

Well, it's Labor Day weekend, which traditionally marks the end of summer; however, this has been the summer of all summers, one we will never forget! Labor Day was first nationally recognized in 1894 to honor working people. Will Rogers said: "I suppose Labor Day was set by an act of Congress, but how Congress knew anything about labor is beyond me?" Now the dictionary is the only place where success comes before work. Someone said that the hardest work that some people do is describing the work they do or did. One last thought, a woman's work is never done, especially if she asks her husband.

When I think of work, one of my favorite Bible verses comes to mind. It's one that I quote quite often, but rarely preach on. Why I don't know, because it is one of the most reassuring promises in the New Testament. This morning let's look at this passage which is found in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 28-30, and see what we can learn and apply to our daily lives.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

Now it has taken me a long time to really appreciate this promise from Jesus. Oh, like all of you I get tired at times and need my rest. But until I started really digging into this passage, I was somewhat reluctant to accept this promise from our Lord and Savior. What really gave me concern was that word "yoke." Now a "yoke" is defined as a wooden framework for harnessing together oxen, mules, or other draft animals, consisting of a crossbar with two U-shaped pieces that encircle the necks of the animals.

Jesus says: "Take my yoke; it is easy." I don't know about you, but to me the terms "yoke" and "easy" just don't go hand and hand. The first image that comes to mind is that of the mules with harnesses around their necks pulling a plow or a wagon like on the farm when I was growing up. It didn't look easy to me back then, and I know the mules didn't seem to enjoy it either.

The idea of putting a yoke on my shoulders when I am already tired and weary just didn't appeal to me. I was having a hard time seeing how that could lighten my existing load and give me any rest. I kept asking myself: "How can the yoke of Jesus be light? He took on the weight of the sin of the whole world and suffered a cruel death on our behalf. Light? Easy? How can that be?"

But the Jews who heard these words from Jesus had a different understanding of what Jesus was trying to say. In the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, "yoke" was a metaphor for servitude, and hence obedience. Thus, they spoke of the yoke of the Law, the yoke of the commandments, and the yoke of God.

However, Jesus may have had something else in mind when He issued His invitation. He says: "My yoke is easy." The Greek word for "easy" can mean "well-fitting." In Palestine yokes for oxen were made of wood. When an ox was purchased, measurements were taken around its neck. Then the yoke was roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have a final fitting for the yoke. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not irritate the neck of the ox. In other words, the yoke was tailor-made to fit each individual ox.

There's a legend that Jesus made the best yokes for oxen in all Galilee, and that people would come from all around to buy His yokes. In those days, as now, shops had signs above the door; and it has been suggested that the sign above the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth may have read: "My yokes fit well." Thus, in these verses, Jesus may have been referring to the sign on the carpenter's shop where He worked in His early years before He started His ministry. When Jesus says "My yoke fits well," He means "the life I offer you is not a burden to irritate you; your task is measured to fit you." Whatever God wants us to do is tailor-made to fit our needs and abilities. And believe me; God has a purpose and task for each one of us.

In this passage, the Apostle Matthew may also be referring to the burden of the religious obligations imposed on the people of that time by the scribes and Pharisees. As we discussed a few weeks ago, the Pharisees had taken the Ten Commandments and developed hundreds of manmade rules for the people to follow. Note that I said manmade; God never intended that we have all these rules and regulations about being religious and following Him. When asked what was the greatest commandment Jesus replied with two simple commands: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." It's amazing how we so-called religious folks try to impose our own personal opinions and requirements for following Jesus on others, when it's very simple – love God and love neighbor! Thus Jesus is inviting us to be free from the "yoke of religion" and free to experience a personal relationship with Him.

Jesus says: "My burden is light." As a Rabbi once put it: "My burden has become my song." It is not that the burden is easy to carry; but that it is laid on us in love; thus, it is meant to be carried in love; and love makes even the heaviest load light. When we remember the love of God, when we recognize that our burden is to love God and to love our neighbors, then our burden becomes a song. There is an old story about a man who came upon a boy carrying a smaller boy who was lame upon his back. "That's a heavy burden you're carrying," the man said. To which the boy replied: "That's no burden; that's my little brother." The burden which is given in love and carried out in love is always light and easy.

When Jesus said that His burden is light, He did not mean that there will be no problems, trials, or heartaches in the Christian life. Our burdens come in many packages, but Jesus tells us that we do not have to bear them alone. We are yoked to the One who gives sufficient grace for

every kind of need. To serve Him is not bondage but perfect freedom. Yokes can be oppressive when those in charge are harsh and cruel, but the Lord's commands are not difficult. Christ's servants can find rest and renewal in fellowship with Him, even when the work is difficult and stressful.

J. H. Jowett said that the fatal mistake for the believer is to seek to bear life's load in a single collar. God never intended for us to carry our burdens alone. Jesus therefore deals only in yokes, not single harnesses. A yoke is a neck harness for two; the Lord Himself asks to be the One of the two. He wants to share the labor of any demanding task we have. The secret of peace and victory in the Christian life is found in putting off the demanding collar of "self" and accepting the Master's relaxing yoke. Jesus says: "Take my yoke upon yourself because if you take one side, I'll take the other. I will be your partner in life. You will not have to pull all the weight by yourself."

The yoke that our text refers to is well illustrated by the process of training a young bull to plow. In some parts of the world, the farmer will harness a young ox to the same yoke as a mature ox. The young bull, dwarfed by the other animal, will not even be pulling any of the weight. It is merely learning to walk in the field under control and with a yoke around its neck; the older ox pulls all the weight. It is the same when a believer takes the yoke of Jesus. As the Christian grows in their spiritual walk, the yoke becomes easy and the burden light.

Jesus says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest." We can rest our bodies in many ways, but the rest Jesus promises is more wonderful than that of a good night's sleep. Here Jesus speaks of a different kind of rest – a rest for our souls; an inward rest, free from anxieties. Notice that this rest is a gift; it is unearned and undeserved. This is the rest of salvation that comes from realizing that Jesus finished the work of redemption on the cross of Calvary, having paid the penalty for our sins in full. Here is the rest of the heart and the peace of mind that comes only when we give our lives to Jesus Christ. This is the rest that can only come when we are in a right relationship with the Lord.

For a different viewpoint, listen to how the *Message* paraphrases Jesus' words: "Are you tired? Worn Out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Now I like this interpretation because it not only builds upon the yoke being tailor-made just for us, but it brings up the new thought of being in rhythm with God, being in tune with God. Being out of tune or out of step can be irritating, stressful and demanding. Jesus is telling us to get in

tune, to get in step with Him. In other words, walk with Him, establish a personal relationship with Him, and find where you can serve Him.

Each of us has a purpose in life, and we will never be in tune with God, or with life, until we find it. Have you found your niche in life? Are you satisfied that you are doing what God wants you to do? Does your current ministry fit well; is it tailor-made or is it irritating you? Do you know where God is leading you? Or is there a little voice within you prompted by the Holy Spirit telling you that the Lord has something else in mind for you?

I realize that these are tough, personal questions. I struggle with them myself as I try to listen to where God is leading me. And as some of us know from first-hand experience, what the Lord wants us to do will change at times as new opportunities for service to Him come up, which means that we must stay in constant conversation and prayer with Him. God wants life to be well-fitting for us. He wants our burdens to be light and for us to enjoy the rest and peace that only He can give us. But we will never experience this until we take up our yoke beside Him and walk in step with the Lord.

As we all know the cross is the symbol of Christianity. You see it everywhere – on church steeples and communion tables – it is an awesome reminder of what Jesus did and suffered for us. But Jesus also used another symbol for Christian commitment and that is the yoke. Yokes are not usually painted on church buildings or worn on chains around the neck. Maybe they should be, for the yoke is also a symbol of commitment to Jesus Christ.

Paul W. Powell, in *The Complete Disciple*, wrote: “The cross and the yoke symbolize for us the two different aspects of commitment. The cross is an instrument of death; the yoke is a tool of labor. The cross is the symbol of sacrifice; the yoke is the symbol of service. The cross suggests blood; the yoke suggests sweat. To be committed to Jesus Christ means that we are ready for either the yoke or the cross.”

As we prepare to receive communion on this Labor Day weekend, Jesus offers this invitation to each of us: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy 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.” This passage has come to mean more to me each day as I walk with the Lord. I hope that you feel the same way. Jesus extends a personal invitation to each one of us to come: come to Him when the demands of life weigh us down and we get tired. Come find rest from your labor, help with your task, and strength for the journey. Jesus invites us to find our purpose in life and service to Him, and to take our yoke beside Him as He helps us carry the load and give us rest. Are you ready to join the Master? Then take up your yoke and follow Him! Amen