

Exegetical Brief - Matthew 11:29-30: What Is Christ's "Yoke"?

By David J. Valleskey

What minister of the gospel doesn't find joy in preaching the comforting words of Jesus in Matthew 11:25-30, with our Savior's warm invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"? This invitation is extended to those who are "weary" (οἱ κοπιῶντες, "toiling, struggling" – note the present participle, indicating ongoing action) and "burdened" (πεφορτισμένοι, perfect passive participle, indicating a state that exists as a result of a completed action). The noun φορτίον was used for the cargo of a ship, that which burdened or weighed it down.

To those who are "weary" and "burdened" Jesus gives this invitation: "Take my yoke upon you." "My yoke," he says, "is easy and my burden is light." What is this yoke of Jesus? The answer to this question lies in identifying the yoke that was burdening and wearying those to whom Jesus extended his invitation.

In the opening verses of this pericope Jesus praised God that "these things" (ταῦτα), which God had "hidden" (ἐκρυψας) from the "wise" (σοφῶν) and "learned" (συνετῶν), he had "revealed" (ἀπεκάλυψας) to "little children" (νήπιοις). The context indicates that by "these things" Jesus is referring in particular to God's gracious plan of salvation, the message both he and John the Baptist had proclaimed. The "wise" and "learned" had rejected their message (vv. 18-19), preferring to live under the heavy yoke and burden of a "law way" to salvation. (Expressions such as "the yoke of the Torah" and "the yoke of the commandments" were commonplace in Jesus' day.) Salvation via the yoke of the law was the way advocated and taught by such as the Pharisees, of whom Jesus says, "They tie up heavy loads (φορτία) and put them on men's shoulders" (Mt 23:4). To have one's hope of salvation based on the law would indeed have been—and still is—a wearying and burdensome yoke.

To such who were laboring under this yoke Jesus says, "Take *my* yoke upon you.... For *my* yoke is easy and *my* burden [φορτίον] is light." The context makes it clear that he is contrasting *his* yoke with the yoke that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were placing upon the people. With the expression "my yoke," then, he is not referring specifically to the crosses Christians might have to bear for Jesus' sake, a view some espouse. Nor would Jesus be thinking of the broader concept of the Christian's whole new life of obedience, which would include cross-bearing, as others contend.

Rather, in contrast with the "law-yoke" of salvation by works that people were wearing, Jesus is offering a "gospel-yoke" in its place—salvation by God's grace through his redemptive work. But why would Jesus call salvation as a free gift of God a "yoke"? Is it just a play on words? Or is it more than that? Luther, who quoted this passage many times, has some instructive things to say. In a sermon he preached on this text in 1525 on St. Matthias' Day he asks, "What does [Christ] mean by saying, 'Take my yoke upon you'?" This is his answer:

At first the gospel terrifies and is contrary to the flesh, for it says that all our efforts are nil, our holiness and goodness count for nothing, everything that is in us is condemned, we are children of wrath and indignation. And this is hard on the flesh, an intolerable burden; this is why he calls it a burden or yoke....

[Christ] goes on to say, "My yoke is easy, and my yoke is light." It is as if he were saying: Don't be afraid of my yoke. The yoke of the law, under which you have been living up to now, was heavy; but my yoke is not so heavy....

The yoke of Christ is easy and his burden light, not only because he takes away ceremonies and human ordinances, but also the whole law, the curse, the sin, the death, and everything that can happen to us on account of the law. All this Christ takes from me and gives me his Spirit (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 51:130,132).

In another sermon on this same pericope, preached on St. Matthias' Day, 1517, Luther brings out the same point, namely, that from the viewpoint of the flesh the gospel of salvation by grace alone, faith alone is a burdensome yoke:

To come to Christ and go out from oneself is the great cross, which no one dreads more than he who is seeking to wash away his sins through his own works.... The wicked have no peace. If they would give up themselves and hate their sins, they would have no punishment and would not need to fear it [i.e., Christ's "yoke"].... But they do not want to give up themselves and are afraid of Christ's easy yoke. So they go on laboring under their burden, being afraid where there is nothing to be afraid of, and dragging their sin like a heavily laden wagon (*LW, AE, 51:30*).

For those whose hearts the Spirit has penetrated through the gospel, however, that which appeared to be a yoke brings welcome relief instead. Luther says, "Christ did not wish to impose any other burdens on the church—if that which is nothing but comfort and grace could be called burden—when he says, 'My yoke is easy, and my burden light' [Matt. 11:30], that is, my yoke is peace and my burden is joy" (*LW, AE, 41:22*).

A final thought: Is it proper to use this pericope, which speaks about the "yoke" of the gospel of God's free and boundless grace, to address the subject of other yokes Christians might bear for the sake of Christ, e.g., the crosses a Christian bears? This can certainly be brought out as an application of the truth Jesus is teaching here. Just as the "yoke" of the gospel is light and easy, so it will be with regard to any other yoke our Lord permits to be placed upon us.

Luther makes such an application of this passage in his 1535 commentary on Galatians:

Whatever there is of cross or suffering to be borne later on [i.e., after a person has taken hold of Christ by faith] is easily sustained. For the yoke that Christ lays upon us is sweet and his burden is light (Matt. 11:30). When sin has been forgiven and the conscience has been liberated from the burden and the sting of sin, then a Christian can bear everything easily. Because everything within is sweet and pleasant, he willingly does and suffers everything. But when a man goes along in his own righteousness, then whatever he does and suffers is painful and tedious for him, because he is doing it unwillingly (*LW, AE, 26:133*).

(This text is the Gospel for Pentecost 7, ILCW and CW Series A.)