

Easing the Burden  
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30; Romans 7:15–25a  
Saturday, July 9, 2023

Let us pray: May your word be spoken, Lord. May it take root in our souls and find expression in our lives, all for your glory in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was trying to think of an illustration to start this sermon off with; some kind of story to help illuminate what these texts are about. But here's the only illustration that you need: I just got back from a 2,000 mile, six-day road trip with three kids. That's a vivid illustration, isn't it? You can *see* that. You can probably *hear* that. I dare say you can *feel* that. You want to know what Jesus is saying here? *You can't please everyone.*

In the verses immediately before this, Jesus has been talking about John the Baptist, who came to prepare the way for Christ, but people didn't *listen* to John. So Jesus says, "It's like children sitting in the marketplace 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*. You can't win! 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 *crazy*, 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. If you try to please one person, you are inevitably going to disappoint or upset someone else. And if you try to please *everyone*, you usually end up pleasing no one at all!

Paul is talking to the Romans about *knowing* what is good and right but not being able to *do it*. It's like he's torn between two things: good and evil, righteousness and sin. He wants one, but he keeps getting pulled to the other. We all know what *that's* like, right? "I know the right thing to do, but man, it is *hard* sometimes to *do it*."

When I hear these two readings, I hear *conflict*. Tension. Two opposing forces, and we are right in the middle. And that can be *exhausting*. Trying to please *God*, trying to please *other people* can be mentally, physically, spiritually exhausting.

But Jesus says there at the end, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. In me, you will find rest for your *souls*." What does that rest *look like*? What does it *feel* like? As we live with the daily conflict and tension of trying to please God and trying to please other people, trying to just live life with other people, how can we find the peace that Christ offers? And I don't mean it in terms of, "We can either please God or we can please people, but we can't do *both*." I'm talking about how we can find peace with God *and* peace with *each other*. How can we go from living in a place of *tension* and *conflict* – internally and externally – to living in a place of *peace*? And I think that the answer is found in an understanding of how God loves us, and how we love others.

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So first, I think we find peace with *God* by understanding and embracing the love that God has for us. We often think of "pleasing God" as being this impossible standard that we have to meet. "I have to do *everything right* in order to make God happy." We may *know* that's not true intellectually and theologically, but the way we *live* and *feel* often tells a different story. But what Jesus says here is that God is not laying this heavy burden on us, this impossible standard

that you have to live up to. God is *relieving* that burden and giving you *rest* from it. Jesus says, “My yoke is *easy* and my burden is *light*.”

Now, in one sense, 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 for people to live out. "You have to do *this, this, this, and this*, or else you are not living right with God; you're not *pleasing* God." They 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 connected 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. 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*."

Paul had lived most of his life as a Pharisee. So he *knew* about that yoke. He felt the weight and the burden of constantly trying to please God. And it was *killing* him. You can *hear* it in his words here, "Nothing good dwells within me...I am a captive to the law of sin...Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?!" That is *heavy* language. He is saying that he is not good enough for God, to meet this standard of pleasing God. But that is the *old* Paul talking. That is Saul the Pharisee talking. Because the very next thing that Paul says,

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Who will rescue me from this body of death? Jesus.

Paul had come to understand that he did not have to try harder and harder and do more and more to please God. Jesus lived and died and rose again to *relieve* that burden from him. Paul came to understand that even when he sinned, even when he fell short of what God wanted for him, he was still loved and forgiven and accepted. And it was *not* because of what *he* did. It was because of what *Jesus* had done *for* him. So that inner conflict of trying to please God was gone (or at least *eased*) because Paul understood and embraced the love that God has for him. The love of God in Jesus Christ relieves the burden of having to be perfect.

If you only hear one thing in this sermon, if you only remember *one thing* from any sermon you have ever heard in your life, I want it to be this: God is *love*, and *God loves you*. It’s so simple, but sometimes we just need to hear that and be reminded of that. God loves you *so much* that God gave up the glory of heaven to come to earth and live life *with* us, as *one* of us, so that God could know what your life is like. So God could feel the things that you feel, experience the things that you experience. God loves you so much that Jesus gave up his life for you, that your sin would be forgiven. And Jesus rose from the dead, opening the way to eternal life, so that he could live *with you forever*.

*God loves you*. Not the *perfect* you. Not *if you try a little harder*, read the Bible a little more, pray a little more, go to church a little more, give a little more. God *loves* you and *accepts* you *exactly the way you are*, right here, right now, sitting here today. With all your sin and flaws. When God looks at you, God does not see that. God sees a beloved child, created in God’s very image, who has been forgiven by the saving death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, “Come to me.” Not, “all you who are good enough, who have done enough, who try hard enough.” But, “Come to me, all you who are *weary* and *carrying heavy burdens*.” All of us who are *worn out* from trying so hard to be good enough, to meet the standard that someone somewhere along the way told us we had to meet to be worthy of being loved. Jesus says, “Come to me, and I will set you free from that. I will take that burden from you and bind you to myself, not with *laws* but with *love*.”

You are *so unbelievably loved* by God. If we can *understand* and *embrace* the love that God has for us, that can make this life of faith *so much easier*, because we stop trying to do things that *prove* we are good enough for God to love, and we start *wanting* to do all of those things in *gratitude* for the love that God has already poured out upon us.

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When we find that peace with *God*, we can then share that love with *others* and find peace with *them*. Because we stop making others prove themselves. We stop waiting for them to be good enough. We love them the way that we are loved: *as they are*, flaws and all. No one will ever be *perfect* for you. Some people may get pretty close, but no one will ever be *perfect*, 100% meeting your expectations of who and how they should be. So why not let go of those expectations and just love them.

That’s easy to say, right? I know it’s *hard* sometimes because some people can just be so *stupid* and *wrong*! I’m not saying that it’s *easy*. It’s *simple*, but it’s the hardest thing we’ll ever have to do. To love someone who disappoints you or makes you angry or hurts you. And it’s not just *feeling* love for them. It is, as Paul says elsewhere, showing them patience and kindness and bearing with them and hoping for them and praying for them and blessing them. Not when they

*deserve* it. But because they *need* it. We *all* need it. And I think what you'll find is, when you let go of those expectations of *others*, it makes things easier for *you*. It lightens the load that *you* are carrying around and eases *your* burden. That other person is just as imperfect as you are. But they are also just as *loved by God* as you are.

This is what Jesus has done for us. He has made it possible for us to live life with God and with each other. He has shown us what that looks like – to love and to *be* loved. He has eased the burden that we place on *ourselves* and on *each other*. You can't please everyone. And you don't *have* to. Simply understand and embrace the love that God has for you – love that accepts you *as you are*, flaws and all – and then extend that same love to someone else. You do *that*, and I *promise* you, this whole thing gets a whole lot easier. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.