

Jesus' Yoke: an Expression of Kindness

Matthew 11:28-30

In his book *The Great Omission* Dallas Willard gives an illustration that gets us into our discussion this morning about discipleship. Let's say you have a neighbor who is very disappointed with his car; it never performs the way he'd like. When you hear about all of its troubles, you might conclude that his car is a "lemon," that it is inherently flawed. But then you find out that once a month he was supplementing his gasoline with a quart of water. So now you no longer blame the car or the auto maker because the car's performance. Your neighbor is disappointed because he doesn't understand how his car was designed.

In a similar way many Christians are disappointed in their walk with Christ. Some even conclude, "I must be a lemon; I am inherently flawed. The Christian life just doesn't work for me." But it may be that such persons are operating their lives in a way that is incompatible with Jesus' design for us. We talked about this last week in Matthew 11. There Jesus taught that rest for our souls is a byproduct of discipleship - being apprenticed to Him and learning from Him. The promises of Jesus are for disciples, those who are actually following Him. His promises aren't merely for those who try hard or who are sincere in their beliefs. His promises are for disciples.

Listen again to Matthew 11:28-30.

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "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. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Jesus reassures those who come to Him by saying, "I am gentle and humble in heart." Jesus isn't harsh and selfish as a rabbi/teacher; He is a Good Shepherd who skillfully leads His people to good pastures. Jesus adds in verse 30, "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." A better translation would be, "My yoke is **good/kind** and My burden is light." The same word is used in Romans 2:4 where we read that "the kindness of God leads us to repentance." Jesus wasn't promising that following Him would be easy. He was assuring us that His demands were ***an expression of His kindness***. Compared to the burden of the Pharisees or the burden of sin, Jesus' burden was light.

In 1 John 5:3 John made a similar point:

3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

Properly understood and skillfully obeyed, the commandments of God don't leave you empty and burdened down.

I think it is significant that Jesus specifically tells us that His yoke is an expression of His kindness and that He is not merely adding additional burdens to weary people. I really

think Jesus was off the charts when it comes to emotional and relational intelligence. He knew how important it was for people to trust His motives. Generally speaking, if people aren't convinced that you're kind they won't hear a word you say. If people think you are arrogant and harsh and could care less about them personally, you won't have any influence in their lives. I think that's why Jesus said, "I am gentle and humble in heart. . . my yoke is an expression of My kindness and I am not wanting to burden you down."

If you and I are going to follow Jesus from the heart (and not be selective about which commands we'll follow), we need to trust His motives. In order to internalize this teaching, I want us to consider three areas of discipleship. I hope to show in each area how the demands that Jesus makes are an expression of His kindness and that living them out is much less burdensome than the alternatives. I hope these three examples convince you to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt in every area of discipleship.

Example #1: Self-Denial (Matthew 16:24–26) First I want us to consider how Jesus' teaching on self-denial might be an expression of His kindness and NOT some attempt to make us miserable. We read this in Matthew 16:

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

When Jesus says that the one who comes after Him "must deny himself," He isn't talking about self-loathing or self-hatred; He's not saying that our thoughts and desires are always bad. But He is saying that when **our** desires conflict with **His** desires, we must side with Him. As followers of Christ will often need to say "no!" to thoughts and words and actions that are impure, unkind, vengeful, or just plain unhelpful and unnecessary (see Ephesians 4:29).

Furthermore, Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must. . . take up his cross and follow Me." In the first century, the Romans forced a condemned person to carry the crossbeam of his cross to the place of crucifixion. It's been pointed out that if you ever saw someone "carrying his cross" you knew he was on a one-way trip; he would not be back. This is another way Jesus talked about dying to self.

You might wonder, honestly, how a life of self-denial could possibly be a good life and lead to rest. Notice what Jesus said next:

25 "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Those who become disciples of Jesus actually "get a life"; they find out what living is all about. Many people here today would tell you that their lives took on meaning and purpose only when they started following Jesus. That's because we were created to give ourselves to Jesus and His Kingdom.

There will be a day when every person in this room cares about his/her soul more than anything else. You might not now, but you will on the day of reckoning. On that day, those who have trusted in Jesus and followed Him through this life will not be disappointed. They will agree that denying yourself and taking up your cross and following Jesus was far and away the best way to live.

By contrast, we are told throughout Scripture that indulging ourselves - saying “yes” to every impulse and desire - is a recipe for heartache and frustration. For example, we read in Psalm 32:10:

10 Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
But he who trusts in the Lord, lovingkindness shall surround him.

Of course, we can experience “the passing *pleasures* of sin,” but indulging ourselves ultimately leads to slavery and bondage. That’s why Paul wrote this in Philippians 3 about his opponents:

18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Indulging our appetites may seem like freedom, but it’s really bondage. If your god is your appetite, you are on a path to destruction and shame. Jesus would not be kind if He told us, “Go ahead and indulge every urge you have; I love you anyway. . .” That would be unkind. The demand that we must “deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus” is a good yoke; it is an expression of Jesus’ kindness. It leaves us less burdened than the alternative.

Example #2: Sabbath (Matthew 12, Deuteronomy 5)

The perspective that the yoke of Jesus is an expression of His kindness has the potential of opening up areas of discipleship that are sometimes ignored because they seem too obscure or confusing. Practicing a weekly “sabbath” falls into this category for many. The fact that the gospels record Jesus sparring with the Pharisees about the Sabbath might make you think that Jesus was anti-Sabbath anyway; but He was mainly against the Pharisees legalistic view of the Sabbath.

In Matthew 12, for example, Jesus went to the synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. When they questioned Jesus about whether it is lawful to heal someone on the Sabbath, Jesus pointed out that if your sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath you would surely pull it out. Since the man with the withered hand was more valuable than the sheep, yes, it was lawful to heal him! Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” and his hand was immediately healed. The Pharisees were so enraged that they “went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.” Mark Buchanan pointed out that for the Pharisees it was forbidden to heal a man on the

Sabbath, but it was perfectly fine to plot a murder. They had completely distorted the significance of the Sabbath. They made it a burden.

So what was the point of the Sabbath? Why did God command His people not to work on the seventh day of the week? We're given one answer in Exodus 20: Since God rested on the seventh day, we should too. We imitate God when we quit working and rest. But Deuteronomy 5 gives another, complementary answer.

12 'Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

Notice what Moses adds in verse 15. Their Sabbath observance was tied to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt (not to the creation week as in Exodus).

15 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

When they were slaves in Egypt, they couldn't have observed a Sabbath even if they wanted to. They were at the mercy of the Egyptians who were increasingly harsh taskmasters. As a reminder that they had been delivered from such harsh, oppressive conditions, the Lord commanded them to observe the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath wasn't some burdensome requirement God laid upon people who would prefer to work seven days a week. Rather, the Sabbath commemorated that they had been **delivered** from such conditions. They were no longer slaves, so they shouldn't live as slaves who were required to work 7 days a week. Sabbath was a weekly declaration that God had delivered them from slavery with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." Through Sabbath keeping we make a similar declaration: I am not a slave to work or to sin; Jesus is my Master.

Technically speaking, Christians don't observe the old covenant Sabbath; we don't typically observe the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. In the book of Acts and early church history we see that the church transitioned from worshiping on the Sabbath (Saturday, the 7th day of the week) to worshiping on the Lord's Day (Sunday, the 1st day of the week, the day Jesus was raised from the dead). Even though it's not always called Sabbath, Christians down through the ages have agreed that the OT pattern of setting aside one day a week for rest is good and wise and **necessary**.

Properly understood, Sabbath keeping isn't a burdensome practice full of do's and don'ts. It's really a gift. On the Sabbath we rest (because we can). People that practice a weekly Sabbath would tell you that it is a foundational building block for their rest on

the other six days of the week. Sabbath keeping is a celebration and a declaration of freedom. Ruth Haley Barton's recommendation is, "Let yourself fall in love with this day" (*Sacred Rhythms*, p. 138). If Sabbath is going to be life-giving, it's going to have to be more than an obligation; we have to receive it as an expression of Jesus' kindness.

Example #3: Money and Giving (Acts 20:35)

Hundreds of Scriptures speak about money and giving. Scriptures repeatedly warn us against loving and serving money. Jesus said this in Matthew 6:24:

24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus states in the starkest of terms that it is impossible to love both God and wealth. The human heart is incapable of being devoted to two masters; we will end up serving one and hating the other. Taking Jesus' yoke upon us means serving and loving God, not money. How is that an expression of His kindness? Wouldn't it be more kind if Jesus said, "A little materialism is okay; just make sure you tithe. . . whenever you can"?

Paul addressed this issue very directly in 1 Timothy 6. He told Timothy to **warn** the church in Ephesus about the dangers of wealth:

9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Because loving money plunges people "into ruin and destruction," Paul added this in verses 17-19:

17 Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. 18 Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

The command to be generous and to give isn't an oppressive burden that Paul or Jesus is laying on our shoulders; it is an expression of God's kindness because **we need to be free** from the love of money and **others need the help** that our money can provide.

In Acts 20 Paul is talking with the elders in Ephesus. He points out that he never sought to benefit financially from them; he worked with his hands to earn money for himself and his traveling companions. His concluding comment was this:

35 “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

Since this statement of Jesus isn’t recorded in the gospels, we aren’t sure where Paul learned this principle. But he obviously “owned” it. His own life demonstrated that “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Those who take Jesus’ yoke upon themselves and learn from Him will have the same experience.

I have a friend who agreed to let me share with you how “giving” is a joyful practice, not a burdensome obligation. When he and his wife got married, they decided that they would begin giving a tithe (tenth) of their income to their church each month. And they purposed that they would increase their giving by a half-percent or a full percent each year. They are currently giving 18%. The 8% they don’t give directly to the church goes into an account that they are committed to giving away. They use this money to help the poor in various places, to support missionaries, short-term missions trip, Making Room effort, and needs that they come across from time to time. Instead of asking, “What’s the least we can give and feel good about it?” they asked, “How can we find ways to be more generous?”

They don’t experience Jesus’ teaching on money and giving as harsh and demanding. The command to be generous is not some burden they’re carrying. Trust me when I say that they find great joy in their giving. They would tell you that Jesus’ teaching on money and giving is an expression of His kindness.

Conclusion. My encouragement to you is to engage the teachings of Jesus through the grid of His kindness. When you come across a teaching that seems unreasonable (“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”) or impossible (e.g., his teachings on anger or lust or non-retaliation), ask the question, “How is this teaching an expression of Jesus’ kindness?” Ask the question, “How is not obeying this teaching more burdensome than obeying it?”

If we are going to follow Jesus in a comprehensive way from the heart, we need to trust His motives. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Seek to understand how Jesus’ yoke is an expression of His kindness.