

Jeremiah 1:1-10  
Matthew 11:20-30

## MY YOKE IS EASY

Jesus is making one of His campaign speeches, running for office – offering to be Lord and Director of our lives, if we will elect Him. As far as we know, He did not have many such speeches, and He did not use them very often. But you probably remember some of the others:

*“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’”* (Matthew 16:24-25)

*“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you: to love one another. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.”* (John 15:16-20)

These seem like strange campaign promises at first: deny self; get hated and persecuted. What a wonderful deal – let’s go for it! Of course, unlike most people who run for office, when Jesus campaigns, He talks about the road, not the goal. He talks about the goal too, but not when He is campaigning. Jesus doesn’t want to mislead anybody. If we want to come with Him – to follow Him – He wants us to know what we are getting into. This is not a turkey shoot. Where He goes, it sometimes gets pretty hard, and He knows that if we come with Him, we will get caught in it. The only way to follow Jesus is to write Him a blank check. We never know what He will fill in, or when. Maybe over time we learn that Jesus will never fill in anything unnecessary – anything that doesn’t make sense to the Kingdom. Nevertheless, we give Him blank checks. It is called faith – trust. The merchant who found the great pearl went and sold *all that he had*, and bought that great pearl.

Who is running *your* life now? We cannot hear Jesus’ campaign speeches unless we also ask this question. Before deciding if we want Jesus to run our lives, we need to think about who has the job at the

moment. Who is running your life now? Saviors do not fool around. Saviors cannot operate with half-measures or with slow and patient learning or counseling techniques. The situation is more desperate than that, or we would not use “savior” language. No savior can help us unless we turn will and life over to them. That’s what makes it so scary, especially seeing that there are also a lot of false saviors running around. *That*, in fact, is the very reason we must each ask the question: “Who is running my life now?” If it is not the true Savior, then it must be a false savior. Of course, some people tell me *nobody* is running their lives. After watching them for a while, I tend to agree: Nothing is happening. Nothing matters. It’s a shambles – total anarchy. I would rather play with Satan. At least that way there is a chance to repent.

Most of us are not anarchists. We have a false savior running our lives, or at least we can remember when that was the case. Is it your mother? Some mothers try so hard and mean so well, it just doesn’t seem fair to identify her as a false savior. On the other hand, it is not her fault; she cannot keep herself from trying – until you switch to the true Savior. Often, we like to jump to the big-and-famous false saviors: David Koresh, Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-tung. Often, that only obscures our own issue, or ducks it altogether. The Bible is always making a huge deal about idols. We don’t get it anymore, but they were talking about false gods, false saviors: the government, the boss, the lottery, the perfect mate, the children, the retirement fund, the college degree. And the most famous false savior of all: yourself. “I’m going to run my life because I’m smart enough and strong enough, and after all, it’s my life!” Really!? You made it? You designed it? You know what it’s here for? You know what’s best for it? I guess we all feel that way a good deal of the time. That must be why the world is such a wonderful place – so perfect, so peaceful, so full of love and sharing.

Jesus is making His campaign speech. He is saying that maybe you are tired of running your own life, or at least sick at heart about what keeps coming of that. Maybe you are tired of letting false gods or false saviors run your life. So He is asking for the job. False saviors put the wrong burdens on us. I have sure put some bad ones on myself. “Try *my* yoke,” Jesus says. “You will love it.”

This, of course, is our favorite among His campaign speeches. It does not sound like the others. The others sound pretty dire. The others carry warnings of challenge and sacrifice and maybe even death. This one sounds so friendly. We are always looking for an “easier, softer way,”

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and this sounds like it. To be sure, one of the marks of a false savior is to offer false promises. Nevertheless, we like the sound of an “easy yoke” and a light burden. That is, we like the sound of it ... until we start to think about it.

The yoke, for Jesus’ listeners, would have called forth the picture of oxen with a log, shaped and carved, fitting over their necks and shoulders. To this yoke was attached whatever load the owner wished them to pull. No ox or mule could be useful without a yoke. All the weight of whatever load or cargo which was to be moved came onto the yoke, and, because that yoke fit over the shoulders, an ox or mule team could pull many times its own weight.

The yoke was such a familiar object, and its function lent itself so well to analogy, that people had been playing with the imagery for centuries. Anything you had to bear or carry might be referred to as your yoke. The yoke of the Law (Torah) was the most famous analogy at the time. Today it is still represented in the vestments (stoles) for clergy. I am not supposed to speak to you from the pulpit unless I am under the yoke of Scripture – the yoke of the Gospel. A yogi – a yoked one (in Hinduism) – is one who carries the yoke of the teachings of the Masters. That is, the teachings are a discipline that the yogi walks under. The concept of a disciple is the same thing. You are a disciple of Jesus if you walk under the discipline (the yoke) of His teaching and instruction.

We are a generation of careless hearers. It took me years to realize that the yoke is easy, not the load. Jesus says His *yoke* is easy, but many people I know think they hear Him say the *load* is easy. Now I ask you: If you are a beautiful, strong ox and have this very fine yoke that you carry proudly on your shoulders, would it please you to walk through life pulling one empty tin can behind you? Rephrasing: If you love the Lord your God and you desire to praise and serve Him, would it please you to go through life carrying only the weight that any good-sized mouse could handle with ease? God help us, sometimes we talk as if that were exactly what we long for and are working toward – a life of ease. In a world like this, that surely must be one form of evil.

What is the burden that Jesus will ask you to pull if you accept His invitation? “My burden is light.” Meaning, truth. Specifically, the truth of the Gospel: God’s love, mercy, forgiveness, eternal life, loving community. A truth activated by our turning from our own ways and then putting our lives under the guidance and control of the Holy

Spirit. It is light, but not light that weighs lightly. The world has never liked or befriended such light with any sincerity. It got Jesus killed, Paul executed, Peter crucified upside down. And the list quickly expanded to thousands. Only one of the twelve disciples died a peaceful death. I wonder what the ratio is today? Especially since I have seen few convincing signs that our own world and time love the light any better than it was loved in ages past.

The wording of this passage sounds beautiful, and its meaning truly is beautiful. But do not mistake the message, or you will end up thinking Jesus lied to you (like so many of His servants do).

*“My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* This is a carpenter talking to you. He is more than that, but He is also that. In Jesus’ day, carpenters made yokes, among other things. Jesus had no doubt made many, many yokes in His time. Maybe there was a sign hanging over His shop, “My yokes are easy.” Only, the word that we have translated as “easy” no longer carries its proper meaning in English. The New Testament word is *chrestos*: “My yokes FIT RIGHT.” If you have a good ox, a proper load, and a yoke, the only problem left is if the yoke does not fit right. If the yoke does not take the load evenly or if it gouges the neck or shoulders of the ox or mule, then you will not get very far. No matter how fine an animal, there will soon be sores and, if no attention is paid, crippling. Then a long time for healing, or the animal is ruined. But if the yoke fits right, a good animal can haul enormous weight day after day after day with no damage. They even seem to enjoy it.

How many people do you know, or have you known, who are walking through life with a yoke that does not fit right? Fine animals, you can tell, but now bleeding from neck and shoulders because whom-ever they are trying to please has no clear notion of how to make a true and proper yoke. At every step, the load yanks and yaws. And the burdens they carry are neither lightweight nor as light as the truth of God. I think Jesus looked out upon the world and, with a compassion our eyes are too dim to fathom, saw the children of God hauling all manner of junk and trash across their days, pulling in harnesses that have rubbed them raw and left them bleeding and crippled.

Gently, because He will not force us, but urgently He says: “I know who you are, though you yourselves do not. I know your gifts and your strengths. I know just how you pull, and that you lead a little stronger with your left foot than with your right. I know the burden that is exactly

suited to what you love best and care about most. I can make a yoke that will fit you so perfectly that you can haul ten times your weight for fifty years and never get lame from the yoke. In the name of God – for the love of God – lay down these needless burdens you have been carrying. Set aside this yoke that you and others have been insisting you wear though it doesn't even begin to fit you. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... For my yoke is chrestos* [it will fit you like a glove] *and my burden is light* [the truth of God's love – the part that you can know and carry to others].”

Fifty years ago, I could have left this sermon right here and it would have been okay. It would have been heard. But no longer. My interpretation of this passage has Jesus offering and promising every one of you a tailor-made yoke, and a tailor-made burden. Half of you do not hear the Christian Faith on that level any longer. Another way of saying it is that many of you do not really believe in, or at least are very skittish about, a personal God. What *that* really means is that you are not at all certain that you have a personal destiny, or that you have any specific task or purpose to accomplish with your life here on earth. You think you can marry anybody you want, take any job that is offered, choose any vocation or job that you wish, retire any time you can afford it ... because it doesn't really matter. Oh, to be sure, you *want* to be moral; you *want* to be kind rather than cruel; you *hope* to do some good and as little harm as possible. But it's all generic. There is no personal God who taps you on the shoulder and says, “You are the one I have in mind for this particular assignment.” And of course, you are given free will. Even if you *do* believe in a personal God, you do not have to accept, or even acknowledge, the call.

Today's Scripture passage obviously comes out of an entirely different way of thinking and believing. The prophets were Jesus' role models, and Jeremiah was His role model of prayer and devotion. Clearly Jeremiah believed that God had formed and designed him for a specific purpose from long before he was born. Is that just for Jeremiah? Does God only do that once or twice every thousand years or so? No, it is a foundational concept in Christendom that God personally cares about – has a purpose, a design, a plan for – *every* individual. It's hard to look out over any city, never mind the whole world, and imagine such a thing. Obviously not many of the teeming millions are aware of such a personal destiny, or at least they are not finding it. Some people believe it for themselves but not for many others. Some people believe it

for others but not for themselves. Most do not believe that such meaning and purpose exist in life for *anybody*. And that's exactly how far away our world is from believing the Gospel – or obeying God.

Many people, and I am one of them, believe that Jesus has changed the consciousness of the Western World from a communal to an individual perspective. Jesus has moved us from “chosen people” – a chosen *nation* – to chosen *individuals*. His emphasis on neighbor love and the fellowship of believers certainly includes community, but the community is made up of individuals. And each individual has his or her own encounter with God – our own individual relationship with God – rather than taking our meaning and identity from belonging to a special culture or a special nation.

Some of us complain about the extreme individualism of our time, and we wish there were some way to build stronger community. There is: Return to Jesus' brand of individualism. Like everything else that Jesus has brought us, we are forever losing it. The church keeps going back to the Law – back to fear; back to communal thought-frames; back to human efforts to save the world, instead of each of us turning our own will and life over to God. Jesus' individualism, by the way, is an individualism of total devotion and dedication to God – a life of daily prayer that means surrendering one's own will and life and choices to the will of God. That has absolutely *nothing* in common with the individualism that is being practiced today.

From Jesus' kind of individualism have come the greatest friendships and the most powerful community the world has ever seen. From Jesus' kind of individualism have come people of such endurance and service and love for others that we can barely believe the lives they have led. From Jesus' kind of individualism have come people who have chosen to not live for self but to turn will and life over to God and to whatever purposes God has had for them.

In our time, the church has often wandered far from this individual relationship with God, which is the primary prerequisite of the Christian WAY of Life. Our Congregational forebears left England because they were convinced that the ecclesiastical structures of the church were putting human authority between the individual and God. It was essential to keep, as the primary and most important prerequisite of all, the precept that each individual must pray and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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There is no Christian community unless it is made up of faithful individuals. In Christendom, there are no true individuals until life and will are turned over to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you do not know your task – your purpose here – you are not a happy person. What’s more, you do not know your identity, or your Christian mission. How then will you help others, or serve Christ or His Kingdom?

If I say “God loves us,” what do you think that means? That God has a lot of sentimental feelings about us from afar? God calls us into lives of purpose and meaning – lives we cannot have without consciously turning ourselves over to the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit ... through constant prayer, continual study, and willingness to obey.

God is after every one of us – to find or renew or rework our personal covenant with Jesus. That is the primary task. And until that is *our* top priority – in first place where it belongs, and there to stay – we cannot be the church of Jesus Christ. Everything else we do will keep going vague and be pointless – a grasping after the wind.

Jesus said: *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* What do you think? Shall we do that?