

**“The Yoke’s On You”**  
**Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30**  
**July 6, 2008**

As some of you may know, I wasn’t one of those lucky kids who grew up going to church regularly. My Mom and Dad used to take me to the Methodist church sporadically when I was younger. Then I attended the Baptist church with my brother and his girlfriend when I was in my mid-teens, but it wasn’t until I was 22 years old that I became serious about following Christ, and started reading my Bible and attending worship every Sunday.

At that time Christianity was a mystery to me. I knew a little bit about the Bible. I had heard a lot of stories about Jesus and the power of love and forgiveness. I knew a little bit about Christianity, but what I didn’t know much about was the Christian life. I knew a little bit about what a Christian believed, but I didn’t know hardly anything about what a Christian was supposed to do.

And so in order to try to solve this puzzle that was the living of a Christian life, I started watching and listening to the people who went to my church. I studied them like some sort of sociology experiment and I copied them like a child learning from his or her parents.

I ate the things that they ate, and drank (and didn’t drink) the things that they drank. (or didn’t drink) I went to the places that they went, watched the movies that they watched, read the books that they read, and listened to the music that they listened to, all in the pursuit of discovering the one precise set of thoughts and actions that defined a proper Christian life. But then the trouble began. Slowly it started to dawn on me that the thoughts, beliefs and actions of some of these people that I was trying to emulate were contradictory to the thoughts, beliefs and actions of some of the other people that I was trying to learn the Christian life from.

Some of these people were tea totalers and never touched a drop of alcohol. They were also absolutely certain that anyone who spent even one short minute of Miller time was destined for the fires of hell. Yet there were others for whom it was nothing to have a little glass of wine with one’s dinner after church on a Sunday afternoon. One of my most trusted mentors, a fellow named Bernie believed that gambling of any type was evil, yet his

wife's uncle bought him lottery tickets for Christmas as a joke. (And Bernie was not amused.)

I was looking for one specific and absolute set of actions and beliefs that would help me to understand what Jesus wanted me to do and believe. But instead, what I discovered was a collection of thought and opinion so diverse and contradictory that at one point I was tempted to give up on finding Jesus' will for my life altogether. And that's when I found out about the importance of taking on the yoke of Christ.

As most of you know, a yoke is a wooden crosspiece that is attached to a harness on a beast of burden that will enable the animal to carry the weight, or pull the plow that the farmer has in mind for it. However, the yoke to which Jesus was referring in Matthew 11 is a figurative yoke, symbolizing the desires and expectations that he held for his followers. Just as the farmer had a yoke that enabled the oxen to plow the field, so does Jesus have a yoke that he would place upon the shoulders of his followers that will enable them to accomplish the task that he had designed for them.

Unfortunately, this agrarian image of the beast of burden pulling a heavy load has gone a long way toward informing the approach that many people have taken toward the living of the Christian life. When approached this way, we are tempted to believe that like some sort of farm animal there is a set or series of generic, one size fits all yokes that one is supposed to strap on one's shoulders and work with in order to please God and earn God's love.

One such yoke is the yoke of obedience. This was the way of the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day. All of their religious life was bound up in the definition of, and obedience to an endless series of rules. As William Barclay wrote in his commentary on the passage, "*A man lived his life in a forest of regulations which dictated every action of his life. He must listen forever to a voice which said, "Thou shalt not."*" This brand of blind obedience to an endless list of rules was joyless and cold and just about as far away from the life that Jesus desires for his followers as you can get.

Still today you don't have to look terribly hard to find any number of good Christian people who try to fit this same yoke of Pharisaic legalism around their necks. They too, believe that they must work to earn God's favor by doing or not doing all the right things. They go to church every Sunday, and

they put lots of money in the offering plate. They read the Bible every day and pray like mad every chance that they can get. They don't smoke and they don't drink, and they don't dance, and they don't curse, and they don't play cards, and they don't go to movies, and they don't watch television, and they don't listen to popular music, and they are some of the most miserable people that you would ever want to meet. And why are they so miserable? Because at the end of the day all of this doing and not doing leaves them even more empty and frustrated than they were before they started trying to make friends with God by being so good. The truth is that the yoke of obedience will crush you under its weight. It is huge and heavy and impossible for any one person to carry. One can never be good enough to earn God's love, and no matter how hard one tries, the yoke of obedience will never fit.

Another of these generic yokes of Christian servitude is the yoke of knowledge. For others, the apparent way to God's heart is through the accumulation of knowledge about God. These folks believe that if they study enough scripture, and read every book on the Christian Book Distributors best seller list, then they can earn their get into heaven free card by the sheer volume of their abundant and inerrant knowledge about the person and will of God.

But as author and pastor Rob Bell wrote in his awesome book titled, *"Velvet Elvis,"* *"The moment God is figured out with nice, neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God."* When Moses asked God for his name, all he got from God was "I am." God left the rest up to Moses to figure out on his own. And the same is true for us. God is too big to fit into a box or to tie up with a nice neat little bow of understanding. And no matter how much we read or study, we will never know enough about God to make God real to us.

However there is an important distinction to be made here. And that is to say that while knowing *about* God is one thing, knowing God is quite another thing altogether. In our scripture passage Jesus said *"Come to me," said Jesus. "All who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and know me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

And there it is in a nutshell. Jesus yoke isn't a yoke of obedience or knowledge. The yoke of Christ is a yoke of loving relationship. He doesn't say, know *about* me, he says, know *me*. The yoke of Christ is a yoke of love and understanding and intimacy. And while those who take on the yoke of Christ might well do many of the same things as those who burden under the yokes of knowledge and obedience, they do them for a very different reason and to a very different end. They pray and read the Bible not to earn brownie points, but so that we can be in conversation with Jesus and get to know him better. And they observe the 10 commandments and love their neighbor as their self because they want to show Jesus their love.

While it might resemble the yoke that he has placed upon the shoulders of those that have gone before you, Jesus' yoke is no generic one size fits all burden designed to crush you under that weight of obedience or knowledge. But instead it is a yoke lovingly designed specifically and individually just for you. Jesus yoke is easy because it is a yoke of loving relationship, and his burden is light because he shoulders it with you.

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Amen.