

"The Yoke of Christ"
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St. John Henry Newman
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"Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls; for My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." Matt. xi. 29, 30.

1 THESE words, which are brought before us in the Gospel of today's festival [Note], are
2 also found in the address made to us upon Ash Wednesday, in which we are told that if
3 we "return unto Him who is the merciful Receiver of all true penitent sinners, if we will
4 take His easy yoke and light burden upon us, to follow Him in lowliness, patience, and
5 charity; this, if we do, Christ will deliver us from the curse of the law, and from the
6 extreme malediction which shall light upon them that shall be set on the left hand." A
7 few days since we were upon a Fast-day called to take on us Christ's yoke, and now on
8 a Festival of an Apostle the call is repeated.

9 And with a particular fitness it occurs, now as often, that we celebrate the feast of St.
10 Matthias, during Lent; for if there be an Apostle who above the rest may be taken to
11 remind us of the duty of mortification, it is he. Our Lord, when asked why His disciples
12 did not fast, said, they could not fast while He was with them, but that the time would
13 come, when the Bridegroom should be taken away from them, and then should they fast
14 in those days. That time was now come, when St. Matthias was chosen to be an
15 Apostle. Christ *had* gone away. Peace and joy the Apostles had abundantly, more so
16 than when He was with them; but for that very reason, it was not such a joy "as the
17 world giveth." It was His own joy which arose out of pain and chastisement. This was
18 the joy which St. Matthias received when he was made an Apostle. He never had been
19 an Apostle under age. He had indeed been with our Lord, but not as an Apostle. The
20 rest had been chosen (as it were) as children; they had been heirs of the kingdom, while
21 under tutors and governors, and, though Apostles, had not understood their calling, had
22 had ambitious thoughts or desires after riches, and were indulged for a while, ere new
23 made, with the old wine, lest the bottles should burst. But St. Matthias came into his
24 inheritance at once. He took upon him at once, upon his election, the power and the
25 penalty of the Apostolate. No dreams of earthly prosperity could flit around that throne,
26 which was reared over the grave {104} of one who had been tried and had fallen, and
27 under the immediate shadow of the cross of Him whom he had betrayed.

28 Well, then, does St. Matthias repeat to us on this day our Lord's words, "Take My yoke
29 upon you, and learn of Me," for he had taken it on him from the first. His Pastoral Staff
30 had ever been a crosier. He had had no youth. He had borne the yoke in his youth. He
31 entered at once upon his long Lent, and he rejoiced in it.

32 The exhortation, then, which our Saviour gives in today's Gospel, and of which St.
33 Matthias's history reminds us, is at the present season most suitable. Our Saviour says,
34 "Come unto Me," and then He adds, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me." Thus

35 He first calls us to Him, and next shows us the way. "Come unto Me," He says, "and I
36 will give you rest;" and then adds, "Take My yoke upon you, and ye shall find rest for
37 your souls." He told the Apostles that they must come to Him, but did not at once tell
38 them the way; He told them they must bear a yoke, but did not at once tell them what it
39 was. St. Peter, in consequence, inquired about it on one occasion, and was bid to wait
40 awhile, and he should know of it more plainly. Our Lord had said, "Whither I go, thou
41 canst not follow Me now, but thou shalt follow Me afterwards." "Ye shall seek Me," He
42 said, "and whither I go ye cannot come." [John xiii. 36, 33.] He spoke of His yoke, the
43 way of His cross, as St. Peter found when at length, after His resurrection, he was told
44 plainly what should befall him. "When thou wast young," said our Lord to him, by the
45 lake of Tiberias, when thou wast a child in the faith, and hadst thine own way, "thou
46 girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest," as just before St. Peter had girt his
47 fisher's coat unto him, and cast himself into the sea; "but when thou shalt be old, thou
48 shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou
49 wouldest not." [John xxi. 18.] And then He added, "Follow Me." St. Peter, indeed, was
50 called upon literally to take Christ's yoke upon him, to learn of Him and walk in His
51 ways; but what he underwent in fulness, all Christ's disciples must share in their
52 measure, in some way or other. Again, in another place, our Lord speaks more
53 expressly; "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross,
54 and follow Me." [Matt. xvi. 24.] Here we have the words of the text emphatically
55 repeated. To come to Christ, is to come after Him; to take up our cross, is to take upon
56 us His yoke; and though He calls this an easy yoke, yet it is easy because it is His yoke,
57 and He makes it easy; still it does not cease to be a yoke, and it is troublesome and
58 distressing, because it is a yoke.

59 Let us set it down then, as a first principle in religion, that all of us must come to Christ,
60 in some sense or other, through things naturally unpleasant to us; it may be even
61 through bodily suffering, such as the Apostles endured, or it may be nothing more than
62 the subduing of our natural infirmities and the sacrifice of our natural wishes; it may be
63 pain greater or pain less, on a public stage or a private one; but, till the words "yoke"
64 and "cross" can stand for something pleasant, the bearing of our yoke and cross is
65 something not pleasant; and though rest is promised as our reward, yet the way to rest
66 must lie through discomfort and distress of heart.

67 This I say must be taken as a first principle in religion; it concerns us all, it concerns
68 young and old, rich and poor, all of whom are apt to consider it a valid reason for
69 disregarding and speaking against a religious life, that it is so strict and distasteful. They
70 shrink from religion as something gloomy, or frightful, or dull, or intrusive, or exorbitant.
71 And, alas, sometimes it is attempted to lead them to religion by making it appear not
72 difficult and severe. Severe truths are put aside; religion is made to consist in a worldly
73 security, or again in a heated enthusiastic state of mind. But this is a deceit. I do not of
74 course mean, far from it, that religion is not full of joy and peace also; "My yoke," says
75 Christ, "is easy, and My burden is light:" but grace makes it so; in itself it is severe, and
76 any form of doctrine which teaches otherwise forgets that Christ calls us to His yoke,
77 and that that yoke is a cross.

78 If you call to mind some of the traits of that special religious character to which we are
79 called, you will readily understand how both it, and the discipline by which it is formed in
80 us, are not naturally pleasant to us. That character is described in the text as meekness
81 and lowliness; for we are told to "learn" of Him who was "meek and lowly in heart." The
82 same character is presented to us at greater length in our Saviour's sermon on the
83 Mount, in which seven notes of a Christian are given to us, in themselves of a painful
84 and humbling character, but joyful, because they are blessed by Him. He mentions, first,
85 "the poor in spirit;" this is denoted in the text, under the word "lowly in heart;"—secondly,
86 those "that mourn;" and this surely is their peculiarity who are bearing on their shoulders
87 the yoke of Christ;—thirdly, "the meek;" and these too are spoken of in the text, when
88 He bids us to be like Himself who "is meek;"—fourthly, those which do "hunger and
89 thirst after righteousness;" and what righteousness, but that which Christ's Cross
90 wrought out, and which becomes our righteousness when we take on us the yoke of the
91 Cross? Fifthly, "the merciful;" and as the Cross is in itself the work of infinite mercy, so
92 when we bear it, it makes us merciful. Sixthly, "the pure in heart;" and this is the very
93 benefit which the Cross first does to us when marked on our forehead when infants, to
94 sever us from the world, the flesh, and the devil, to circumcise us from the first Adam,
95 and to make us pure as He is pure. Seventhly, "the peace-makers," and as He "made
96 peace by the blood of His Cross," so do we become peace-makers after His pattern.
97 And, lastly, after all seven, He adds, those "which are persecuted for righteousness'
98 sake;" which is nothing but the Cross itself, and the truest form of His yoke, spoken of
99 last of all, after mention has been made of its fruits.

100 Such is the character of which the text speaks. A man who is poor in spirit, meek, pure
101 in heart, merciful, peace-making, penitent, and eager after righteousness, is truly
102 (according to a term in current use) a mortified man. He is of a character which does not
103 please us by nature even to see, and much less to imitate. We do not even approve or
104 love the character itself, till we have some portion of the grace of God. We do not like
105 the look of mortification till we are used to it, and associate pleasant thoughts with it.
106 "And when we shall see Him, there is no beauty, that we should desire Him," says the
107 Prophet. To whom has some picture of saint or doctor of the Church any charm at first
108 sight? Who does not prefer the ruddy glow of health and brightness of the eyes? "He
109 hath no form nor comeliness," as his Lord and Master before him. And as we do not like
110 the look of saintliness, neither do we like the life. When Christ first announced His
111 destined sufferings, Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Be it far from
112 Thee, Lord, this shall not be unto Thee." Here was the feeling of one who was as yet a
113 mere child in grace; "When he was a child, he spake as a child, he understood as a
114 child, he thought as a child," before he had "become a man and had put away childish
115 things."

116 This is St. Paul's language, writing to the Corinthians, and he there furnishes us with
117 another description, under the name of charity, of that same heavenly temper of mind in
118 which Christian manhood consists, and which our Lord had already described in the
119 sermon on the Mount; He says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,
120 and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." And then
121 He describes it as suffering long, kind, envying not, vaunting not, behaving seemly,

122 unselfish, rejoicing in the truth, slow to be provoked, bearing all things and hoping all.
123 And with this agrees St. James's account of wisdom, that it is "pure, peaceable, gentle,
124 easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without
125 hypocrisy." [James iii. 17.]

126 In all these passages, one and the same character is described acceptable to God,
127 unacceptable to man; unacceptable to man both in itself, and because it involves a
128 change, and that a painful one, in one shape or other. Nothing short of suffering, except
129 in rare cases, makes us what we should be; gentle instead of harsh, meek instead of
130 violent, conceding instead of arrogant, lowly instead of proud, pure-hearted instead of
131 sensual, sensitive of sin instead of carnal. This is the especial object which is set before
132 us, to become holy as He who has called us is holy, and to discipline and chasten
133 ourselves in order that we may become so; and we may be quite sure, that unless we
134 chasten ourselves, God will chasten us. If we judge ourselves, through His mercy we
135 shall not be judged of Him; if we do not afflict ourselves in light things, He will afflict us
136 in heavy things; if we do not set about changing ourselves by gentle measures, He will
137 change us by severe remedies. "I refrain my soul," says David, "and keep it low, like as
138 a child that is weaned from his mother." "I keep under my body, and bring it into
139 subjection," says St. Paul. Of course Satan will try to turn all our attempts to his own
140 purposes. He will try to make us think too much of ourselves for what we do; he would
141 fain make us despise others; he will try to ensnare us in other ways. Of course he turns
142 all things to evil, as far as he can; all our crosses may become temptations: illness,
143 affliction, bereavement, pain, loss of worldly prospects, anxiety, all may be instruments
144 of evil; so likewise may all methods of self-chastisement, but they ought not to be, and
145 need not. And their legitimate effect, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, is to make us
146 like Him who suffered all pain, physical and moral, sin excepted, in its fulness. We know
147 what His character was; how grave and subdued His speech, His manner, His acts;
148 what calmness, self-possession, tenderness, and endurance; how He resisted evil; how
149 He turned His cheek to the smiter; how He blessed when persecuted; how He resigned
150 Himself to His God and Father, how He suffered silently, and opened not His mouth,
151 when accused maliciously.

152 Alas! so it is; not only does the world not imitate such a temper of mind as this; but, if
153 the truth must be spoken, it despises it. As regards, indeed, our Lord's instance itself,
154 the force of education, habit, custom, fear of each other, and some remaining awe, keep
155 the world from reflecting upon the notes of character which the Gospels ascribe to Him,
156 but in His followers, it does discern them, it understands and it condemns them. We are
157 bidden lend and give, asking for nothing again; revenge not ourselves; give our cloak
158 when our coat is taken; offer the left cheek when the right is smitten; suffer without
159 complaint; account persons better than they are; keep from bitter words; pray only when
160 others would be impatient to act; deny ourselves for the sake of others; live contented
161 with what we are; preserve an ignorance of sin and of the world: what is all this, but a
162 character of mind which the world scorns and ridicules even more than it hates? a
163 character which seems to court insult, because it endures it? Is not this what men of the
164 world would say of such a one? "Such a man is unfit for life; he has no eye for any thing;
165 he does not know the difference between good and evil; he is tame and spiritless, he is

166 simple and dull, and a fit prey for the spoiler or defrauder; he is cowardly and narrow-
167 minded, unmanly, feeble, superstitious, and a dreamer," with many other words more
168 contemptuous and more familiar than would be becoming to use in Church. Yet such is
169 the character of which Christ gave us the pattern; such was the character of Apostles;
170 such the character which has ever conquered the world. "In much patience, in
171 afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in watchings, in
172 fastings, by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost,
173 by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of
174 righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by honour and dishonour, by evil report
175 and good report, as deceivers and yet true, as chastened and not killed, as sorrowful
176 yet always rejoicing;"—these are the weapons of our warfare, "which are not carnal, but
177 mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds." [2 Cor. vi. 4-10; x. 4.] These
178 are despised by the world, but they have subdued the world. Nay, though they seem
179 most unmanly, they in the event have proved most heroic. For the heroic character
180 springs out of them. He who has thrown himself out of this world, alone can overcome it;
181 he who has cut himself loose of it, alone cannot be touched by it; he alone can be
182 courageous, who does not fear it; he alone firm, who is not moved by it; he alone severe
183 with it, who does not love it. Despair makes men bold, and so it is that he who has
184 nothing to hope from the world, has nothing to fear from it. He who has really tasted of
185 the true Cross, can taste no bitterer pain, no keener joy.

186 I have been trying to urge on you, my brethren, that the taking of Christ's yoke, and
187 learning of Him, is something very distinct and special, and very unlike any other service
188 and character. It is the result of a change from a state of nature, a change so great as to
189 be called a death or even a crucifixion of our natural state. Never allow yourselves, my
190 brethren, to fancy that the true Christian character can coalesce with this world's
191 character, or is the world's character improved—merely a superior kind of worldly
192 character. No, it is a new character; or, as St. Paul words it, "a new creation." Speaking
193 of the Cross of Christ, he says, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of Our
194 Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in
195 Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new
196 creature." [Gal. vi. 14, 15.] It is a new character, and it is one; it is ever one and the
197 same. It is not one in Apostles, and another in the Christian of this day; not one in the
198 high, another in the low; one in rich, another in poor; one in Englishman, another in
199 foreigner; one in man, another in woman. Where Christ is put on, St. Paul tells us, there
200 is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus
201 [Gal. iii. 28.]. What Lazarus is, that must Dives become; what Apostles were, that must
202 each of us be. The high in this world think it suitable in them to show a certain pride and
203 self-confidence; the wealthy claim deference on account of their wealth; kings and
204 princes think themselves above instruction from any; men in the middle ranks consider it
205 enough to be decent and respectable, and deem sanctity superfluous in them; the poor
206 think to be saved by their poverty;—but to one and all Christ speaks, "Come unto Me,"
207 "Learn of Me." There is but one Cross and one character of mind formed by it; and
208 nothing can be further from it than those tempers and dispositions in which the greater
209 part of men called Christians live. To have one's own way, to follow one's own tastes, to
210 please one's self, to have things to one's mind, not to be thwarted, to indulge in the

211 comforts of life, to do little for God, to think of Him now and then indeed, but to live to
212 this world; to aim at things of this world; to judge of things by our own accidental
213 judgment, be it better or worse; to measure religious men, to decide upon right or wrong
214 in religion, by our favourite fancy; to take a pride in forming and maintaining our own
215 opinion; to stand upon our rights; to fear the hard words and cold looks of men, to be
216 afraid of being too religious, to dread singularity; to leave our hearts and minds, our
217 thoughts, words, and actions, to take care of themselves:—this, on one side or the
218 other, in this measure or that, is the sort of character which the multitude, even of what
219 are called respectable men, exemplify; and no wonder, this being the case, that they
220 speak against those who have, or strive to have, a more serious view of religion, and
221 whose mode of living condemns them. If there be but one character of heart that can
222 please God, both of these contrary characters cannot please Him, one or the other does
223 not; if the easy religion is right, the strict religion is wrong; if strict religion is right, easy
224 religion is wrong. Let us not deceive ourselves; there are not two ways of salvation—a
225 broad and a narrow. The world, which chooses the broad way, in consequence hates
226 and spurns the narrow way; and in turn our Blessed Lord, who has chosen for us the
227 narrow way, hates, scorns, spurns, denounces, the broad way. Surely He does so; He
228 hates the broad way as entirely as the world hates the narrow way; and if we are
229 persuaded to take part with the world, we take part against Him. When St. Peter said,
230 "Be it far from Thee, Lord," being shocked at the notice that his Lord should suffer, what
231 was His answer? Did He thank him for his zeal? Did He, at least, let it pass in silence?
232 He answered, "Get thee behind Me, Satan, for thou art an offence unto Me; for thou
233 savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." [Matt. xvi. 23.] And in
234 like manner to the corrupt church of Laodicea He says, "Because thou art lukewarm,
235 and neither cold nor hot, I will cast thee out of My mouth. Because thou sayest, I am
236 rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not, that thou
237 art wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked; I counsel thee to buy of Me
238 gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment, that thou mayest be
239 clothed; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see." And then He adds:
240 "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten;" that is, He puts on them His yoke; "Be
241 zealous therefore and repent." [Rev. iii. 16-19.]

242 To conclude. If Almighty God moves any of us, so that we have high thoughts; if from
243 reading Scripture or holy books we find that we can embrace views above the world; if it
244 is given us to recognize the glory of Christ's kingdom, to discern its spiritual nature, to
245 admire the life of saints, and to desire to imitate it; if we feel and understand that it is
246 good to bear the yoke in our youth, good to be in trouble, good to be poor, good to be in
247 low estate, good to be despised; if in imagination we put ourselves at the feet of those
248 mortified men of old time, who, after St. Paul's pattern, died daily, and knew no one after
249 the flesh; if we feel all this, and are conscious we feel it; let us not boast—why?
250 because of a surety such feelings are a pledge to us that God will in some way or other
251 give them exercise. He gives them to us that He may use them. He gives us the
252 opportunity of using them. Dare not to indulge in high thoughts; be cautious of them,
253 and refrain; they are the shadows of coming trials; they are not given for nothing; they
254 are given for an end; that end is coming. My brethren, count the cost; never does God
255 give faith but He tries it; never does He implant the wish to sit on His right hand and on

256 His left, but He fulfils it by making us wash our brethren's feet. O fearful imaginations,
257 which are sure to be realized! O dangerous wishes, which are heard and forthwith
258 answered! Only may God temper things to us, that nothing may be beyond our strength!

259 Note

260 Preached on St. Matthias's day during Lent.

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