

SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

The Yoke of Christ

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

July 9, 2023

These final verses from the eleventh chapter of Matthew's gospel are among the most comforting we find in all of scripture.

The truth is that I am not a scripture memorizer usually, but these words I know by heart. As one of your pastors, I have spoken them more times than I could possibly count. At hospital bedsides, during funerals, in worship, in the midst of difficult diagnoses and treatments. Jesus' words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and 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." An invitation and a promise—words nearly universal in their reach. For who among has not felt weighed down by heavy burdens or weary? How many of us feel this way right now, at this very moment? Don't worry—I won't ask for a show of hands, but I know that we're here.

These words are perennial. They speak to the reality of the human condition, to the fact that there is something that we will always need that Christ will always offer. In the same way that we will never not thirst, we will never not need Christ's invitation. True to the nature of a 'greatest hit,' these words don't get old. We don't tire of their tune or outgrow their message. "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

For as comforting as these words are, it might surprise us to realize that in the earlier part of this passage, Jesus is angry. Since we have just parachuted down into Matthew 11 for today, it may be helpful to have some context here. In this

chapter in Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus in the midst of building conflict. He has been going about his ministry of healing and teaching, keeping close company with the sick, with the unclean, with tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders of his generation have some opinions about this. It's obvious to them, and they think it should be obvious to others: *This man is a glutton, and a drunkard!* The same religious leaders also reject John the Baptist, the purported prophet and messenger from God: *This man clothes himself in camel's hair and rants and raves in the wilderness.*

John the Baptist is too pious; Jesus is not pious enough.

In these verses from Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus' annoyance on full display. These religious leaders are like bickering children who get upset when others don't play according to their rules. John the Baptist doesn't eat and drink, and they say he has a demon; Jesus eats and drinks, and they say he's a glutton and a drunkard. It's impossible to win.

There is a second source of Jesus' anger with the religious leaders, and this is probably the bigger one: Jesus believes that the religious leaders have warped the teachings of the Torah from something beautiful and life-giving to something harsh and burdensome. This is not Jesus rejecting Judaism as a flawed religion—after all, Jesus was a Jew, so this is very much his faith and his community. He is angry about a particular way of practicing Judaism that was legalistic and demanding, an impossible burden for ordinary people who did not have the time or the knowledge or the resources to devote their lives to a religious vocation. He is angry about the particular

so-called “wise and intelligent” religious leaders who have created stumbling blocks for God’s children, denying access to the gifts and comfort of a life with God to those who need it the most.

So, this is the context that is swirling in the air. This is the mix of anger with the religious leaders and also compassion for a suffering people that prompts these words of life, and I invite you to hear them again. “Come to me, all you that are weary and 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 is as if Jesus is saying, “I see you. You are so tired and weighed down. It doesn’t have to be this way. Come to me. Take my yoke upon you. Allow me to teach you. For my yoke is kind and good.”

Words of grace for those crowds of ordinary people, and for us.

I learned this week about a man who amassed quite a following doing extraordinary deeds, healing the sick and restoring sight to the blind.

I’m actually not talking about Jesus in this case but rather a 20-something-year-old YouTuber who has become famous by orchestrating lavish and sometimes absurd acts of kindness and generosity, usually involving large sums of money. His videos on YouTube have titles like, “1000 blind people see for the first time” and “We saved an orphanage.” Some are challenges, like, “Last to leave the circle wins \$500,000” or “Would you sit in a tub full of snakes for \$10,000?” (Spoiler alert: it appears that many people would.)

This famous YouTuber has over 165 million global subscribers who watch his videos, which regularly amass tens if not hundreds of millions of views. I’ve been pondering this phenomenon this week with a mix of amusement and befuddlement, but that wasn’t all, and at a certain point I realized that I felt a certain

kind of sadness about this. We still long for a savior. Someone who will cure our diseases. Someone who will give us purpose and meaning. Someone who will set us free from despair and restore our hope.

The truth is that there are many would-be messiahs auditioning for this role, offering us their own promises, their own kind of yoke. There is an entire wellness industry that promises that we can be perfected, that “we can organize ourselves, heal ourselves, budget ourselves, love ourselves, and eat well enough to make ourselves whole.” This is what Kate Bowler explores in her newest book entitled *No Cure for Being Human*. Kate is a theologian, an author, a professor at Duke Divinity School. She was diagnosed with stage IV cancer at the age of 35.

Bowler writes,

Modernity is a fever dream promising infinite choices and unlimited progress. We can learn how to be young forever, successful forever, agents of our own perfectibility. We can fall in love with Tony Robbins and Eckhart Tolle, Joyce Meyer and Rachel Hollis. Women can learn that their better selves can be measured in Weight Watchers points, squeeze into Kim Kardashian’s waist trainers, or be enhanced by the right shade of Mary Kay lipstick. Men can save like Dave Ramsey, master the habits of highly effective people, or flip a tire or two at their local CrossFit. The American admiration for bootstrappers and optimists [has become] a capitalist paradise. Everyone is now a televangelist of the gospel of good, better, best. “Harness your mind to change your circumstances. The salvation of health and wealth and happiness is only a decision away. Will you finally let it save you?”

Now I want to be clear that if you came here today wearing your favorite shade of Mary Kay lipstick, or you’re going to leave and flip a tire or two, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But there is a larger question about the yoke we choose, who or what we allow to guide us for the work of living.

I might love my lipstick or try to prioritize caring for my body, but if I start to believe that these things can save me, I have chosen the wrong yoke.

And we've all been there, haven't we? Some of us are there right now. Disappointed. Defeated. Let down and without hope.

But just as Jesus has compassion for the crowds, he has compassion for us, and scripture safeguards the words that we need to hear. "Come to me, all you who are weary and 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."

My prayer is that you hear this invitation anew today.

If religious institutions and leaders have let you down or turned you away, Christ's yoke is for you.

If the freedom and agency promised by productivity, earning, and achieving have left you feeling captive in a life you no longer recognize, the yoke of Christ is for you.

If the miracle benefits of the latest diet, lifestyle fad, or self-help scheme have fallen flat, the yoke of Christ is for you.

It is for all of us.

Paradoxically, we know that taking on the yoke of Christ does not mean a life free from hardship and difficulty, loss, or hard work. These will always be a part of our human lives. As Kate Bowler likes to say, "There's no cure for being human." And we also know that taking on Christ's yoke, despite being "easy" and "light," is not without cost. We will be asked to sacrifice and to grow in integrity and to be formed according to the fruit of the spirit.

But, friends, here's the difference between the yoke of Christ and the yokes of infinite choices or unlimited progress: When we take on the yoke of Christ, we can

trust the one who guides us. He is gentle and humble in heart. He is not a stumbling block or an empty promise, but a welcoming embrace, an open door to a life with God.

Yes, when we take on the yoke of Christ, we can trust the one who guides us. His promises are sure. He leads us not to disillusionment and despair, but to life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.