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THE YOKE'S ON YOU

There's something going on in this gospel passage that's just wrong.

- But I think, sinister though it may seem, it is also incredibly human,
  - and for that reason, it's also very understandable.
- But human or not, understandable or not, it is a behavior that can have devastating consequences.

It's actually the result of a two-step process.

- Step One is to decide what you believe about GOD, or what or who you think GOD should be.
  - Usually that idea of GOD is something that affirms what you already think, feel, believe about the world and your place in it.
- Step Two, then, is to judge all others, including *their* beliefs about GOD, by this image of GOD that you've envisioned.

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We find a good example of this in The Screwtape Letters, by C.S. Lewis.

- Screwtape, an arch-demon in hell, encourages Wormwood, his nephew and an apprentice tempter, to use this just described practice to move his so-called patient away from GOD.
  - Though his patient has become a Christian, Wormwood is advised to get him to evaluate all others—even other Christians—on the basis of his own life and faith.
    - In doing so, the patient will find himself superior to others because of flaws or failings in their faith or behaviors.
    - The result is that the patient becomes the focus of his own worship and not GOD and, thus, he moves farther away from GOD rather than closer.

Judging others on the basis of your own life and beliefs is a great formula for distancing yourself from GOD.

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I think this is what we're seeing in this description from Matthew.

- John the Baptist had come, but didn't measure up to what the people thought or expected.
  - He doesn't conform to what the folks to whom JESUS is speaking think he should be like.
    - He's too reclusive, too ascetic, a loner, too somber and serious.
    - He should eat and drink more like the rest of them.
- Then JESUS comes along and HE'S...well...too much the opposite of John.
  - HE drinks too much, eats too much, and hangs out with the wrong kind of people.

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Perhaps we can call this the Goldilocks syndrome:

- you know, everything is too hot or too cold, or too soft or too hard, and never just quite right, so that she can be satisfied.

John, and the GOD John represents, is just too severe,

- while JESUS, and the GOD HE represents, is just too accepting.
  - We'd like our religious leaders to be just right, which pretty much means just like us.

But that's the thing.

- Our pictures and ideas about GOD don't threaten us, don't expect change from us, don't really ask that much of us, because they are the images we have made.
  - They really don't really do much other than to affirm us.
    - And while affirmation is great, and even necessary at times, it doesn't help us to become more who GOD wants us to be.

GOD comes along—first through John, and then more fully through JESUS—in part to disrupt our pictures of GOD,

- and then to shake us loose from holding on too tightly to these images
  - (Which, by the way, is called idolatry.)

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I know it's not possible to live without some image of GOD.

- And inevitably, simply because we are human, fallible (the old word is sinful), we'll likely picture GOD in ways that are helpful and unhelpful, clear as well as distorted.

Yet, GOD shows up where we least expect GOD to be:

- in order to shake us up,
- in order to call what we thought we knew for sure into question,
- in order to surprise us by being so different from what we expected,
  - and yet precisely what we need.

No wonder JESUS gives thanks that GOD has revealed all this—and GOD'S own self to boot—not to the wise, but to infants.

- You know, infants: open-minded, malleable, embracing of every possibility—even those possibilities that the rest of us would think impossible.
  - These are the ones whose faith in GOD leaves them open to GOD'S surprises and all that GOD might be.

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JESUS does another thing in this passage as well, too.

- HE doesn't simply call our pictures and expectations into question.
- HE gives us another picture of GOD to consider.
  - GOD is the ONE who bears our burdens.
  - GOD is the ONE who shows up in our need.
  - GOD is the ONE who comes along side of us.
    - And nothing demonstrates that more than the cross:
      - GOD'S willingness to embrace all of our life, even to the point of death.
      - And GOD does this to demonstrate GOD'S profound love and commitment for us, for each of us, and for all of us,
        - and that love can't be deterred by anything.

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That's not necessarily what we want.

- We often would prefer a GOD who takes away our problems rather than helping us cope with them;
- who eliminates challenges rather than equipping us for them;
- and who vanquishes our opponents rather than enabling us to make peace with them.
  - Again, it's not usually what we want, but it pretty much exactly what we need.

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You may remember the TV show, “Laverne & Shirley.”

- The show began with the two women reciting a little verse that began, “Shlemiel, schlimazel...”
- These are Yiddish words that often describe our place in life.
  - A “schlemiel” is a person who is always spilling soup on others.
  - And a “schlimazel” is the person on whom the soup always gets spilled.

In most of our conceptions of GOD, we’re the ones whom GOD enables to be soup-spillers.

- And we all have lists of those on whom we’d like to spill the soup.

Yet those who strive to live godly lives, to draw continually closer to GOD in their life and faith, often get the soup spilled on them.

- And, at first glance, that’s not what we really want.
  - Yet, odd as it may sound, sometimes it may be just what GOD thinks we need.
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One more thing that JESUS does in this passage is to invite us to carry HIS yoke—like the wooden crosspiece over the neck of an oxen—but a yoke that HE describes as being easy and light.

- In a sense, JESUS is inviting us to make our choice—to decide what yoke we want to have on us.
    - And it seems to me we have two choices:
  - 1) You can choose the weight of the world yoke.
    - That’s the one where we’re constantly wrestling with sin and its impact on us and others.
    - It’s the one where we see ourselves not measuring up, not good enough, not doing the good we want to do, but doing the evil we do not.
      - Carrying this yoke leads us to be constantly at work, trying to make some kind of success of our lives, often defined by the rules of what the world says is success.
    - The weight of the world yoke forces us to either live with the burden of the guilt of our sin,
      - or to change our image of GOD so that at least we measure up when others do not.
        - The weight of the world yoke keeps our focus constantly on us and actually moves us away from really seeing who GOD is and who GOD invites us to be.
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Or, 2) you can choose the gift of grace yoke.

- That’s the yoke where you find that your sins are forgiven, that 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 the failure of the cross.
  - And the light and easy burden that comes with the gift of grace yoke?
    - You love GOD, but only to best of your ability.
    - You love others because GOD also loves them.
    - And you love yourself because GOD loves you so much that GOD even died for you.
  - The grace yoke means claiming that GOD goes with you through whatever life may bring.
  - It means finding a peace that passes all understanding even when everything seems to be against you.
  - It means that when the world spills soup on you, GOD is right there with you to help clean it up.
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You can live with your image of GOD and spend your life, either trying to measure up or finding fault in others.

- Or you can live with the image that JESUS brings of a GOD of incredible grace, mercy, and love.

The yoke’s on you.

- Which one will you choose?