

HIS BURDEN IS LIGHT

07.05.26

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

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INTRO: Lead congregation in singing the spiritual: “Burden Down.”

THEIR BURDEN IS HEAVY

I have never understood people who try to convince us that enslaved Africans were better off in bondage in America than living free in Africa—and, more than that, that many of them were actually happy with their lot.

To believe such a thing, one must close one’s eyes to the well-documented witness of history. Life as a slave in the American South was horrible and miserable.

From 1936 to 1938, the Federal Writers’ Project interviewed more than 2,300 formerly enslaved people across the South, producing the largest collection of firsthand accounts of American slavery. Written transcripts of those interviews are housed at the Library of Congress, along with 500 photographs of the interviewees.

One account tells how enslaved people were sent out to pick cotton. Slaveholders assumed that people of color had been created by God to be not fully human and, as such, were naturally lazy and shiftless. So, at the end of the day, what they picked was weighed. That weight determined their quota for the following day. If they picked less than the day before, they were beaten. If they picked more, that became the new quota for the next day.

Here are some quotes from those interviews:

Mary Reynolds was enslaved in Louisiana and interviewed in 1936. Her memories are among the most searing in the entire WPA collection: “They beat me till I was black and blue. They beat me for nothin’... I was so hungry sometimes I crawled on my hands and knees to the trough where the pigs ate.”

Charlie Williams was enslaved in Arkansas: “We worked from sunup to sundown, and if the moon was bright, we worked by moonlight. I never knowed what it was to rest till after freedom.”

Harriet Robinson of Alabama told her interviewer: “If you didn’t do just right, they beat you till the blood ran. I seen folks whipped till they couldn’t stand, and then they poured salt and water on the cuts.”

Aunt Sally Williams of South Carolina said: “I had a baby girl, jus’ a little thing, and one day they took her from me and sold her. I never knowed where they carried her. I cried till I thought my heart would break, but they didn’t pay me no mind.”

Imagine living your entire life under a burden like that and then, one day—

“When the Yankees come, we didn’t know what to do. Some run and hide, some laugh, some cry. When they told us we was free, we just fell on our knees and cried. We didn’t know nothing ’bout freedom, but we knowed it was good.” —Sarah Ashley, Texas.

“When the Yankees come, they blowed the horn and called us all together. They said, ‘You is free.’ I danced and shouted till I couldn’t stand. I felt like the Lord Himself had come.” —Louisa Adams, Mississippi.

Most of us will, thank God, never have to live under a burden as heavy as the one borne by the enslaved people of our past. There are exceptions, of course—people who have been abused, people trapped by poverty and prejudice, people bullied and beaten down by tyrants and tormentors.

But no burden is quite as heavy or cruel as the one laid on us by unscrupulous and hypocritical religious leaders. They are the ones who hold the keys to heaven or hell—or so they say. They are the ones who tell us who is worthy of love and who is unworthy, who is accepted by God and who is rejected—or so they say.

And it is toward those religious leaders—their modern-day progeny and descendants—that Jesus turns his gaze in today’s gospel lesson.

HIS YOKE IS EASY

The lesson from Matthew’s gospel that we heard read this morning comes in two parts and offers two alternative ways of practicing our religious faith.

In the first part, Jesus calls out the elite religious leaders in first-century Palestine—the priests, scribes, and Pharisees—for the unscrupulous, hypocritical, and cruel moral and ethical burdens they placed on the common people.

The priests were the specialists in religious ritual and tradition. The scribes were specialists in religious law. And the Pharisees were the wealthy and influential lay leaders of the temple and synagogue. They were, to put it in contemporary terms, a conservative, defensive, and judgmental bunch.

These leaders assumed that the common folk were incapable of the righteous behavior necessary to earn a place in God’s kingdom because they were sinful, lazy, and shiftless—and that their miserable lot in life proved it. God, they believed, was punishing them for their sins by making them live in hopeless poverty.

To rule over them effectively, the elite created legal and moral rules, rituals, and traditions that were heavy and burdensome, often moral Catch-22’s.

The phrase *Catch-22* first appeared in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel by the same name and is defined as a no-win, self-contradictory situation in which the very conditions needed to solve a problem are made impossible by the problem itself. In other words, you can’t get what you need because, in order to get it, the rules require you to already have it.

Example: You need experience to get a job, but to get experience, you must have a job. Catch-22.

Or you need a loan, but to get a loan, you need a credit score—which you can't get unless you've had a loan. Catch-22.

The religious leaders also condemned the common folk for not following rules and laws that they did not, themselves, follow.

For instance:

- The historical record shows that the Pharisees developed detailed interpretations of purity laws that went far beyond what the Torah required concerning washing, tithing, and food preparation—but then did not follow those details themselves.
- In a time when most laborers lived hand to mouth and were paid daily, the scribes and priests forbade them from working on the Sabbath and yet required temple sacrifices and offerings—many of which went into their own pockets.
- The Pharisees insisted on levying a tithe tax on tiny garden herbs—mint, dill, and cumin—grown mostly by poor villagers and sold in the marketplace to supplement their meager income. Even many of the rich said they found this tithe to be excessively meticulous, but they did not repeal it.
- When the Torah specifically forbade charging interest when loaning money to one's countrymen, the wealthy would follow the letter of the law. But instead of charging interest, they required poor farmers to put up portions of their land as security, especially when it was clear that paying back the loan was going to be burdensome for the farmer.

In the first part of today's lesson, Jesus calls out the wealthy leaders of his day for their oppressive, cruel, and abusive treatment, what he refers to as the "heavy burdens" which they lay upon the poor and common people, the *am ha'aretz*, "people of the land."

He points out that John the Baptizer was an ascetic. He ate a hyper-kosher diet and never drank wine. He obeyed every jot and tittle of the law. He took a vow of poverty and even lived alone in caves in the desert to keep himself from getting too attached to objects and possessions. "And you all said he was either a fool or a crazy man."

So, I come along and I enjoy wine and good food, and you all clutch your pearls and point at me and say, (Gasp) "He is a glutton and a drunkard. Oh, and look at the people he associates with—tax collectors and prostitutes and people with tattoos who use coarse language!" There's just no winning with you people!

"Wisdom," he says, "is vindicated by her deeds." The Greek word for wisdom is *Sophia*, who is also the Greek goddess of wisdom, so wisdom is always spoken of as feminine. When he says, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," it's just an ancient Jewish way of saying, "Y'all think you're wise, but wise is as wise does."

He then offers this prayer, full of irony. God, he says, has hidden real “wisdom” from the “wise” and “intelligent” (who aren’t wise and intelligent at all) and has given it, instead, to “infants”—that is, the common folk who are generally perceived as stupid and ignorant. They, at least, are smart enough to know that they don’t know.

As the old Persian proverb goes –

Those who don’t know and don’t know that they don’t know are fools, shun them.
But those who don’t know and know that they don’t know are children, teach them.

And teaching them is just what Jesus offers to do in the next paragraph. He will teach them about the Good News of God’s grace and love as he turns to the common folk gathered there and says:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

HIS BURDEN IS LIGHT

Because we call ourselves Christians, we are called to do as Christ does. That is, to make light the burdens of others, especially those who cannot, for whatever reason, lay down the things that are weighing them down.

Like John “Snowshoe” Thompson, for instance --

In the 1850s, deep in the Sierra Nevadas, winter storms routinely cut off small mountain towns from the outside world. People went months without news, medicine, or supplies. Then came a Norwegian immigrant named John “Snowshoe” Thompson. Strapping on homemade skis, he volunteered to carry the mail across 90 miles of treacherous mountains—often in blizzards, sometimes at night, always alone.

He made the journey twice a month for twenty years. He never lost a letter. He never accepted payment. And he didn’t just carry mail—he carried hope. He brought medicine to the sick, tools to stranded miners, and comfort to families desperate for a word from loved ones.

Thompson once said, “If I can lighten someone’s load, the mountain feels smaller.”

Or Amy Downs --

When the Oklahoma City bombing destroyed the credit union where she worked, Amy Downs was buried alive under concrete and steel for more than six hours. She survived—but 18 of her coworkers did not.

In the years that followed, Amy noticed something: survivors and family members of people who died tragically often felt they had to “be strong” for others. Their grief became

a private burden. So, Amy began quietly reaching out—calling, writing, meeting for coffee, listening without judgment. She became a companion to the grieving, a safe place where tears were welcome and stories could be told again and again.

She later said, “I couldn’t take away their sorrow, but I could help them carry it.”

Jesus calls us to lighten the burdens of others—but first, he offers to lighten ours.

Is your soul weighed down by the weight of the lies and cruelty that have become commonplace and acceptable in politics? Turn to Jesus; his burden is light.

Does your soul ache for something, someone with a message that brings good news and does not end with a plea for money? Listen to Jesus; his grace and love are free.

Are you weary of doing your best only to be ridiculed and criticized for your effort? Offer it to Jesus; his acceptance will give you rest.

Do you sometimes find yourself filled with loneliness, desperation, fear, and despair so that you just feel like giving up? Go to Jesus. Turn to the gospels. Blanket yourself with his words and let his acceptance, grace, and love warm you, assure you, and set you free.

In his name...

AMEN