

Matthew 11:25-30: Yoked

Preface:

Before we read today's passage let's remember where we've been, because it's relevant for how we read today's passage.

Jesus has just spent an entire chapter, chapter 10, teaching his Twelve closest disciples what it means to follow him, and it's costly. When he's finished, John's disciples show up needing some confirmation, for John, that Jesus is the Messiah who they've been waiting for, because John's wondering: He's in prison, and he needs reassurance that God is still in charge of his life.

We did skip a very small bit of Matthew, where, after John's Disciples leave, Jesus condemns the towns in which he's been doing all sorts of miracles, all sorts of good, but who have rejected him. He says that if Tyre, if Sodom, if other towns that over the course of history rejected the way of God and marched ahead on their own paths, if they had seen what Jesus has been doing, they all would have turned to God.

Then he goes into today's passage.

Let me pray for us, if I could.

Prayer:

Introduction:

And it's just a few sentences, really, but today's passage is a complicated one. Each paragraph that was read to us is its own sort of idea.

First, Jesus talks about revelation; not the book at the end of our Bibles, but God's right to self-revelation, to share as God sees fit. Jesus says this, there:

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26 Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

Then, Jesus talks about the relationship he has with the Father; it's an exclusive, intimate one, one which only they share. And of course relationships aren't transferrable; they aren't something that can be duplicated. You can't have the exact relationship I have with someone, although I can introduce you to them, and nurture your own relationship with that person. Jesus says, there:

27 "All things have been committed to me by my Father. 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.

Then he says a famous few sentences. We've heard them; many people have, Christian or not.

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

How are these connected?

And if we want to look at the ways these paragraphs, their themes, are connected, we can. Jesus invites us to consider whether or not we're little children; whether or not we understand what God has revealed through Him. We hear Jesus speak and we're left wondering, "Am I an insider or outsider?" "Am I someone God has revealed himself to, or not?" "Am I a child of this Father who reveals himself?"

And we can answer positively, "Yes!" if we've listened to Jesus. Jesus continues with the parent-child metaphor. We discover, as he reassures us and redirects us, that our relationship with God is utterly dependent on Jesus' choice to reveal God to us. There are wise, knowing people; but they don't know who Jesus knows, because only Jesus knows the Father as the Father really is. But Jesus offers to reveal to some this Father, so they can know God as God really is. They can have a relationship with God, one like the

Son's. They can be "children of the Most High," as it's put else where.

And who does Jesus choose to reveal God to? Well, to anyone who is "weary and burdened." To anyone who wants to come to him and receive the rest he offers.

Relationships Are Non-Transferable:

Jesus is the avenue of revelation when it comes to knowing the Father; only by way of Jesus can we know God.

It's an exclusive relationship, which we tend to find offensive. You know what I mean? I mean, the exclusivity Jesus implies here is really hard for us to deal with; the idea that Jesus is the only way God can be accurately and fully known. That to be considered wise and full of insight about God you have to consider Jesus, because he's the only one who has complete insight and really accurately knows about God.

It can feel, oh, undemocratic. It smacks of privilege and exclusivity, can feel fundamentally unfair to us.

Except that Jesus says "Anyone who comes to me, I'll reveal God the Father to them." And if we think about relationships as relationships, we realize that no one automatically knows someone. To be a person is to be introduced to people and form relationships with them over time. Jesus is ready to introduce us to the one in

whose image we have been made, so that we might be remade into His own image. In fact, if God and the Father are the only ones who know each other fully and accurately--Jesus doesn't talk much about the Spirit here, although he does elsewhere--it's only by being brought into their relationships by one of them that we can know the other. Jesus offers, to any of us who wants it, to get to know God as completely as he can.

Weary and Burdened.

So Jesus offers, to anyone who will come to him, an opportunity to know God as fully and as accurately as he can be known. He says this, to the crowd that's followed him around:

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Two Reactions: Relief

I'm not sure about you all, but I have two reactions to this. The first is, relief, you know? It is. My spirit expands, and I feel at peace. I've heard this passage a thousand times, but each time I do, something triggers calm in me, even if only for the space of my reading it

or hearing it. It's beautiful; the Holy Spirit turns it into a trigger for me, a trigger into peace. I'm glad for that.

Two Reactions: Confusion:

The second reaction is, oh, disbelief. Or, maybe, confusion. Because, you know, on a calendar, out of context, this is beautiful.

In context it's confusing. Jesus has just taught the Twelve all that's coming on them, which was followed up with a scene about John's imprisonment, and an urge that "we don't fall away from following God on account of Jesus," because Jesus doesn't meet our expectations, so to say this...it feels, out of place. Weird. It doesn't seem like Jesus "yoke" is all that light, or his "burden" all that easy.

This is confusing, to me. I like it better when the passage is on a fridge magnet, you know? When I don't have to think about what Jesus is saying here.

Grounded Relief:

But ultimately, a sense of relief without context isn't relief at all. It's an emotional jolt. It's good, it's handy, we can be blessed by it. But it's something like a hit from a drug. We don't need a hit from a drug in the middle of a hard day; we need strength to face the objectively hard things of life, no matter what, without drugs.

What could be more powerful is to remember what this passage really means, when we stumble across it in some devotional reading or on a wall calendar.

Because then the feeling of peace, of relief, of hope that it gives can be stronger, greater, not an emotional spike, but a grounded strength, because Jesus' words are grounded. What he says, and why it matters, has nothing to do with how we are feeling, which can change depending on a thousand things, but has to do with some objective truth.

So what Jesus says here, it's realistic. It's based in something real.

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

First of all, Jesus acknowledges this: Being a person who cares to know God includes a yoke and it includes a burden.

And can I just say, I think "Yoke & Burden" would be a brilliant brand name for, like, hipster beard oil or something. So. Have at it.

But being a person who wants to know God, wants to

live up to God's hopes for humanity, this way of life, objectively, includes a yoke and a burden.

Metaphors Start as Real Things: Yokes

Jesus is talking to those who are following someone. Does this make sense? They are following John. Or they are following the Pharisees. Or they are following him. There were other Israelite factions in play that we don't hear as much about in the Gospels--the Sanhedrin, the Essenes, the Sicarri. All had followers.

We assume, when we hear Jesus talk about "his yoke being easy and his burden being light" that what Jesus says is a metaphor for following him, a metaphor for living a God-insightful life. And it is. But he's not the first one to use these metaphors.

And before "yoke" was a metaphor, it was a thing, right? A yoke was the thing that joined oxen together so that they'd move together as a team. Where one goes, the other follows. This real "yoke" became a metaphor for the teaching an Israelite teacher gave, the way of life the Israelite teacher--or group--prescribed. The Pharisees had a yoke, the Essenes had a yoke, it was the way of life that you had to live, and to be yoked to an Israelite teacher was to do as he did and do as he told you to do. So this was a metaphor that was in play all around Jesus, not one he made up. Follow me? You had to learn the teaching of the teacher, commit to it, in order to be yoked to him.

Jesus claims his yoke is easy; it's easy. And in claiming it was easy and calling to those who are "weary and burdened," he's making a point about all those other yokes: the Pharisees primarily, but the others that are in play, too. He's saying they are a burden, and to be yoked to them, to those other teachers, is to be like you're in a team of oxen driven by a farmer who treats his animals poorly, drives them into the ground. But if you want to know God the Father fully and accurately, come to Jesus, because not only will Jesus reveal him to you, introduce you, so to speak, but Jesus will reveal a relationship with God that's easier than all those other yokes make it out to be.

And we'll see this as we move forward in Matthew, and Jesus talks about how he--and those yoked to him--ought to engage with the most basic relationship-promise when it comes to knowing God, which is how to take the command to "keep the Sabbath holy."

Metaphors Start as Real Things: Yokes

A burden we get; something that needs carried. A load.

Now, very literally, Pharisees would wear boxes on their foreheads, on their arms, with scrolls of Scripture in them. These are called phylacteries. In the Old Testament God charged that these ought to be worn as a reminder of all that God asked of his people. They weren't worn all the time; usually during prayer.

Figuratively, in prayer, those who wore these would be carrying the burden of obedience to the law that was written in these boxes. To carry the burden of a teacher was to live up to the requirements of the law as a teacher--or school of teachers--thought one ought to live up to them. Does this make sense?

Jesus, again using a metaphor that we get more naturally than the yoke thing, because we've all carried something, even if we haven't carried the things that some of Jesus' audience might have in mind when he speaks, in using this metaphor, Jesus is saying that his understanding of the covenant responsibilities, the way of life we are ought to live when we're in an insightful, accurate, healthy relationship with the Father, that his burden is light.

And it is. Over and over and over in Matthew we've seen that to follow God as the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law put it, and we'll see as the Priests understood it, takes an enormous amount of work. Those other groups that I mentioned asked an enormous, enormous amount of daily, ongoing, rule-keeping. We know this; we call it legalism. The law, though, these rules that were meant to help Israel know God, the law had become a burden so great, over time and interpretation and application, something that the average Israelite couldn't even lift. It was too big, too much, too all-the-time to be faithful in a Pharisee way.

And so when, Jesus says, having just promised to reveal God as fully and accurately as God can be revealed,

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

He’s not just out to make people feel relieved, experience a jolt of peace so they can keep on with their law-keeping work. He’s offering the group around him the double-blessing of not only knowing God as fully as any human possibly can, but saying that it’s just not the hard, impossible task that they’ve been told it is.

One translation--not a translation, a whisp-y, translation-like paraphrase, has Jesus say here:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me...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.”

And, you know, I’m suspicious of paraphrases, but

that's a home-run.

Summary:

To know God is to be yoked and burdened. Let's lay that out there. To be in a relationship is to have responsibilities and blessings to the person with whom you're relating. A relationship without the work of commitment, the demands that come of mutual love, is not a relationship; it's more like an affair.

A bit of Scripture, no matter how inspiring, without context isn't Scripture anymore, not really: it's words that trigger a high, it's more like a drug.

Jesus points out in today's passage that we can know God as fully and accurately as God can be known...if we want to. All we have to do is come to Jesus. In another context, I'd be like, "Amen!? Hallelujah. Come to Jesus."

Jesus offers to introduce anyone to his Father who will simply come to him and take on the comparatively light and easy relationship demands.

And we realize that the reason a life following Jesus is so hard, why living up to the God who is accurately revealed in Jesus can be so difficult for one of his followers, is not because it's inherently difficult in fact, it's because it is inherently antagonistic to the status quo, to the yoke and the burden of the Pharisees, and

to the prideful, self-interested ways of the so-called wise and insightful.

What could we do with this?

Conclusion:

Here's what I'll invite us to do with this passage. Let's consider our relationships generally, first of all. Are we doing the work we need to do in them to keep them healthy, good, ones in which we have insight about the person we're growing more to care for all the time? Do we offer the other person the freedom to be themselves--as God offers us--and yet, the opportunity to conform to the unique thing that a relationship is. Because a committed relationship is not simply just two individuals coming together; it has it's own rhythms of grace, it's own demands and personality and weaknesses. How are our relationships, particularly with those we have most committed ourselves to?

Can we be grateful that Jesus, "the image of the invisible God," as Paul puts it, the "the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father," as John puts it, has revealed--as Jesus himself puts it--God to us? Jesus reaches out, introduces us to his Father, and says, "Look, you've got to adopt this kid; he's awesome. She's great." And the Father's like, "Brilliant. I've loved him or her forever." And Jesus pulls us aside, tells us what it takes

to make this relationship grow, and the Spirit gives us all we need to grow into it. Let's consider, then, how well we're living up to the light yoke and easy burden Jesus shares with us when it comes to maintaining and nurturing our relationship with God. What are we doing to nurture our relationship with God?

That's easy enough, right?

Seriously, though: There is no relationship without intentional effort by both parties. The Father, Son, and Spirit together do all they can to nurture our relationship with God; but our effort matters, too. What are we taking for granted? What are we putting into it?

And, importantly, what are we putting into it that we don't have to? I don't know how often I make marriage more work than it needs to be because of my guilt, anxiety, carelessness, and self-interested behaviors, but at the end of the Day, that's the way of the Pharisees, not the way of Jesus. Let's use our energies well, rather than wastefully, and give to our relationship with God what it needs instead of the energy of guilt, shame, legalism, worry, any other thing.

These are things to think about, I suppose. God will be with us as we do.