

Whose Yoke

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I didn't get much rest this past week, and as the week wore on my restlessness only seemed to grow. It seemed everywhere I turned someone, or some group, had some expectation of what I was supposed to be doing, or where I should be dedicating my time. Here's the thing, being wanted can be pretty intoxicating. It makes us feel important and needed. And as long as we keep playing by the rules and expectations of everyone else we get praised. It's as though someone else gets to decide who we are and what role we will play in our own life and as long as we play our part within that system life is easy. Or so we are told.

What if the rules and expectations are oppressive and unjust? Do we just grin and bear it? Surely not. You see, every single one of us lives our lives within a system of rules and expectations, and it starts from the moment we are born.

Now for those of you who consider yourselves rule followers, living inside a system of rules may come effortlessly. As long as you know the rules then you know what is expected of you and then you live within that system. Sounds simple enough, right? You follow the rules, you get the praise.

But what about people who strive to do the right thing, but fall just short of other's expectations? They know the rules, they know the expectations, but just can't quite seem to meet them. Should their life be relegated to one without praise?

I think about my own life... I believe I've been a rule follower, and truth be told I like the praise that comes with it. The problem I've seen with each passing year has left me unsettled, even burdened and tired. I've come to realize that praises come as long as orders are being acted upon, rules are being followed, opinions are being agreed with, and pre-conceived expectations are being met. Anything less than that, I've learned leads to being talked about, sabotaged, oppressed and dismissed. Each and every time people manipulate others, or abuse others or just do anything to cause public ridicule or shame, it is really their way of saying "Be who I expect you to be if you want my support and praise, because anything other than that will just not work."

There is a problem, though, when such a life is imposed on everyone, where praise is only for those who follow without asking. That problem is questions get silenced and curiosity gets extinguished. The end result for those curious types,

like me, can be summed up in one word: Burdened! We are burdened by the sheer power and forcefulness of the external world's desire for conformity. We are burdened by others never-ending need to be recognized as better or more important in every situation. We are burdened by others need to be seen as the rule makers. We are burdened by being blamed when the end result is less than hoped for by those same rule makers who now don't seek recognition. We are burdened and sometimes the burden is so overwhelming that life begins to feel too hard. No matter where we turn it seems there are times we simply can't find rest.

Many years ago I took on a case and one evening at a family dinner my decision came up. I remember my mom's reaction like it was yesterday. She said, "oh son, why do you always have to choose the hard road." Now, when I agreed to represent these people I didn't see it as a hard road, I saw it as doing what I had dedicated my entire life to, pursuing justice.

I've thought a lot about her statement over the years, and I find it very interesting in light of today's scripture where Jesus says, "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." Now maybe some of you are wondering where the connection is between a loving mother briefly stating her desire for her son to choose an easier road and Jesus' statement here, and I believe there is good reason for that. You see, if all we know about words and their meaning comes from an American dictionary then the word Yoke will only have one meaning, and that one meaning would prevent you from ever seeing how a statement about doing what society expects of someone having certain characteristics could ever be related to Jesus' statement about taking his Yoke upon yourself.

That dictionary definition for yoke is a wooden bar or frame that joins 2 animals like oxen together at the heads or necks so that they can work together. Who knows, some of you with farming backgrounds may have actual experience with that kind of Yoke. But what if I told you there is more than one meaning for Yoke, just not in English. What if I told you that other meaning had important significance for the people of Jesus' day, especially the original audience of Matthew's Gospel, and I believe it has important significance for us today.

That other meaning is about rules of life and how life should be lived. That other meaning begins with a foundational principal for Judaism: the asking of questions. Asking questions was seen as especially important when reading the Torah (the Jewish name for the first 5 books of the Bible). For the ancient Jews, the verses

found in the Torah were meant to be lived out, not just talked about. But here's the thing, in order for words to be lived out, those words have to have meaning and meaning comes from someone somewhere making decisions about those words in that verse. Now within ancient Judaism, these Rabbi's understood that decisions had to be made about the meaning of words and they took seriously their role as interpreters of the Torah within community.

These ancient Rabbi's knew they were responsible for helping people understand what God was saying to them through the text and then telling them how they could go and live out the meaning of the text. So, to accomplish this role of interpreter of scripture, a Rabbi would put things into 2 categories: things the Rabbi allowed and things the Rabbi forbade. And here's the thing, different Rabbis had different lists of what they allowed and what they forbade. In other words, Rabbis had different sets of rules. And here's the kicker, a Rabbi's set of rules, a Rabbi's list, which was actually that Rabbi's interpretation of how someone should live out the verses of the Torah was called that Rabbi's yoke. So, when someone was making their decision about which Rabbi to follow they were making it because they believed that particular Rabbi's interpretation was the closest to what God actually meant. And when that choice was finally made you were taking that Rabbi's rules, that Rabbi's yoke upon yourself.

So back to my Mom's statement about her desire that I choose an easier path. I know her statement was full of love. The reason I know is because I know what it is like to be a parent who desperately wants their child's life to be joyful. I also know something else when it comes to why a parent would want this for their child, something often hidden, rarely if ever talked about, and that is choosing to stand with the lost, the enslaved, the oppressed oftentimes causes the rule makers to do everything they can to turn your life upside down. In their eyes you have decided not to play by their rules. And the thing is, my Mom knew it because she lived it too. She knew how difficult life could become because of my decision to take upon myself the Yoke of Justice instead of the Yoke of oppression. The Yoke of Love instead of the Yoke of evil. The Yoke of Equality instead of the Yoke of brutality.

She knew it, and just like any loving parent she wanted to save me from that pain even though she knew she couldn't. And maybe, as a parent that is the hardest thing because to truly love a child is to let them know they have the freedom to choose their own path. To truly love anyone is to let them know how free they are to live their life without fear of not being loved... not your life or the life you want for them, but live their life. Imposing one's rules, one's lists of permitted activities

or permitted decisions and forbidden activities or forbidden decision in exchange for the promise of praise... in exchange for the promise of inclusion and love, should never be seen as good news, and should never be called such. It is selfish and loveless and harmful to everyone involved.

It seems this is what Jesus was witnessing firsthand. The Yoke being imposed upon people during his day was said to come from God, but Jesus knew different. The yoke being imposed, the rules and expectations to which the people were being subjected, were not gentle. They were not humble. Jesus's Yoke of Grace & welcome and love for all of creation, on the other hand was. Listen again, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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."

There are all kinds of yokes today. They are all around us all the time. Some may come in the form of formal rules, others might be harder to recognize, like expectations of others. But make no mistake, the placing of expectations on others are yokes too. All of those yokes place heavy burdens on us and leave us restless, even exhausted. The weight we are expected to carry from those yokes is too much.

There is Good News though, and it comes in the form of Rabbi Jesus' Yoke. We can take that Rabbi's Yoke upon us and learn from him and we can find rest from the power and forcefulness of the external world's desire for conformity. We can find rest from others never-ending need to be recognized as better or more important in every situation. We can find rest from others need to be seen as the rule makers. We can find rest from being blamed when the end result is less than hoped for by those same rule makers who now don't seek recognition. We can find rest from a life that begins to feel too hard.

Rest that comes by choosing to take Rabbi Jesus' gentle and humble Yoke upon yourself. Learn from that yoke and let gentleness and humbleness lead you to rest.

Amen!