

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/14/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Several people this week have asked me to repeat or expand what I said in my sermon Sunday about JESUS' yoke. So, let me do just that and develop it a bit further. In Matthew 11:28-30, JESUS says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For MY yoke is easy and MY burden is light." Just what is JESUS talking about?

To begin with, lest someone misread it, JESUS is not talking about the yellow part of the egg—the yolk. HE is using something very familiar to the people of HIS day in a couple of different ways. And HE is attempting to give people a different view of what it is to be faithful and obedient to GOD.

One of the ways that JESUS is referring to the yoke is in the arena of farming. For plowing and turning over the soil, or for pulling a cart, people often used oxen, either singly or as a pair. The yoke is a couple of curved pieces of wood that go around the neck of the ox and reins are attached to the sides. By pulling on the reins, the farmer or driver can get the ox to turn right or left. So, in part, JESUS is saying that the "yoke" he invites people to carry, meaning the thing that is used to steer them in life is not big and heavy, but rather easy and light. The religious leaders of that day had all kinds of rules that were to be followed if you wanted to earn GOD'S favor. Often, they were more than any person could accomplish on a regular basis. But JESUS' teaching was not difficult but something that everyone could carry out as a way of being directed, steered, through life.

The second way to understand the yoke (and something I didn't mention Sunday) is the teaching of the rabbis. Each rabbi or religious teacher had some significant lessons or ways of understanding the scriptures which was called their "yoke." Whenever a rabbi interviewed a candidate for his rabbinic school, he sought to discover whether the potential student could grasp and accept his set of key teachings, in other words, if he could "carry his yoke." Often, these lessons could be complicated or difficult, but JESUS the RABBI (and that's what many called HIM and what HE had put together by calling twelve disciples), promised that HIS teaching was, again, easy and light. And JESUS' yoke was simply this: "Love one another. As I have loved you, you should love one another."

The two yokes with which we are presented are these: 1) the weight of the world yoke, or 2) the gift of grace yoke. The weight of the world yoke, the heavy and difficult yoke focuses on expectations and, based on those expectations, you aren't measuring up, you aren't good enough. You need to work harder and achieve the rules, all the rules, of the religion of the day (or some of the religions of today) or you're just not going to make it into GOD'S presence or acceptance. And what often happens when we feel like we're falling short, we focus on how others are doing, looking for ways that they are worse than we so that we can feel better about ourselves. And the focus ends up on us as we consider our status and we drift away from GOD and GOD'S love for us.

The gift of grace yoke says, you and everyone else everywhere have failed, but your sins are forgiven, your guilt is removed, and JESUS makes you good enough, even for and especially for GOD. With the gift of grace yoke, success is simply believing in what JESUS did for you and for everyone on the cross. And recognizing what JESUS has done for you invites you to do the same for others—to treat them with the same love and respect that JESUS showed to us. JESUS yoke invites you to love GOD,

but only to the best of your ability. And then to love others because GOD also loves them. And to love yourself because GOD loves you so much that GOD even died for you.

Two different yokes to carry and to let set the direction for your life. You can choose to work hard to follow “the rules,” but doing so will only leave you coming up short. And the result of that is that you end up judging others so that you don’t have to admit the reality of your situation. Or you can choose to claim GOD’S love for you and then share it with others so that they, too, can carry that simple yoke of love based on GOD’S grace in JESUS CHRIST. Two different yokes, but GOD gives us the freedom to choose which yoke we want to carry. And when you make your choice, remember that JESUS’ yoke of love and grace is the one that is easy and light.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey