

*The Pleasant Yoke of Law Keeping (Mat 11.28-30)*

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*10-30-2005*

Introduction

Looking from the “outside in” at the reformed faith, there are people who think that an emphasis on the sovereignty of God results in license and loose living. It is as if divine sovereignty automatically rules out human responsibility. However, this is a major mistake. To the contrary, an emphasis on the sovereignty of God results in a proportional stress on duty and obligation (if we follow Scripture and do not make unwarranted inferences). It is perverse to use sovereignty to excuse oneself from responsible effort. Actually, the hard work in the way of godliness goes hand in hand with recognition of sovereignty in the teachings of the Lord Jesus. An example of this connection of God’s determined will and our determined effort stands out beautifully in the passage before us today in Matthew 11.28-30.

The context of our passage is the sovereign actions of God the Father and Jesus the Messiah. Jesus acknowledged the sovereign and discriminating will of the Father when, in prayer, He explained the unbelief of Israel (vs. 16-24) in terms of the concealing and revealing work of the Father. (vs. 25-26, **At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; <sup>26</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.**). Then He cited His sovereign choosing of people to whom He reveals the Father (v. 27, **and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him**).

Most readers of the NT think of Matthew 11.28-30 as one of the warmest and most precious passages of the Bible. It contains an overture of grace, a special invitation from Jesus to the weary and heavy-laden to come to Him for peace of mind and rest of soul. **Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.** Who can deny the warmth of these words? No one can and we must all remember that the context of this overture is one of the most forceful statements on God’s sovereignty in all of Scripture.

These thoughts lead us to inquire as to the subject of verses 28-30. How would you identify the subject and characterize the theme of this text? Of course, we might call it an invitation or an overture. However, what do the imperative verbs in relation to the invitation indicate (the invitation is “come to me” and the imperatives are “take” and “learn”)? They indicate that there is more here than invitation; there is duty here. These verses give us an angle on Christian duty, but how do they direct our duty? There is a call here to learn, so, it is discipleship duty that is in view.

Now it may surprise us not only to find a warm emphasis on duty in the context of divine sovereignty, but also to find that the duty is to the law. It seems that a good title that reflects the subject of this passage is “The Pleasant Yoke of Law Keeping.” This is man’s duty before a sovereign God. Notably, with a warm and welcome tone, Jesus commands that we wear a yoke, but it reeks with promise, so it is a pleasant yoke. Thus, the pleasant yoke of law keeping is my topic for this morning, and I will develop it in three stages: 1) the fact of this duty, 2) the nature of this duty, and 3) the encouragement to this duty.

1A. The fact of this duty

The idea of the yoke along with the imperatives of the text gives us the fact of this duty. Obviously, there is no reference here to an egg yoke. A yoke was a collar fastened to two animals to tie them together for plowing. This became figurative for the yoke of commandment, precept, and direction. To be “under the yoke” means to be “under law and commandment.” The yoke of the Pharisees lies behind the words of our text. The heavy-laden are not people who are tired from a hard day’s work; they are people under a yoke that no man can bear. Peter refers to this yoke as the yoke of the law as a merit system that denied grace and aggravated guilt. At the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15, Peter said, **Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?** <sup>11</sup> **But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will** (vs. 10-11). The Pharisees, as blind leaders of the blind, taught the people to live by the commandments of men with a goal of meriting God’s favor. They denied grace. The result was weariness and unrest of soul.

Another passage that helps us understand the idea of a yoke is 1 Corinthians 6.14, “**Be not yoked together with unbelievers.**” What does the text forbid? It forbids the bond or tie of a Christian with unbelievers in such a way that the principles of conduct of the unbeliever govern the life of the Christian. It means, “Do not live under the same rule as the non-Christian” (or under the same rules however amoral they may be).

Acts and Corinthians show that a yoke is a governing structure. It refers to precepts and obligations. The yoke of Christ is all that He commands (Mat 28.20), the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments (explained representatively in the Sermon), and the duty to love God and our neighbor (that summarizes the Ten Commands). These things work together and not apart, not in some kind of disjunction. Granted, there is a new wineskin form to the law but its fulfillment form is the way that it continues to have universal and abiding validity (cf. Mat 5.17-19). Jesus told us to think continuity, new wine, new wineskins, and fulfillment not abrogation.

Here is the point. The duty of law keeping is a present fact of the Christian life. A Christian is one who comes under commandment like coming under a yoke. The yoke gives structure and guidance to his steps and his work. The precepts of men are not to govern him. Nonetheless, he is in fact under orders. He has obligations to keep to the Lord Jesus. He has a yoke of law keeping that is the fundamental ruling principle of his life. That is the fact of this duty.

## 2A. The Nature of this duty

The nature of this duty is twofold.

### 1B. On one hand, it involves full commitment

Jesus says, come to me and take my yoke upon you (vs. 28-29). Interestingly, this is the basic commitment of saving faith. The fact of God’s sovereign good pleasure (cf. 11.20-26) does not eliminate our responsibility to make this commitment. It is a means through which God saves His elect.

Here is how a person enters into the family of God. Here is the way, by a commitment to Christ (come to me), by a commitment to wear His yoke (take my yoke upon you). Thus, one enters the family of God by a commitment to live under the authority of Christ; this involves a commitment to His commandments.

It is important that we note that it is not by keeping the law that one is saved; rather it is by a commitment to law keeping, to the yoke of Jesus, to Him (in a personal way, to Him as your Lord and king). There are some passages to compare in this connection. In Matthew 5, the blessed are the poor in spirit (v. 3; poor in spirit means acknowledging your spiritual poverty

with a repentant heart). We also have Romans 10.9, **if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** Believing and confessing that Jesus is risen Lord is an acknowledgment that He is Sabbath king and thus universal sovereign Lord. Per 1 Peter 3.21 we know that when we come to Christ we make a pledge of good behavior. Consider how we should read Matthew 11.12 in light of the principle of the yoke, “forceful men of determination seize the kingdom as a prize.” We must accent the idea of a kingdom and thus the fact that what we seize is the privilege of living under kingdom authority, the authority of Christ our sovereign Lord.

This is how one becomes a Christian. He acknowledges Christ as risen Lord and assumes responsibility to live under His authority. Furthermore, as the commitment by which one becomes a Christian, it defines the fruits of repentance of the Christian life every day on route to glory. The Christian renews this commitment regularly.

This commitment to the Lordship of Christ comes to expression in baptism where the believer pinpoints his submission to Jesus as Lord. It is easy to see how baptism arises here. The Christian makes this commitment to Christ, to His authority, to do whatever He commands (whatever the fine print says, that I will do). Then he hears this simple command, “be baptized.” We correctly think of baptism as the first step of obedience in coming to faith in Christ. How can someone look you in the eye and say, “I believe in Christ,” and at the same time shrug his shoulders at His command to be baptized? We cannot consider this person a member of the family of God. The confession is not credible. Besides, one enters into the visible church by baptism (cf. 1 Cor 12.12-13). The fundamental duty is to believe, repent, turn from living your own way, and commit yourself to living under His authority in all things. This must begin with baptism.

2B. On one hand, the nature of this duty involves full commitment (full practical and wet commitment). On the other hand, the nature of this duty involves studious discipleship. Jesus commands that we learn from Him (come, take, learn from me). Learning here has the context of the yoke.

Learning can never be a mere academic exercise. It always has this goal before it: to learn how to live before the Lord Jesus as our king. It involves learning how to obey; it is learning for righteous living. It means that you work at learning the law.

In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul prays an example prayer that shows the bond of learning for Christian discipleship with righteous living under the law of God. [Note how recorded prayers bear analogy to audible prayers; Paul tells the church what he prayed so they can hear his prayers and profit from them.] He says, I pray for love that abounds in knowledge and discernment. Why does Paul pray for love in this way? He says, “that you may be able to test the things that differ, to choose the best, that you may be filled with the fruits of righteousness which is by Christ Jesus unto the praise and glory of God.”

This is not intellectualism versus Christ. Rather, it means knowing Christ in His precepts. Our Lord’s teaching, points us to the whole law of the OT and NT and thus to the new covenant form of law keeping in a promise-fulfillment pattern with new wine in new wineskins. We must pursue the law in its true spirit and intent. This demands reflection, study, meditation, and logical inference making (cf. Mat 11.15 on duty with regard to teaching that has no explicit commands).

If you think you are a good person able to keep the Ten Commandments, then you have not plumbed the depth of God’s law. If you are standoffish and passive, then you have not learned about true discipleship that is diligently active (cf. Mat 7.24).

### 3A. Encouragement to this duty

#### 1B. The person of Christ

We find encouragement in the one to whom we go and from whom we learn. We learn about Him as well as from Him. Our privileged relation to this person is very personal.

He is gentle and lowly in heart.

It makes a big difference for the learner when the teacher is gentle and humble. The lack of these qualities in a teacher discourages learning. The gentleness of our Lord gives us a spring in our step. In this connection, I cannot help but recall an experience in my life that vividly sticks in my memory even though it occurred over forty years ago. As a first year student in college, I did odd jobs for the owners of an apartment building (washing windows, cleaning screens, and whatever). One day I had a new task, that of painting an entry door. I had never used oil-based paint. As I began to paint the door, I did not know the pitfall of a beautiful noontime sun that warmed both the door and me. Soon, however, it became clear to me that something was very wrong. The paint rippled on the door; the more I brushed, the more it rippled. I began to perspire in what became the scorching heat of the sun. When I was about to give up and admit total defeat (having ruined this main entry door to the complex), the owner came to inspect my work. He railed, cursed, railed, and cursed some more. He gave me one of the worst word-beatings that I have ever received. He could only find fault (which was easy to do). He was everything but gentle in teaching me the rights and wrongs of painting. Right now as I talk about that event in my life, I choke up a bit and can actually feel some of the shame I felt in that man's presence. I had done wrong, I was exposed, and he made sure that I felt exposed.

Because the painting experience affects me so deeply, I have to compare it with my walk with the Lord Jesus. I sin against Him daily. I make too many mistakes. I lack wisdom in too many ways. I look back over my life and it is clear to me that I am but a poor servant with many rippled doors in my past, but the Lord Jesus does not goad me with abiding shame in His presence. He says, "I see your sins and I forgive you. Here is a better way. Take another step. Keep on keeping on. I will never leave you nor forsake you." He is gentle and encouraging even though we can be so foolish and self-willed. If we deny Christ and then have an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with Him, as Peter did, what would we see in His eyes? Would we see eyes blazing with anger or burning with condemnation? No, we would see eyes of love. As sinners welcomed to His Table, we see the person who humbled Himself to bear the shame and punishment of our sins in our place. Feebly trying to learn how to live under His absolute authority, we are encouraged not discouraged by our gentle and humble Lord.

2B. The character of His yoke (my yoke is easy, my burden is light)

Here I refer to the fact that His yoke is light. He calls us to do our duty but the duty itself is light. At first appearance, it may seem heavy (I recall expecting a door lintel to be extremely difficult to install because it was so heavy, only to find out that it was light because made of cinder). At first, the law towers over us and seems heavy. It is a difficult and narrow way, we discover, to the narrow heart, to the selfish heart, but in submission to the Lord Jesus, the commandments turn out to be our joy (Jn 15.11). They are not burdensome (1 Jn 5.3). They have a lawful use (1 Tim 1.9) that makes them a delight for our meditations day and night (Ps 1).

3B. The promise of His blessing (I will give you rest ...rest for your souls)

The promise of rest is one reason for the pleasantness of His yoke. His promise stands in marked contrast to the crippling anxiety, frustration, futility and misery of the sin-laden and guilt-laden conscience. That is the promise of the Pharisaic yoke. It is debilitating and deathly. However, Jesus commands that we live on a pathway of learning His law in order to live it in all of its perfection. Our righteousness is in Him and not in us. We fail Him continually and still He promises to give us rest. This is how we endure the trials of life and the difficulties (the "ups and downs") of our walk. He gives His disciples peace, rest of mind, encouragement, and rest of soul.

## Conclusion

### 1) This is how you become a Christian

It is by committing yourself to the authority of Christ, to His yoke, to Him. In this way, you seize His kingdom with determination. You submit yourself to the risen Lord Jesus as your prophet, priest, and king in the fullness of all these offices.

### 2) This how you live the Christian life

Let me remind you of the basic structure of the Christian life. It has its reference point in the laws and commandments of Christ. They are His loving laws and His pleasant yoke. The Christian life is a matter of covenant keeping. That is, it involves keeping your pledge of good behavior in humble submission to your humble sovereign Lord, Jesus-Messiah (as your prophet, priest, and king).

The church is to be a community of learners. I ask you to look here and to commit yourself to the great privilege of learning as a group, as a people, as the people of God, and as a family of believers as well as individuals. Discipleship includes learning from others and helping others learn under the pleasant yoke of Christ. We need to think much about how to do this.