

TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU

Matthew 11:16-30

Key Verse: 11:29

“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.”

In this passage Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us and learn from him. He promises that we will find rest for our souls. At first, this sounds paradoxical. How can we find rest by taking a yoke? A yoke is a symbol of hard work. Yet Jesus promises that when we take his yoke upon us we will find rest for our souls. We believe that Jesus always tells the truth. We believe that Jesus’ word is the word of life. Let’s listen to Jesus, accept his teaching, and find rest.

First, wisdom is proved right by her actions (16-19).

Look at verse 16a. “To what can I compare this generation?” In many of the gospel accounts, Jesus interacts with individual persons such as the man with leprosy, the centurion, or the woman with a bleeding problem. Through Jesus’ dealing with them we learn, as individuals, how we can come to Jesus and obtain his blessing upon our lives. In this passage, Jesus evaluates the entire generation he lived in. His generation, like all generations, had its own specific character. Look at verses 16b,17. “They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’” This describes a rebellious child in the supermarket. They were irrational in the pursuit of fleeting pleasures. They complained when they did not get what they wanted. They were disobedient and self-centered, demanding and ungrateful. In brief, the generation of Jesus’ time was childish and rebellious.

Jesus explains in verses 18-19a, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’”” John lived a pure and poor life. He did not drink wine or eat delicious food. He gave himself fully to prepare the way for the Lord by preaching a message of repentance. In spite of his fiery love for God, he was criticized. People tried to dismiss him as a crazy desert man like the Gerasene demoniac. In terms of lifestyle and ministry, Jesus was quite a contrast to John. Jesus spent time with sinners. Jesus ate with them and drank with them and really enjoyed fellowship with them. Then Jesus was criticized for being too loose and keeping the wrong kind of company. John and Jesus preached the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (3:2; 4:17). John was the forerunner and Jesus was the Messiah. They were united in their purpose as God’s servants to fulfill his mission on earth. The people of the times should have liked one or the other or both. Yet the people of the times criticized them unconditionally. The nature of the criticism shows that no matter how the message was packaged, they would have rejected it.

Jesus understood what kind of generation he lived in. What about us? A few years ago, Tom Brokaw wrote a book called, “The Greatest Generation.” He praised his father’s generation as the greatest in American history. It was because they went through the Great Depression and World War II and won great battles with great sacrifice. By and large, they were Bible-believing people. There was a widespread reverence for the Lord’s Day in America. According to a local Rogers Park historian, during the 1950’s our church building was full of worshipers every Sunday. In the early ‘60s, as a little child, I remember that everyone in our community spent Saturday nights taking baths, cleaning clothes and shining shoes in preparation to worship God on Sunday. There was a basic respect in America for elderly people and those in positions of authority. Then something happened. Atomic power produced atomic pride. Material abundance fostered greed. Americans began to pursue the American Dream, leaving God out. The devil did not miss the chance. In 1963 the Supreme Court prohibited prayer in public schools. In 1973 through Roe v. Wade they legalized abortion. The Vietnam War and Watergate brought disillusionment and despair. The hippie movement arose and then gave way to the yuppie movement. Yuppies produced something called Generation X, and then came the Millennials. Now we live in what has been called the postmodern generation. This generation has dismissed the idea of absolute truth and embraced relativism in many forms. It is a generation living in deception.

In his book, “The Good Life,” Charles Colson exposes this through his treatment of Wallace Stevens. Stevens has been called one of the great American poets of the 20th century. He was the son of well-to-do parents and began

writing poetry while at Harvard University. He was deeply influenced by the French thought that each person creates his own reality in his mind, and then imposes this reality on the world outside of him. Stevens imagined café life on the streets of France and could live in this imaginary world. It was based on as much actual data as he could accumulate. But he never visited France because he preferred to live in his imagination rather than reality. He was a harbinger of virtual reality. As he grew older, he was forced to admit that his imagination did not order the outside world. Every day he went to work for a large insurance company. To set insurance rates, the company must forecast trends and predict behavior. To do this, they must operate with objective standards. For example, they know that young people tend to be adventurous when they drive a car. So they charge them higher rates based on their objective standard. Gradually, reality intruded into Stevens' imagination. This happened at home, as well as at work. He married a beautiful young woman. But he could not project his reality onto her. She had her own reality. She felt that he never really knew her. Though married for life, they became distant and even cold. Stevens finally realized that his world view was not based on truth. He realized that beyond his own imagination there was "the Imagination" at work in the world. Just before his death in 1955, he accepted Christ and was baptized. It is indeed ironic. This man's work advanced postmodern thought in the literary world. Yet he repudiated his own work at the end of his life. He testified that truth and salvation are found in God alone.

People in the postmodern generation want to imagine a God of their own mind rather than bowing before the living God who created them in their mother's womb. They reject Jesus with sophisticated theories and arguments. Yet Jesus said, "Wisdom is proved right by her actions." Here "wisdom" is knowledge applied to real life. We must have the intellectual courage to test our beliefs against reality. In doing so, we will find that the Bible is the word of God and the truth. Those who repent and acknowledge Jesus will be blessed. Those who live in deception and reject God's word will suffer the consequences.

Second, judgment in proportion to favor (20-24).

As Jesus surveyed the people of his times, his heart was broken by their poor response to the Messiah's coming. Look at verse 20. "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent." The word "denounce" means to criticize or condemn publicly. We don't use it often today because it does not appeal to relativistic people. Yet Jesus denounced some entire cities where most of his miracles had been performed. It was because they did not repent.

Look at verses 21-24. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum were cities in Galilee where Jesus did many miracles. Jesus' miracles revealed the power of God and the mercy of God who sent Jesus into the world to save men. Those who saw Jesus' miracles should have accepted Jesus as the Savior King sent by God. They should have repented for living selfishly and begun to serve Christ as King. But they did not. They were indifferent. They just went about their business. This broke Jesus' heart. The word Jesus used in verse 21, "woe," comes from a Greek word (ouai) that carries the emotional content of sorrowful pity in addition to anger. Jesus wept over them and warned them because he did not want them to perish in their indifference.

We tend to think that indifference is not so bad. But to be indifferent to the work of God is the greatest offense to God. To awaken their consciences and warn them, Jesus compared them to the Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom. Tyre and Sidon were denounced for their wickedness by Israel's prophets (Isa 23; Jeremiah 25:22; 47:4; Ezekiel 26-28). Sodom is the land that God destroyed for her wickedness by sending fire and brimstone from heaven. Homosexuality was prevalent there. Most Galilean Jews probably agreed that Tyre, Sidon and Sodom should be judged by God. But according to Jesus, the Galilean Jews were worse sinners. Indifference is a more serious sin than wickedness. Indifference to God comes from spiritual arrogance.

Jesus knew that the Gentile people would repent of their sins and turn to God when they saw his miracles. Still, Jesus went to Jews first, according to God's plan for world salvation. It was nothing but God's undeserved favor. As recipients of greater favor, they had a greater responsibility to respond. This principle applies to us as well. America has been blessed abundantly by God. We have the freedom to believe the gospel and to worship God. We are responsible to God for how we use this favor. A day is coming when God will judge all peoples of all nations. We will stand accountable before the Holy God. Any American who lived in indifference and selfishness can expect the worst on judgment day. We must pray for America. Indifference to the world mission command may be the great sin of the American church. We must send out missionaries to the nations of the world. Lord, help us.

Third, God's wisdom in salvation work (25-27).

Jesus worked hard for the evangelization of Galilee. But the result was indifference and unrepentant hearts. Jesus could have been discouraged. Yet Jesus turned to God in praise. Look at verses 25-26. "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.'" Jesus realized that God was working according to his own wisdom. God's principle is to hide the way of salvation from those who pursue it by works and to reveal it to those who simply repent and accept Jesus. The greatest thinkers could not discover God and his saving grace through reason. The greatest achievers could not reach up to God through their Herculean efforts. The most ardent moralists did not gain the knowledge of God through their strict adherence to rules. But anyone who repents and accepts Jesus can have salvation and eternal life. God alone is glorified in his salvation work.

Jesus went on. Look at verse 27. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Though Jesus was not recognized properly by men on earth, Jesus saw himself before God. God knew Jesus and God recognized Jesus properly. Jesus was the only way to the Father. Jesus found comfort and strength in God. This was Jesus' source of peace and satisfaction. In the same way, we can turn to Jesus in times of misunderstanding. Jesus is our comfort and strength.

Fourth, Jesus' invitation and promise (28-30).

The only way to know God is through Jesus Christ. It is absolutely up to Jesus to reveal God to people. What tremendous access power Jesus has. Usually, when we want to meet an important person, we must find a contact who can introduce us. One of the hot questions in Washington is always "Who has the President's ear?" If we can meet that person we can have indirect access to the President. In Chicago, the question may be, "Who has Oprah's ear?" If she approves a book it becomes a best seller. When we want to know God, Jesus is our contact person. Jesus alone can bring people to God. 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." How does Jesus use his access power. Is he restrictive? No. Jesus welcomes anyone who will to come to him.

Look at verse 28. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus opens his heart and throws his arms wide to embrace anyone who comes to him. Jesus promises that the weary and burdened will find rest in him. What makes us weary and burdened? Too much homework? Too much company work? Too many children? Perhaps, but not really. It is our sins. When Cain was cut off from God by sin he became a restless wanderer on the earth. Guilt and the fear of death tormented his soul, so he could not rest. Jesus forgives our sins. Jesus takes away our guilt and shame. Jesus drives out fear. Jesus watches over us as our good shepherd. Jesus gives us eternal life. In Jesus' love and protection we find true rest.

After putting down our burden of sin, there is something we must take from Jesus. Look at verses 29-30. "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." Jesus tells us that we must take Jesus' yoke upon us. What does this mean? In ancient times, a yoke was used to join two oxen together to harness their labor power for plowing the fields (1Ki 19:19). Metaphorically, this yoke represents our relationship to Jesus. Taking Jesus' yoke is submitting to his Lordship. It is surrendering ourselves to Jesus completely and willingly. It is to take our place as servants in his work.

This may bother our notion about human rights. We honor our American forefathers who threw off the bondage of colonialism through bloody battle. We have since developed into people of the most sophisticated human rights. There are so many rights in America, such as civil rights, women's rights, children's rights, voting rights, visitation rights, students' rights, criminals' rights, and animal rights. We are very sensitive about rights. In politics, we may have to talk about human rights. But we cannot talk about our human rights with Jesus. When Jesus says to take his yoke, it means to yield to Jesus as Lord and Savior. St. Paul is a good example. He always referred to himself as a servant of Christ Jesus or a slave of Christ Jesus. In Galatians 2:20, Paul said, "For I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." When we surrender to Jesus, our sinful passion and pride dies and Christ lives in us. This gives us rest.

Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Jesus is also our Teacher. Jesus wants us to learn from him. Most of all, Jesus wants us to learn his inner character. Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. Those who follow him and learn from him become gentle and humble like Jesus. Proud people are restless people, like King Saul. But gentle and humble people are really happy people and they are peaceful people. They have the greatest joy of growing in the image of Jesus.

There is a spiritual mystery in Jesus' yoke. Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It is because Jesus takes the yoke with us. Wise farmers yoked oxen together in matched pairs. They usually joined a strong and mature animal to a younger, inexperienced one. As the two oxen worked together, the younger one learned how to work and grew in labor power. In the course of time the younger one became fully trained and could be used to train others. When Jesus asks us to take his yoke, he does not drive us from behind with a whip. Jesus joins us to himself in taking his yoke. In fact, Jesus takes the heaviest part of the load. Jesus took up his cross. Jesus paid the price of all of our sins in his own body and died for us. Jesus rose from the dead to give us victory over death. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we gain the power to take up our own cross and follow Jesus. St. Paul experienced that the resurrection power of Christ enabled him to do far more than he had imagined. In Philippians 4:13, he says with confidence, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

When Jesus tells us to take his yoke, he wants to be our Lord and Savior. Jesus wants us to share his heart for world salvation. Jesus wants us to participate in the saving of young souls and raising disciples in our generation. This work is Jesus' work. We share in Jesus' work through obedience to his word and prayer. As we do so, we can grow spiritually in the image of Jesus. We can find unutterable joy and true rest for our souls. Jesus' invitation to take his yoke is the best invitation we can receive. Let's accept now through prayer.