

The Yoke Fits, Wear It

Sunday, July 26, 2020—Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

Call to Worship by Mike Millar

Give praise to the Lord! Make known among the nations—and in your neighborhoods—the mighty deeds which God has done!

Sing praise to him! Glory in his holy name and give thanks for his many miracles.

Look to the Lord, for he is strong. Seek his face, for he is compassionate.

Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

(Adapted from Psalm 105:1-5)

Sermon Text: Matthew 11:28-30

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

Sermon, “The Yoke Fits, Wear It”

To really understand what Jesus is talking about in this passage, we have to imagine a time before gas and diesel powered the farm industry. We have to go back to a time when farmers relied on livestock to plow their fields.

Recently I came across the story of a farmer who worked the soil over one hundred and twenty years ago.¹ When he first began tilling the soil, he did so with yoked oxen. But it wasn't long before tractors came along, and this farmer adapted to modern ways and began using a tractor. But he always reserved a portion of his land to be worked with a yoke of oxen. It wasn't a necessity for him; he simply farmed this way out of a sense of nostalgia. He enjoyed the oxen; he enjoyed raising them and nurturing them and training them for the yoke. It became a hobby to him, and he was good at it.

Before we go on, it's helpful to know what an ox is: an ox is simply a steer which has been allowed to grow to full size, rather than be slaughtered, so that it might be used as a draft animal.

When it was time to train an ox, he'd select one that was a year or two old and begin breaking it. He would do that by pairing the young ox with an old ox named Clyde. Clyde was about ten years old and he'd been around the farmer for many years. Clyde was steady and reliable, and he never fought the yoke. He simply knew how to settle in and go to work.

The way that the farmer would break the young ox is to put it under the yoke and then Clyde would take the young ox with him, literally dragging him around the field with him, teaching it how to pull, how to settle in under the yoke, and how to be efficient.

¹ Some of my sermon was informed by this video which I accessed on Monday, July 20, 2020: <https://youtu.be/IUOoszydGc>

Ideally, the young ox would learn from Clyde and would become a good farm animal. But that wasn't always the case. Sometimes the young ox would develop pressure sores on his back. And these pressure sores weren't little or insignificant. As you may have already guessed, they were caused by the yoke rubbing on the back of the ox.

You might think that the sores were caused by a yoke that was ill-formed, but that's not the case because the farmer would hand-carve each yoke to perfectly fit each ox. The sores would develop not because of the fitting of the yoke; the farmer made sure that the yoke fit perfectly. The issue is whether or not the young ox will allow himself to be yoked. And when they won't allow themselves to be yoked, they're either half in the yoke, or half out of the yoke. They're never completely under the yoke where Clyde can help them. And that's when the pressure sores develop.

And then the farmer explained that if it goes on long enough, then he has no use for it, and he is left with no other choice but to slaughter the ox who is unwilling to submit to the yoke.



This is my fourth sermon from this passage. In each of the three previous sermons, I tried to come up with a somewhat catchy title:

- The Yoke's on Us
- Did You Get the Yoke? and
- This School's a Yoke!

I initially titled this sermon, "If the Yoke Fits, Wear It." But then I realized that that wasn't an accurate sermon title; it included one word that didn't belong there: the word "If."

Matthew 13:55 tells us that Jesus was the son of a carpenter. There's a legend that Jesus, as the son of a Galilean carpenter, made the best yokes in the land. Each yoke was tailor-made to fit each ox. If that were the case, then I would imagine that above the door there would have been a sign declaring, "My yokes fit well." And now, years later in the midst of his ministry, Jesus was still declaring that his yokes indeed were easy and fit well.

One of the temptations preachers face is the temptation to preach an "easy gospel." That's especially true in our consumeristic, materialistic, individualistic society. As preachers, we are tempted to accommodate, rather than tell it like it really is. We are tempted to preach what the people want to hear, rather than what the people *need* to hear. And so those preachers will lick their finger and lift it upward to feel which way the wind is blowing, rather than getting down on their knees to discern which way the Spirit is moving. They poll their communities and ask, What are you looking for in a church?

- You want a praise band, but you don't want electric guitars? We can accommodate you.
- You want a church where you can feel good all the time and never be told to give up the secret sin in your life? We can accommodate you.

- You want a church where you give your life to Jesus so you can have a better car, a better job, and whiter teeth? We can accommodate you.

It's tempting. And if you drive past First Accommodation Church in Anytown, USA on a Sunday morning, you'll see lots and lots of cars on their parking lot. And the parking lot attendants have the brightest smiles, but the people in the pews inside don't know what it means to be yoked to Jesus.

The pastors behind those Lucite pulpits will smile and proclaim, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest," promising you an easy care-free life in Christ. And they would be absolutely right in proclaiming that promise, because it's one of the greatest invitations ever issued by Jesus Christ. But they forget that the promise comes with a purpose; they forget verse 29: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart."

Let me tell you something: living for Jesus is not easy. It requires discipline. And we don't like to be disciplined:

- We don't want to pray as we ought.
- We don't want to search the scriptures.
- We don't want to tithe.
- We don't want to walk the straight and narrow.
- We might even face persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will face tribulation, but take heart! For I have overcome the world."² And when we are persecuted, we are blessed, because great is our reward in heaven.

Christianity isn't just about laying your burdens down at the feet of Jesus; Christianity is also about taking his yoke upon us. It's about joining Christ in the work he's doing in our homes and church and neighborhoods.

Taking his yoke means work: there are rows to plow and fields to cultivate and crops to nurture. And the same Jesus who invites the weary and burdened to "Come unto him" is the same Jesus who says, "Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."³ (For) "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."⁴

When we take our place alongside Jesus in his yoke, we become a worker. Jesus calls us to come him that that we might join him in his mission; it is, after all, his mission. It's not our mission. It didn't originate with us.

For that matter, our mission statement isn't our mission statement; it's God's mission statement. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that we might be connected to him—and through him, to the Father.

Living for Jesus isn't about you living an easy life. But his yoke is easy. It fits us perfectly because we were born to be with Jesus.

² John 16:33

³ John 4:35b

⁴ Luke 10:2

Think about that for a moment: you were born to be with Jesus. That's why his yoke is easy. That's why being yoked with him will not overburden you or oppress you. Rather, being yoked with him will connect you to your Creator and will fulfill you.

There's one more thing: Jesus isn't asking you to do anything that he hasn't done himself. He will go with you all the way, from birth through life to death and beyond. For Christ left his throne in glory; came down to the earth he created; was born of a woman; lived as we live; died as we die; and then rose from the dead, so that we who are yoked to him might one day rise with him.

Thanks be to God.