

## Did You Get the Yoke?

Matthew 11:25-30

Sunday, July 12, 2020, Aledo UMC

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<sup>28</sup> “Come unto me, all you labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Last week I began my sermon with a discussion of homophones: yolk and yoke are pronounced the same way but have different meanings and different spellings. Y-O-L-K is the sunny side of your fried egg whereas Y-O-K-E is a device that is used to connect one ox with another for a specific agricultural purpose.

We explored the design of a typical yoke and how it is intended to connect two oxen to each other. And I raised the question: If a yoke is meant for two, and if I'm to take his yoke upon me, then who's on the other side of the yoke? And that's where we learned that *Jesus is on the other side of the yoke*. That means that the invitation of Christ is an invitation to be literally connected to Christ by way of his yoke.

We explored the mission statement of this church which is: “We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.”

Then we came to realize that Christ's yoke is the means and the metaphor for our connection to Christ.

And that brings us to today's message: *Did you get the yoke?*

I want to begin with one of my all-time favorite stories. A young man was sentenced to a long prison term in the state penitentiary. Upon his arrival, he was shown to his cell where he met his new cellmate, an old convict who'd already spent several years behind bars.

You can imagine what a frightening situation this was for the young prisoner, especially that evening when it was lights out. There was the newbie, lying on his cot, wondering what terrors the night might bring to him.

That's when somewhere across the cell block, some prisoner called out, “593!” And everybody laughed uproariously.

Then another called out, “57!” And again, everybody laughed and laughed.

Then another called out, “314!” And again, the cell block was filled with laughter.

Finally, the newbie asked his cell mate, “Why do the other prisoners keep calling out numbers? And why does everybody laugh when they do?”

“Well, you see, we've all been in prison for such a long time that instead of telling entire jokes, we've just assigned numbers to each one.”

“Oh, I get it,” the Newbie said. “Let me try: 352!”

Dead silence. Not a single peep from anyone. So the newbie's cell mate says, “Some people can tell a joke, and some people can't.”

None of the other prisoners got the joke. Of course, it didn't help that the new guy on the block didn't know how to tell a joke. But hopefully you got it—not only the joke, but the yoke. For Christ offers us to take his yoke and be connected to him.

If you are truly connected to Christ, then you are yoked to him. What does it mean to be yoked to Jesus Christ? To answer that question, let us turn to our sermon text.

The first thing we discover is that when we are connected to Christ, we have rest. That's a wonderful promise, but it's one that is easily misunderstood. At the end of the day, I'll kick off my shoes, sit down and watch TV. I become a couch potato. I rest. But look at the context: that's not what Jesus is promising in Matthew 11. That kind of rest would suggest that I've taken off my yoke, just as I've kicked off my shoes. I've become idle. But the kind of rest that Jesus is describing has nothing to do with idleness or laziness.

"Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you..." You put a yoke on a pair of oxen when it's time to go out and plow the field, not when it's time to rest. Jesus' words are contradictory: are we resting or are we working?

Rest was established by God in the Creation narrative. For six days, God created the heavens and the earth and all that is therein. Then on the seventh day, God rested. The purpose of Genesis 1 is to establish two critical truths: first, God is the Creator of all things; and second, God kept Sabbath. And if God kept Sabbath, then we also are invited to keep Sabbath.

But does that mean God became lazy or idle? Did God kick off his shoes, become a cloud potato? Absolutely not: God ceased from creating, but even on the Sabbath, God continued his work of preserving and sustaining that which he had created. And today, God continues his work of sustaining and redeeming, even on the Sabbath.

Can you imagine if someone were to call upon God for salvation, only to get a recording that said, "This is God. I can't take your call today; I'm observing Sabbath. Please leave a message at the tone and I'll get back to you tomorrow."

In John chapter 5, the religious elite accused Jesus of violating the Sabbath because he healed an invalid man beside the pool of Siloam. But in verse 17, Jesus replied, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working."

God may have ceased from creating, but he never stops from his work of preserving and sustaining Creation or of healing and redeeming humanity.

But what does it mean, then, to keep Sabbath? What does it mean to find rest? According to Exodus 23:12, Sabbath is simply a time of refreshment for both livestock and people—servants and even slaves.<sup>1</sup> Sabbath is connected to Creation, so when we experience Sabbath, we reconnect with our Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of my discussion about Sabbath rest is derived from *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, © 1960, pg. 446.

Unfortunately, Sabbath had become so distorted in Jesus' day that it was anything but a time of refreshment or reconnection. In fact, the people probably suffered more on the Sabbath than they did when they were working.

So what is this rest to which Jesus is calling us? It's not laziness or merely desisting from work; rather, Jesus is calling us to a "sabbath-life" in which our work has purpose and meaning and fulfillment for us.

Why does our work have purpose and meaning and fulfillment? Because we are connected to Christ. I know that sounds like a circular argument, but it's also true: we come to Christ and find Sabbath-rest; we take his yoke and find that Jesus is on the other side of the yoke; and then we find purpose in life because we are connected to Christ.

Work is, after all, a gift from God. When God created Adam, he also created work for him: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15).

That's in contrast to the punishment which came after the Fall, where God said Adam would face futility in working the soil. Why? Because Adam's sin—Adam's disobedience—had broken the yoke which connected him to Christ.

And that brings us to the critical question: *Did you get the yoke?* "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you **not** an isolated sabbath, but rather, I will give you a sabbath-life of purpose and meaning. Take my yoke upon you and be connected to me because we have a job to do, but we'll do it together, side-by-side. I will be with you every step of the way. I'll make sure that your rows are straight. I'll make sure that you don't get lost. And there's one more thing: I'm not a harsh taskmaster. I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul. I make good yokes: they're pleasant and comfortable and yours will be a perfect fit."