

“Freedom to Love, Serve and Be Joyful”

Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30; Romans 7:15-25

(Scriptures are in the sermon text.)

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Tax hikes or cut spending, regulation or leave alone, cars or public transportation, fossil fuel or green energy, prisons or schools, parks or the arts, aid or sanctions, liberal or conservative, scores or character, competition or team work, democrat or republican, Roman Catholic or protestant, traditional or cotemporary, mission or education, save or buy, relationships or stuff, public or private education, house or rent, dine in or out and the choices and debates go on and on exhausting us.

In essence two thousand years ago the political, spiritual and personal options were much the same. The war with Rome, Herodians or Zealots, the destruction of the Temple, the denominations of the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes and a myriad of personal choices. It was a time of political and religious fighting, a time with numerous spiritual options all claiming to be the best and right, a time when the education, technology and public works of Rome was going to make everyone's life better. It was a time of loss, unemployment, hunger and scarcity. In this wake Israel agonized over the future. Where do we see God? What of the promises of God to Israel? How do we interpret God's work in the world and our lives? Where should we live? What should we do? The gospel of Matthew proclaims the answers are all found in your relationship with Jesus. Matthew begins **Matthew 1:23** **“They shall name Jesus Emmanuel, “which means, “God is with us.”**. Matthew ends with Jesus declaring **Matthew 28:20** **“I am with you always to the end of the age”**.

Jesus identifies today's issues, burdens and the ways we are torn in different directions with a question, a parable and a summary of public opinion. Jesus said, **Matthew 11:16-17** **“To what can I compare this generation? It is like children playing a game in the public square. They complain to their friends, ‘We played wedding songs, and you didn't dance, so we played funeral songs, and you didn't mourn.’”** Jesus' question reveals the futile burden of comparison. It does not matter if it is generation to generation, country to country, group to group, church to church, or yourself with another. Stop burdening yourself with comparisons. Our endless debates are like a group of children fighting over what game to play. Each child gets so caught up in which game is the best that no game is played. Each child gets so focused on getting their way that they pout and leave frustrated, angry that they didn't get to play their game, their way. Day after day the children can't agree which game to play so they complain to all their friends, trying to get their friend to take their side, so the discourse, complaining and burden grows and spreads. They miss out on the joy of playing together. Jesus is pointing out that often we are fickle, restless, stubborn, determined to get our way; unfulfilled in laughter and unmoved by sorrow; too often we behave like spoiled children, never satisfied, often complaining.

Jesus continues **Matthew 11:18-19** **“For John didn't spend his time eating and drinking, and you say, ‘He's possessed by a demon.’ The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’”** We, humans, tend to be hyper critical and certain that our way is the best way. When we don't get our way we become unsatisfied, moody and argumentative.

The Apostle Paul recognized these burdens and strived to trust in Jesus and follow God's way. Paul explains that the battle isn't just outside us and between us it is also within us. Paul writes

in Romans **Romans 7:15-25** “I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. Isn't this also your experience?” Yes. I'm full of myself—after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. Jesus acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.”

Another translation ends **Romans 7:24-25** Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

John Calvin believed our number one dilemma is our hearts curve back in on ourselves. We live in self deception. An inward curved heart struggles to see the big picture, the way of love, the kingdom of God and live a joyful life. If we do not give our burdens to Jesus; if we do not invite Jesus to curve our heart out in love and service; we will implode. Our groups, churches, country and world will implode. The inward curved heart leads to selfishness, to indecision, to inability to see matters from another's perspective, the inability to choose that which brings life, love and joy over that which brings death, hate and sorrow. Unchecked it leads to groups selfishly advocating only for their way, their position, their good rather than advocating for a way of love for all people. This self serving quest can easily consume a person, group or country with an unquenchable appetite for more. No matter what one achieves or accumulates there will never be enough. There will always be someone who does it better or who has more. With wealth the craving intensifies producing a perpetual feeling of never quite making the grade, of there never being enough, creating an unbearable burden. Making matters even worse to hope the burden is transferred to a scapegoat. The blame game begins. In a society focused on material wealth the burden gets blamed on the poor, undereducated and underachieving.

On the cross Jesus was our scapegoat. Jesus wants us to dump the burdens on him. Jesus offers freedom from our burdens, freedom from an inward curved heart, freedom for the miserable, freedom for those at the end of their rope. Jesus proclaims the great invitation, **Matthew 11:28-30** “Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”

Come to Jesus. Jesus will give you rest. Jesus' rest involves peace. Over and over again Jesus came to the burdened, fearful, lost, hurting, anxious grieving, guilt-ridden, searching and gave them peace, perfect peace, heavenly peace, eternal peace, peace that surpasses all understanding. Jesus lifts burdens and gives rest, peace and renewal. Jesus invites you to a new way of living. Jesus tells you to take his yoke upon you. A yoke is a piece of wood that unites two people or animals together so they can easily do twice the work. This metaphor has a double meaning. First to be

partners with Jesus, to be, think, feel, do and love like Jesus. It is having your heart inverted to an outward curve. Jesus invites you to learn how to live and love. Jesus takes your destructive burdens and gives you a burden of loving service which is easy to bear and light. Jesus promises to bear the burden of loving service with you, side by side, yoked together. The yoke is also a symbol for the Torah and God's teaching. Similarly it means to delight in God, to love the Lord your God with all your heart mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself. Matthew Henry maintained that the yoke of Christ was easy because it was "lined with love."

It is a comforting image. It sounds so easy. Come to Jesus, dump your burdens, rest and be yoked with God. At times it is really hard as the Apostle Paul explained in our earlier reading. We want the rest, peace, love and joy of being yoked to Jesus however we fight the yoke. As soon as things are going well we often unhook our yoke with Jesus and trust ourselves. We want to be self sufficient. We want things our own way. We compare ourselves to others. We chase that which can never satisfy in so doing we pick up our old burdens again.

Yoked to Jesus we see ourselves as a beloved, cherished, gifted child of God. Unyoked we must compete, earn our worth, establish our merit through our grades, accomplishments and work. Yoked to Jesus the fullness of life is found in relationships with God and others overflowing with love and joy. Unyoked we chase fleeting happiness in the newest gadgets, sports, hobbies, drugs, sex, entertainment, more and more stuff. Yoked to Jesus we see in ourselves the image of God and we strive to be like Christ. Unyoked we try to create ourselves into the "in image" or the image we think our boss, or spouse or teacher desires. Yoked to Jesus we enjoy forgiveness, grace and experience every moment as a fresh start full of boundless glorious potential. Unyoked we are guilty, full of revenge, lost in dead ends and experience every moment as complex, overwhelming and overflowing with problems. Yoked to Jesus we discover the blessings of living God's way. Unyoked we discover the peril of living our way. Yoked to Jesus we appreciate the diversity of God's creation, the many good ways of living, being and doing, the many good ways of worshiping, and expressing one's faith. Unyoked we are certain there is only one right way, and it is our way and destructively try to get others to live our way. Yoked to Jesus our marriages, families and relationships are nurturing, supportive, loving and bring out the best in every person. Unyoked our relationships are controlling, self serving, abusive, manipulative and bring out the worst in every person. Yoked to Jesus our life has meaning, purpose, passion and we discover God has numerous joyful options to do God's will. Unyoked we search, are lethargic and are restless ever chasing after, looking, for one option that once achieved, lived or followed we make us happy. Yoked to Jesus we enjoy community. Unyoked we want control and power over others. Yoked to Jesus we enjoy peace, renewal and abundant life. Unyoked we are exhausted in wanderlust.

Paul Tillich explains "The yoke of Jesus is easy because it is above law, and replaces the toiling and laboring with rest in our souls. The yoke is not a new demand, a new doctrine or new morals, but rather a new reality, a new being and a new power of transforming life. ... The yoke comes from above and grasps us with saving force; if Jesus calls it easy, Jesus means that the yoke is not a matter of our acting and striving, but rather that the yoke is given before anything we can do. The yoke is being, power, reality, conquering the anxiety and despair, the fear and the restlessness of our existence. The yoke is here, amongst us, in the midst of our personal tragedy, and the tragedy of history. Suddenly, within the hardest struggle, the yoke appears as a victory, not attained by ourselves, but present beyond expectation and struggle. Suddenly we are grasped by a peace which is above reason. ... We know that now, in this moment, we are in the truth, in spite of all our ignorance about ourselves and our world. We have not become wiser and more understanding in any ordinary sense; we are still children in knowledge. But the truth of life is in us, with an illuminating certainty, uniting us with ourselves, giving us great and restful happiness. And

the good, the ultimate good, which is not good for something else, but good in itself, has grasped us. That is the meaning of the call of Jesus, "Come unto Me." according to Tillich.

Perhaps all of this can be summed up in one sentence. Being yoked to Jesus set us free to love, serve and be joyful. That sentence contains Jesus' invitation to follow; the greatest commandment to love God; the second to love others; Jesus' example and command to serve and the reason Jesus came which is to fill us with God's joy. Being yoked to Jesus set us free to love, serve and be joyful.

A great example of this way of life is workcamp. Youth and adults come and lay down their burdens. We do not compare popular to outcast, rich to poor, North St. Paul to other cities. We do not debate between Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Lutheran or mega church. We do not debate our politics, electronic devices, music, books or movies. We lay all those and other burdens down, yoke ourselves to Jesus and one another and serve with love. Serving with love is a burden. We become aware of great need. It is often hot, hard, dirty, tiring work. Yet it is relaxing to be yoked with others serving beside you, making a difference, improving someone's home, their life and bringing hope to them. The work becomes easy and light as we are renewed, sleep sound and see how together we are transforming an entire community with love. Often the people we serve are grateful and pass on loving service to others then sudden the work is easy as we see how the kingdom of heaven is being brought to earth through us being yoked with Jesus.

Jesus is saying to you, **Matthew 11:28-30** "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." Amen