

Sunday 5th July 2020

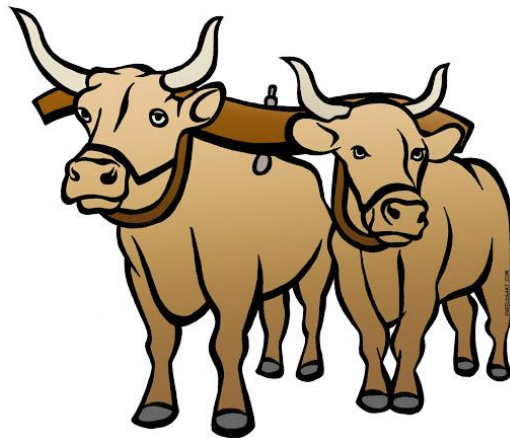
Reading: Matthew 11:25-30

Come to Me and Rest

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned. ²⁶ Yes, Father, this was how you were pleased to have it happen.

²⁷ "My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."



I wonder what the word 'yoke' means to you? I looked the definition up in the Oxford English Dictionary and discovered it can have many meanings, both as a verb, meaning to link one thing to another, or as a noun. As a noun it can, amongst other definitions, be the top section of a dress or skirt, or a crossbar on which a bell swings . It can also be a wooden crosspiece fastened over the necks of two oxen and attached to a plough or wagon, or a wooden shoulder piece for carrying a pair of pails. If you are not very good at spelling then you might also think it was the yellow part of an egg.

If we disregard the definition as the top part of a piece of clothing and the yellow part of an egg, then we probably consider the word 'yoke' to be a word of toil or hardship. If you had to carry two pails of water a long distance hanging from a wooden yoke over your shoulders you would certainly feel the effort required after a short distance. In the same way, oxen or horses are yoked together to pull a heavy cart or wagon, or perhaps a plough. We might not see that too often in this country anymore, except perhaps at ploughing matches, but it is still a way of farming for many less affluent countries.

In Jesus' day the people listening to Him speak would certainly have had an image of what a yoke meant to them, indeed Jesus would have made yokes in the carpenter's workshop. They would have used yokes on their animals, and probably on themselves to collect water from wells. In the farming world, when a farmer was training an oxen to wear a yoke it would be common practice to yoke the young untrained ox with an experienced trained one, thus the untrained would learn from the trained oxen how to work.

Jesus' listeners would also understand the description of a yoke as a 'yoke of burden' placed on them by the Pharisees. Pharisees were an unofficial but powerful Jewish pressure group of the time. They were largely lay-led though they did include some priests. Their aim was to purify Israel through the strict observance of the Jewish law or Torah. They believed that by study and piety, by devoting themselves to learning the law and teasing out its finer points they would become 'wise' and ultimately know God. However, for the average Jew of Jesus' day this 'wisdom' was about as far out of reach as being a brain-surgeon or rocket scientist seems for most people today; they weren't scholars, or trained in languages or literature. They didn't have time to ponder and discuss weighty and complicated matters of the Torah. So the Pharisees took it upon themselves to enforce upon them this strict law observance. If you chose to become a Pharisee, you had to publicly promise to "take the yoke of the Torah" upon you. The Pharisees vowed to yoke themselves to the Law of God, and to yoke the Jewish people along with them.

Perhaps the term yoke is also a word we could use today to describe the pressure of 'religion'. In religion man creates endless rules and regulations and ways of living that, if one keeps them, they insist, will lead us to God, in effect yoking people to the burden of rules. It also makes those who follow these rules feel superior to others. 'I am following the rules much better than you.' 'I know the rules much better than you, therefore I must be much better than you.' It becomes divisive. 'My rules are better than your rules.' 'My rules are the only proper rules to follow.' 'If you don't follow my rules then I'm sorry but you're not one of 'us'' - modern day Pharisees by another name. Following the rules becomes more important than God. People can be religious, and spend all their time trying to follow the rules, thinking they are closer to God, but in reality they have no faith at all.

Jesus tells that they are all heading in the wrong direction. The answer is much easier than that. With faith in Jesus we are offered a different 'yoke'. A yoke that comes from His mercy and love and is easy to bear, is no burden at all, but a gift. He offers it to all who are tired from carrying heavy burdens whether religious, moral, physical, emotional, financial or whatever. We can stop trying to carry the yoke of burden on our own, struggling to get along by ourselves. Instead we can, like young untrained oxen, choose, in faith, to be yoked together with Jesus and learn from Him. He will bear all the weight and carry us along, teaching and guiding us. And the reason that Jesus' yoke is easy to bear? Because of who Jesus is - 'gentle and humble in spirit'. He isn't going to stand over us like a policeman. He isn't going to be cross with us like an angry schoolteacher. He doesn't demand or declare that rule following is the most important thing. He loves us and wants to gently lead us.

Jesus came to show us the nature of God our Father. If we want to know what God is like we just need to look at Jesus. Jesus went on to die for us so that our way to God was open again, the burden of rule following was lifted. We don't need to be yoked to rules and regulations to reach God, we just need to be yoked in faith to Jesus who will lead us gently, lovingly and with mercy and grace to God. 'For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.'

In these days of worry and uncertainty of how life is going to be in the months to come, it is an amazing comfort to know that we don't have to worry about our future, or what we have to do to please God, for there is nothing more we can do to make ourselves right with God. Jesus has already done everything by taking all the punishment for our wrongs and dying in our name. We simply need to believe and trust in Jesus, ask forgiveness for all the wrong in our lives, yoke ourselves to Him and ask Him to lead us by His Holy Spirit.

Don't be a Pharisee.

Take up Jesus' offer. Yoke yourself to Him.

Amen

Music: Knowing You

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxpPla-BskY>

Prayer: (by Iyanla Vanzant)

Dear God;

I don't need to know how.

I don't need to know when.

I don't need to know why.

I don't need to know where.

All I need to know is **Who**.

Thank you for being the one **Who** is always there for me.

The one **Who** never fails to respond to my frantic pleas for help.

Thank you for being the one **Who** is always dependable,
ready and able to support, protect and guide me
through the situations I face in my life.

Thank you for being the one **Who** knows the answer
and offers it freely.

No matter where I am or what I may need,
you are always the one **Who** will take me by the hand
and pull me through.

Thank you for being the one **Who** knows me better
than I know myself.

Who loves me when I can't find love within myself.

No matter what the situation or experience,
you, God, are **Who** I need and what I need.

Thank you for being just **Who** you are
and for supporting me, guiding me,
leading me into being a better me.

For who You inspire me to be, I am so grateful.

Thank you Lord

Amen