

Not Good Enough
Matthew 11:16 – 19, 25 – 30; Romans 7:15 – 25a
Sunday, July 9, 2017

The other week I came across this list that someone had posted online of what makes for a perfect worship service. It was intended for a contemporary worship service, but it's definitely something we can relate to. It starts off saying, "After listening carefully over the past several years, we believe we have finally determined what those who attend our church really want in music. Following are items that come up most frequently whenever this topic is discussed:

- We want more fast songs in the opening praise time and more slow songs in the opening praise time.
- We want more of those wonderful, lovely old hymns and less of those stupid, dead old hymns.
- We want a longer and shorter time of praise at the beginning of worship, and a shorter and longer time at the *end*.
- We want songs to flow quickly into each other and long periods of time between songs for reflection.
- We want more repetition of songs so that they can be learned and meditated upon while singing, and less repetition of songs because it gets boring singing the same thing over and over.
- We want more of those lovely arrangements with extra instruments and less of those showy arrangements with all those instruments.
- We want to sing the good old songs more often and to stop singing those same old songs.
- We want songs to be sung in higher and lower keys.

- We want the musicians to play in the middle of the stage where they can be seen, back behind the plants where they won't be a distraction, and we want them to play louder, softer, faster, slower, more often, and not at all.”¹

It points to something that we all know, you can't please everyone. There are always going to be some people who want one thing from us, and other people who want the *exact opposite thing* from us. We cannot satisfy them both. If you try to make one person happy, you are inevitably going to disappoint or upset someone else. You cannot please everyone.

This is something that even Jesus touches on in our reading today. Jesus has just been talking about John the Baptist and how John came to prepare the way for Jesus, but people did not *listen* to John. So Jesus says, “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” They play happy, joyful songs, but their friends don't dance, so they play sad, mournful songs, but their friends don't *mourn*. They're not happy with whatever you do!

Jesus relates this to himself and John. He says that John came neither eating nor drinking – demonstrating an austere, demanding life of faith – and people said he was *possessed!* So Jesus came, eating *and* drinking – demonstrating a celebratory life of faith – and people called him a glutton and a drunkard, saying that he wasn't austere and demanding enough! You can't please everyone.

But Jesus says something at the end of that section that we have to stop and think about. He says, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” It's kind of like we say, “Actions speak louder

¹ Tom Kraeuter, *Guiding Your Church Through a Worship Transition*

than words.” Jesus is saying, “Your actions *demonstrate* whether you are wise.” You can’t please everyone, so let your actions speak for you. The wisdom of God is demonstrated and proved right by its results, by what it leads you to do. It’s almost like Jesus is saying, “You can’t please everyone, so focus on pleasing God by doing what you know to be good and right.”

We often think of “pleasing God” as being this impossible standard that we have to meet. But what Jesus goes on to say here is that God is not laying this heavy burden on you; God is *relieving* that burden and giving you *rest* from it. He says, “My yoke is *easy* and my burden is *light*.” There are a couple of ways that we can understand what Jesus says here.

The first is that this is a farming metaphor. Back in Jesus’ day, they didn’t have tractors, so if you wanted to plow your fields you had to use oxen or cattle to pull a plow. A yoke is a wooden bar with hoops or collars on either end, and you put those hoops around the neck of the cattle or oxen that you are using to pull your plow. The wooden bar connects your cattle to each other; it binds them together. If one is *weak*, you bind it to a *stronger* one. If one doesn’t behave very well, you bind it to one that *does*. Yokes are heavy; they are burdensome and uncomfortable. But Jesus says, “Take *my* yoke upon you...for my yoke is *easy*, and my burden is *light*.”

Now, Jesus also had something *else* in mind when he said this that would have been very familiar to the people listening to him. Jesus was *Jewish*, and there is some thought that he was a rabbi (he is referred to as *Rabbi* or *teacher*, but it’s not known for sure whether he was *formally* a rabbi). Each rabbi had his own understanding or interpretation of the Jewish law; his own set of teachings as to how faithful Jewish people were to live out the law.

For example, the law says to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Well, what does that *mean*? How do we *do* that? Some rabbis said, “That means you can’t do any work on the Sabbath. That means you cannot *cook*, you cannot *sew*, you cannot *walk* more than a certain number of miles on the Sabbath.” Other rabbis said, “Well, it’s not quite that strict. You can still cook and sew and walk. Just refrain from hard, physical labor. The Sabbath is a day of rest, whatever that looks like for you.”

So each rabbi had his own set of teachings about how to interpret the law, and a rabbi’s set of teachings was referred to as that rabbi’s *yoke*. This set of teachings *bound you to God*; if you kept this yoke and lived your faith in this way, you would be walking with God, living side by side with God.

The thing is, these yokes could get very complicated, very detailed, very heavy and burdensome and hard to carry. “You have to do *this, this, this, and this*, or else you are not living right with God; you’re not *pleasing* God.” The became very *demanding*. This was often Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees. They had such rigid interpretations of scripture that Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.” He’s saying that their yoke is too heavy and burdensome for people to carry; that it is actually *keeping* them from being bound to God.

But Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who 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*.” It’s like Jesus is saying, “There is this impossible standard that other people expect you to live up to. But that’s not the case with me. *My* yoke is easy: love God, love your neighbor. How do you know

you're doing that? Wisdom will be vindicated by your deeds. Your actions will prove it. I didn't come to give you another set of rules to follow. I came to set you free from all of that, so that you could really live your life *with God*."

I talk to people all the time who talk about the pressure that they feel, living in this area. The pressures of your job, to be successful; your house, your car, your clothes, what school you go to, your children and how *they* are performing in school and sports, your *church*. It's like there's this impossible standard that we are expected to live up to, and no matter how hard we work, how hard we try, it's never going to be enough; we're never going to be good enough.

Last week I was talking with Debbie Ealer about the mission trip to New Mexico. She was telling me about this one night where the group that was hosting them put on a cookout for the community. This was a very poor community, so with the offer of free food, people came out in droves. The people knew that this was a Christian organization that was putting this on, so it was an opportunity to talk about faith. As they were going around inviting people to come, they were talking to this one man who was very hesitant. He didn't want to come. Because, he said, "I know about Jesus, and I'm not good enough. I've had a very hard life and made some bad choices. I'm not good enough to come to this dinner. I'm not good enough for Jesus."

He felt the burden of this impossible standard that he had to live up to in order to please God and be good enough for God. And there's a sense in which he's *right*. He's *not* good enough for God, if you base that on the life that he has lived and the decisions that he has made. Paul talks about this very thing. He says, "I know what is good and right, but I cannot *do* it. I *want* to do what is good, but I am a captive to *sin*. Nothing good dwells within me. Wretched man that I am!" Paul is saying that he is not good enough for God, to meet this standard of pleasing God.

He cries out, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Paul knows that, based on what he has done, he is not good enough for God. But he also knows that it’s not about what he has done. It’s about what Christ has done. That Christ came and lived and died to set him free from this impossible standard that he was expected to live up to. Christ removed the burden of this yoke that was placed upon him.

On his own Paul wasn’t good enough, that man in New Mexico wasn’t good enough, *we* are not good enough. But it’s not *about* us being good enough. It’s about *God* being good enough. It’s about God loving us and forgiving us and accepting us despite our sin and our mistakes and our bad decisions. On our own we’re not good enough. But we’re not on our own. In Christ, there is not a law that we have to fulfill or an impossible standard to meet. In Christ, we are invited to come, not based on what we have *done*, but simply to receive the life that Christ has to give.

You can’t please everyone, so focus on pleasing *God* whose yoke is easy, whose burden is light, and in whom we are good enough.