



YOKES



*Jesus said, "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. For my yoke is
easy and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-31*



The idea of Jesus' yoke can scare disciples. What is the alternative to the yoke He offers? If I turn Him down and say no to **His** yoke, will I enjoy autonomy and avoid yokes of any kind? That won't happen. Freedom from yokes is not possible.

Oh, there are so many kinds, too. I've worn the yoke of shame. How about you? I've labored under the yoke of perfectionism? Have you? I've suffered from the taunts of self-condemning voices that were spurred on by legalism. Does that sound familiar at all to you? There are all kinds of yokes conceived in the kingdom of darkness. There's only one yoke in Jesus' kingdom. He made it simple. Unless we wear the one He offers, we will suffer from chains that oppress us.

It is this reality that constrains me to teach this series. Jesus offers us the gracious alternative to languishing under yokes of bondage. He wants to free us, to break the chains of oppressive yokes in order to see us thrive and find rest under the yoke He offers.

What a beautiful offer in Matthew 11. I read it again slowly and marvel that He assures that His yoke won't make me weary and burdened. Just the opposite. His yoke brings rest to my soul. How can that be? I recently read (and I can't remember where) that Jesus refers to the yoke as 'His yoke' first. What was His yoke? Coming to earth to redeem me. He called it easy. How can that be? Because it is love for me that compelled Him.

Could it be that this is the secret to putting on His yoke? I can take on His yoke and it will be easy for me too because of my love for Him. I love Him because He first loved me. If I take on His yoke out of duty, it will be too heavy. If I take it on to prove that I can do it, I will be drained by lack of relationship. Only love makes it possible.

His yoke is the only one I'll accept because His love is behind the invitation. All other yokes come from the enemy of my soul. His aim is never to love. He entices, yes, but then entraps, torments, condemns, burdens, and a host of other atrocities too numerous to mention. In the end, all will bring us to destruction.



They tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them. Matthew 23:4

The first kind of yoke that keeps God's children in bondage is, 1.) **The yoke of religion.**

Jesus came down hard on the Pharisees when He told them that they were placing a heavy burden of rules upon the people, even adding more and more laws that 'The Law' did not specify. The people labored under it. I think it's interesting that Jesus called **that** burden 'heavy' and referred to His own burden as 'light'.

As a young monk, Martin Luther confessed that he didn't love God. He hated Him. He felt that he just couldn't please Him. Luther beat himself, fasted for days, slept outside in the cold, and all because He felt the guilt of his own sin. He couldn't sleep at night because he thought, ***"Can I possibly do everything that God requires?"*** His mentor told him that confession is to bring relief to those burdened with guilt, not add more pressure. But Luther was so bound up by a religious yoke that, though he confessed constantly, he found little relief. While some around him made their complete confession in just a few minutes, Luther would go on and on for hours. Nagging guilt also caused him to be an overachiever so that he advanced in the ranks of the monastery very quickly. It's a reminder to me that perceived holiness can be driven by forces other than a love for Christ.

How do I know if I suffer under a religious yoke? I have a nagging feeling that I'm not good enough. I have no peace. I don't feel forgiven. I don't believe I've paid enough yet for my sins. I feel I have a long way to go to prove to God that I'm sincere. I keep myself insanely busy to dull the ache of unworthiness. I become an overachiever with a need to eclipse the successes of those around me. I need to be God's 'teacher's pet'. At that point, I am the older brother in the prodigal son story who kept all the rules but was probably only looking out for his own inheritance. He felt his father owed him; which is easy to feel if I've been a rule keeper. Under a religious yoke, let hard times come and my underlying attitude is, ***"God, how could you? After how good I've been?"***

If I labor under the yoke of religion, I believe that my good behavior proves to God that I'm really a good child. I am bound to the law and ignore the fact that Jesus already fulfilled it. He did it because I couldn't. Jesus took my sin, annihilated every reason I'd have to perform, and gave me His righteousness. I'm invited to rest in my salvation.

If you suffer under the torment of a religious yoke, how do you escape it? Repent of self-exaltation and minimizing the power of the cross. Affirm again that you have been saved by faith alone – which is where Martin Luther ended up. He began to see that the scriptures were really the language of a loving Father to little children. He was free to worship and celebrate such a great God who provided such a great Salvation from self.

I am the Lord your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; and I have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you to upright.
Leviticus 26:13

The second yoke I can labor under is 2.) **The yoke of slavery.**

When 'yoke' is used, especially in the O.T., it speaks of slavery or bondage to an oppressor. This passage from Leviticus is a perfect example. The Israelites were not freed from the Egyptians through revolt, an underground movement, or a rebel who rose up to lead his people. They were powerless against such a formidable oppressor. Only God could break the bands of their yoke. Bondage was all they knew. It was in their DNA. Four hundred years of it characterized the existence of many generations. Not only did the Pharaohs 'forget Joseph' but so also did Joseph's descendants.

I may not know this kind of slavery but I can be enslaved nonetheless; enslaved to a bully, spouse, a sibling, an aging parent. Someone got the upper hand when you were once in a compromised position. You were weak and perhaps they rescued you. Or they were bigger, more powerful. Now, the relational patterns seems set in stone. You don't have the personal strength to shake up the dynamics. Oh, but God does. He is in you and you need not be a bully in return to be free from their control. There is strength in quietness and resolve. There is strength in the man or woman who knows that they answer to God first. There is strength in the person who knows that they need fear no bully for the Lord is on their side. Whom shall they fear?!

Most predominant is the yoke of slavery each of us faces when we leave the unholy ways of our family and bind ourselves to Christ. Our entire allegiance is re-written. But oh, how difficult to overcome generational yokes. We are shown very early in life that there is the 'family way of doing things' and if you want to enjoy its community, you have to get in step. These unholy legacies don't have to just include things like infidelity, anger, alcoholism, addictive behaviors, depression or a pre-disposition to cancer. There are more insidious culprits like a hatred of men, or women, despising the church, and even racial bigotry between the north and the south, black and white, Christians and non-Christians.

Isaiah said, *Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord; Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Isaiah 51:1* The message is clear. I have been shaped by my caregivers, from my past history. It is imperative that every child of God look closely at their allegiances to see if there is still an unhealthy yoke to those who put pressure on us to be like them. I am to be more like my Heavenly Father than my earthly one. My new birth trumps my 1st birth.

How do I take off this yoke? I ask God to show me to whom I am enslaved and to help me identify every way I walk in their ways by default. God will start turning on the light. Then, I repent for taking part and doing what Jesus would **not** do. I renounce old ways with scripture and take new paths of righteousness armed with scripture and the power of the Spirit. Even if it means being out of step with my family. Am I willing to be a son/daughter that Jesus would have been in my shoes?

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. Romans 4:7-8

The third yoke that can oppress us is 3.) **The yoke of shame.**

Every person is born with a sense of shame because of Adam and Eve's sin. We know we are flawed and are shy before a holy God. The more we add sin to our resume, the more shame grows and the heavier the yoke becomes.

I have fought my own internal battle over the years. I have asked myself repeatedly, ***“How can I get over what I've done? Has Jesus totally forgiven me?”*** The yoke had me by the throat.

Worshippers in the ancient world knew shame well. They would bring their sacrifices; animals, even newborn babies, to kill at the altar; all because they had a sense that they needed to calm angry gods. Their faith was in the wrong god but their conscience was keen in sensing that there was One higher than them who was just and holy. Most never knew that God would send Jesus to be the once-and-for-all sacrifice.

Are you living out a life sentence of depression as you rehearse your failures? Does your track record haunt you like a ghost? If you have confessed your sin but still feel guilty, realize that when God forgives, he separates your sin from you. One of the words for 'forgive' is to 'send away'. God took that 'thing' for which you repented, took it off of you and put it on Jesus. When you can't hold your head up, you must remember that **you are not your sin!**

Satan accuses. People name call. But Jesus calls His forgiven children 'righteous'. The beautiful names He confers on us form an umbrella under which we live in the kingdom. The names are numerous, each one means something beautiful, and it is these that I must rehearse when I am weighed down by shame. Whether people-inflicted or Satan-inflicted, shame is not to be my yoke. It was Jesus' yoke when He died in my place. I am to live like Abraham. ***No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Romans 4:20-21***

How do I take off this yoke? Believe God. See yourself standing in the flow of God's forgiveness and walk by faith. Then have a plan. Satan is the perpetual accuser of the brethren. He will come at you again with old tapes. Be ready with scripture. You will have to quote it out loud and he will flee. Remember, you are forgiven whether you feel like you are or not. Feelings are unreliable but the Word of God is true and abides forever.

For the flesh craves what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are opposed to one another, so that you do not do what you want. Galatians 5:17

The fourth yoke the oppress is ~ 4.) **The yoke of the flesh.**

The yoke of the flesh is to live for myself. It is going in whatever direction gives me the most pleasure, attention, and exaltation. The sobering thing is that its choices can range from the worst debauchery to pursuing the pastorate. This is what makes it so insidious. Sins of the flesh can be obvious and they can also be hidden. Someone in ministry can be as driven to satisfy the flesh as the one engaged in blatant immorality.

If I turn 1 Corinthians 10:31 on its end, the yoke of the flesh is described perfectly. *Whatever you do, do all to the glory of self.*

1 Corinthians 10:31, as it is written, describes the life of one who is yoked to Jesus. ***Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31*** Life is lived according to what makes God look great.

To be driven by my flesh, in its most innocuous appearances, means that I believe that I have the talent and the skill set to make my life successful. To others, it might look like I'm succeeding. I make a good living, people like to follow my leadership, my ventures bring about good numbers, I advance in popularity, my talents dazzle those around me, and most importantly, my flesh is satisfied. Let all this be true in the confines of ministry and I can fool others and myself indefinitely. When my life here is over, I will stand before God and see my mountain of productions burn in the fire.

I can also be God's child and sin blatantly, right in God's face. I engage in the fleshly desires Jesus died to save me from. ***Put to death, therefore, the components of your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.***

Colossians 3:5 One of John Piper's famous series is one he preached out of Romans called, **How To Kill Sin.** Here's one of his comments:

“If we died to sin by being united with Jesus in his death, we can't stay married to sin. The faith that unites us to Christ disunites from his competitors. The faith that makes peace with God makes war on our sin. If you are not at odds with sin, you are not at home with Jesus, not because being at odds with sin makes you at home with Jesus, but because being at home with Jesus makes you at odds with sin.”

How can I find freedom from the yoke of the flesh? I repent of self-exaltation, of wanting what I want whether it's a license to sin or to create my own kingdom for self-glorification. ***It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. John 6:63***

So this is what the sovereign Lord says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be shaken. Isaiah 28:16

The 5th, and final, yoke of oppression is ~ 5.) **The yoke of unbelief.**

Unbelief leads to despair but faith leads to hope. If I do not trust Jesus, I will be unwilling to be yoked to Him. I know in my head that God’s Word is true. I can quote this like I was giving a right answer on a test yet inwardly, still fight severe unbelief. The battle to trust His Word in the face of what appears to disprove it brings me to a crisis of faith.

Peter said that Jesus can be a rock of offense over whom people stumble. What makes each of us stumble is usually different. For many years, I stumbled over the issue of God’s expectations of me. When I go out to teach, I have a group of intercessors who pray for me. They labor in prayer, some even fast. Now, I would feel the pressure of that and think, ***“You are now fully equipped, Christine, to teach under God’s anointing and powerful things should happen.”*** When a group failed to respond like I anticipated, I took that as ***my*** failure. I believed that the intercessors did ***their*** part, gave me everything I needed for a harvest, so I must have failed ***mine***. See the yoke? I forgot that the harvest is not up to me.

I will be shaken if I believe a lie about God. The journey is steep and I must fight for faith. Unbelief assaults me from two places; my own thoughts and the arrows of an enemy who never stops trying to corrupt my trust and connection to God. What will overcome these inner minefields?

“For the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” 2 Cor. 10:4-5

The weapons? Scripture and the Spirit. The fortresses? Lies that become entrenched over time and become strongholds. Speculations and every lofty thing? The mindset I formulate over a lifetime that is ironclad and hard to budge. Only the Word can demolish it and re-write it.

What lie holds you captive? To find the answer, look carefully at the places you consider hopeless. Ask yourself why you believe that? State the lie and form a battle plan with the Word of God. Come at it with sharp arrows of truth ~ asking the Spirit of God to write His Word on your mind and heart. Fight the battle until you begin to know, and feel, the freedom from the yoke of deception.

You and I may temporarily teeter, wrestle like Jacob, but God’s foundation will hold if we take our mutinous thoughts and override them with His word. As long as we wear a yoke of deception, we render ourselves incapable of ever seeing a kingdom outcome. A glorious plot becomes a tragic and that is never what God had planned for His children.



An unprecedented number have logged on to our blog this past week, which shows me that the subject of yokes is extremely important to you. Jesus came to set captives free and break the bands of the yokes of His children. Can you hear chains falling to the floor?

Today concludes this series. I have a couple of closing thoughts.

None of us likes the idea of being yoked to anyone or anything. The picture conjures up images of slavery and God did not create us to be bound to evil. The idea of a yoke repels. Yet, if a glorious deliverer promised any of us freedom from slavery, we would make a decision in a split second to be yoked to someone who loves and saves. That is what I must remember when I think of Jesus' words about yokes. I needed a glorious Deliverer at salvation to yoke me to Himself. I am 'in Christ.'

While my future is secure and I am already seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus, I must still contend with my flesh. I am not to be yoked ~

- To religion and live by others' measuring stick.
- To slavery and live by the demands of controllers.
- To shame and live by the opinions of flawed people.
- To the flesh and live like I did before I believed.
- To deception and live by lies conceived at the gates of darkness.

Jesus offers a glorious alternative. His yoke is easy because it's love-driven. His yoke is gentle because it's love-driven. His yoke is light because it's love-driven. What a friend we have in Jesus.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” Isaiah 58:6



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