **You can put some of that down – more of it, in fact, than you might think.**

In a few days, one of our own will be heading overseas to college, where she will encounter a lot of differences. She may feel that she has to prove herself, demonstrate to her professors and peers that she's qualified for the place offered to her by the admissions committee.

And after she meets one challenge, there will be another challenge and then another and then another. Her new life will be an adventure, for sure, **and** it will come with its share of burdens, worthy of our daily prayers.

So let us pray, as she's learning so many other things at college, that she can hear Jesus' words to her,

"Take **my** yoke upon you **and learn from me.**"

Christian discipleship is a life of learning, and learning from Jesus is to learn a different way of living.

And what is that different way?

Jesus tells us: "I am gentle and humble in heart."

That may be the key.

Perhaps the "easy yoke" of Jesus is the yoke of **gentleness and humility.**

Not weakness.

Not passivity.

Not indifference.

Not surrender to injustice.

Rather, Jesus offers an alternative to the exhausting project of **constructing a self that must constantly be defended, demonstrated, justified, and maintained.**

The alternative Jesus offers is the alternative of **grace**, of God's acceptance of us which says:

You don't have to be so much.

You don't have to prove so much.

You don't have to carry so much.

Learn from me daily, Jesus says, what you need to carry

- for this day and only this day
- for this meeting and only this meeting
- for this relationship and only this relationship.

We are not asked to carry tomorrow until it becomes today.

So perhaps the question isn't whether we have a yoke. The question may be whether we are wearing the right yoke in the right way.

And we answer that question by asking God in our daily prayers, “Is this what you would have me, with my God-given self, do with my life this day?”

We don't control the future, and we can't undo the past, and many of the burdens that many of us carry are either

- anxiety about the future or
- regret about the past or
- a combination of both.

Jesus doesn't ask us to carry any of those burdens.

The burden Jesus asks us to carry is the burden of following him—learning from him, trusting him, and loving as he loves.

And loving as Jesus loves is as simple as this:

- love God above all else, and
- love your neighbor as yourself.

There's nothing complicated about that, as I said last week.

It's just hard.

And, at the same time, it's easier than you think.

Jesus asks us to take **his** yoke of love and let **that** yoke connect us to God and to the world.

Jesus' yoke is love's yoke – an orientation to the world that manifests itself as gentleness and humility, knowing that our place in the world as God's beloved children frees us from the need to try to bend others to our will.

Life isn't easy. Some people are grieving. Some are caring for aging parents. Some are worried about children. Some are exhausted by politics and the state of the world. Some are carrying private burdens nobody else sees.

Life is hard. But perhaps it does not have to be as hard as we make it.

When we yoke ourselves to Jesus' way, we discover that some things are easier than others:

Grace is easier than earning.

Forgiveness is easier than resentment.

Truth is easier than pretense.

Trust is easier than control.

And love is easier than fear.

Jesus doesn't promise any of us an easy life.

Jesus promises us a yoke that fits.

And that yoke is grace.

We continue our worship by singing together hymn number 37, Let All Things Now Living.