

Yoked to Jesus

December 27, 2020

One of my least favorite things to do in the world is going through airport security. Some of the reasons why are obvious: it can take a long time. It can be an annoying process. But also, for me, it produces a lot of anxiety. I tend to hype it up in my head a lot. For those 10 to 15 minutes that I'm going through airport security, I imagine the entire NSA and Department of Homeland Security fixated on my every move. I'm always probably the least suspicious person going through security, but I'm sure I look very suspicious just because of how tense I get! I remember the first time I had to go through airport security. I was about 11 years old. And I remember walking up to the security section and seeing all of the huge metal detectors, the bag checkers, all of the TSA agents, and I was like, "What in the world is this?" I had no idea what to do. I thought for sure I was going to mess something up and they were going to detain my 11-year-old self. I was nervous. But luckily my parents were with me. They had been through airport security many times and knew exactly what to do. They told me just to follow them and do exactly what they did. So, I stuck by their side and intently watched their every move. When their shoes came off, my shoes came off right with them. When they put their luggage on the bag checker, my bags went up right with them. When they stood in the metal detector, I studied their every move like I was going to be tested on it and then did it. And as I was imitating my parents, I realized that my anxiety was decreasing. I trusted what they were doing. I knew it was right. And so just doing what they did brought rest to my restless mind.

2020 was a year that produced so much anxiety and worry within all of us. I'm sure you felt similar feelings to what I felt going through airport security for the first time – just a lot worse. All of the pain, suffering, inconveniences, injustices probably stopped you in your tracks as you said, "What in the world is this? Where do we go from here?" Well, luckily for us, we don't have to figure it out on our own. In these moments of pain and suffering, Jesus meets us. And he guides us in his ways of life and leads us to an eternal rest. We're going to be taking a look at a specific instance in which he makes this reality clear. It's found in **Matthew 11:28-30**. I encourage you to follow along with me on the screen or in your Bible at home. It says: ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened." In this verse, Jesus calls out to his audience. And by seeing who he is calling out to, it tells us something about his heart. He calls out to those who are "weary and burdened." These are people who were being trampled on, who felt like they had the weight of the world on their shoulders. Those who were likely cast out, oppressed, and marginalized by society. And the world has a certain way to deal with people who are weary and burdened, right? They're ignored. They're looked over. Their voices fall on deaf ears. But notice how differently Jesus treats them. He says, "Come to me." And with this, we see that Jesus' heart is to be the refuge and the lover of those who are struggling. Jesus leaves no one behind.

These words “weary and burdened” can be used to describe so many of us after this year. We are *weary* from the anxiety that COVID has caused. We’re weary from the pain, from the suffering that so many have gone through. We are tired. We are tired of the emotional and physical toll that 2020 has placed on us. And we’re *burdened* with the effects of COVID. We’re burdened with job loss or financial hardship. We’re burdened with health concerns, changed plans, building a new normal and a new future. So take this verse as a personal invitation from Jesus right now. He is saying, come to me. And he doesn’t leave it there. He calls the weary and burdened with an intention. He says, “*and I will give you rest.*” Jesus calls to himself those who are struggling, those who are beaten down, those who are dismayed, and makes a promise to them. Don’t take it as anything less than that. This is a promise from Jesus himself. He says, “Come to me, and I will give you rest.”

Rest, I think, is something that we all want right now. And before we go any further, I want to make a couple of things clear about what this verse means concerning rest. 1. This rest is freely given, not earned. Jesus makes himself very clear. He says, “I will give you rest.” The only precondition for receiving this rest is simply coming to Jesus. And what a different concept of rest this is.

What we’re used to, especially in our American culture, is that rest is always earned. For example, in order to get the rest of retirement, we need to earn enough money to be able to support ourselves. To get vacation time from our jobs, we need to earn it by working a certain amount of hours. To get rest just in day-to-day life, we need to earn it by getting all of our work done for that day, by having a clear mental space. Sometimes in my life, it feels like the stars have to align in order for me to get some rest from work. But what we need to understand about what Jesus is saying here is that he does not operate under these same principles. The rest that he gives is not earned by any behavior that we commit. It’s something that is freely given. Jesus is not saying here, “Jump through these hoops, and I’ll give you rest as your reward.” He is not saying, “If you do these things for me, you will earn rest from me.” But how often do we think this? This is not a transaction. Jesus does not operate in that way. The only thing he says is, “Come to me.” Isn’t this beautiful? He’s saying, “Just come to me. Just experience me. Just allow me to take you in, and I will give you rest.” This rest is something special. It’s unique in that it’s not earned, it’s only given. And because of this, there is only one source. That is Jesus.

2. Jesus is the only source of this rest. This verse says, “Come to *me*, and *I* will give you rest.” Notice how Jesus does not say, “Go to your job, make more money, and that will give you rest.” He doesn’t say, “Work to attain everything you want in life, and that will give you rest.” He doesn’t say, “Make sure your finances are in check, your family is in check, your health is in check, your grades are in check, and then these will give you rest.” He says, “*I will give you rest!*” There is no other source on this earth of this kind of rest that Jesus offers all of us. Now, I’m sure you’re wondering, “Well, what does this rest look like? I sure feel weary and burdened. If I come to you, Jesus, how will you give me this rest?”

Let’s take a look at verses 29 and 30 again. ***29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*** Here, Jesus gives us a glimpse into what this rest that he offers looks like. He tells us of some of these behaviors that naturally yield

a restful life. Now, I want to be really clear. Remember, this is not a transaction. Jesus is not saying, “Do these things for me first, and then I will give you rest.” Instead, he is giving us a really clear idea of what a restful life looks like. He is saying that as you’re doing these things, you’ll naturally find my rest.

So what does this restful life look like?

Well, from this verse, we can see that a restful life is one that is bound to Jesus.
29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.”

Here, Jesus brings up what is called a yoke. Now, what he’s not talking about is an egg yolk, which is what I used to think of when I read this verse in the past. He’s talking about a yoke that looks like this. [Photo of a yoke shown in the video.] In the culture that Jesus was living in, these yokes were used to bind two animals together, typically oxen. Under the yoke, the animals could pull a large amount of weight together or simply be bound together as they travelled. So, when Jesus says here, take my yoke upon you, he’s referring to this kind of yoke. He is saying, “Come into my yoke with me and be bound to me.”

Now, walking in one of these yokes could be extremely tough, as you may imagine. But Jesus here describes walking in his yoke as “restful.” And I think he’s right. It all just depends on how we react to it. The rest that we receive depends on our level of submission.

As Jesus is taking the lead, if we’re always trying to go our own way, doing whatever we feel is right, it will put a strain on the yoke. It will pull us away. It will cause us to stumble and will not be restful at all. But if we’re submitting to Jesus and his way of life, the yoke will gently guide us as he is taking the lead. This is how we receive rest. In other words, by obeying Jesus and his commands – learning from him, as this verse says – we will submit to this yoke that gives rest.

Now, what does this rest really look like? We know that it comes from being bound to Jesus and submitting to him. But what does it feel like? We can see from these verses that Jesus’ rest is an eternal rest that is made present here. “*And you will find rest for your souls.*” I love this verse because by just using one word, “souls,” Jesus gives the rest that he offers an eternal quality. He doesn’t say here is rest for your mind or for your body. He says here is rest for your eternal soul. And he also makes it very clear that this is something that we experience now. We don’t have to wait until Heaven to have this rest. Jesus wants us to have it now. So the way I like to think of it is that the rest that we experience under Jesus’ yoke is the rest found in Heaven made present on earth.

I want you for a second to just imagine yourself in Heaven. Think about the rest that you will have there. I mean, you will be in the presence of God. He will be providing for you whatever you need. You’ll experience his love and his grace so fully. Well, guess what? When we are living under the yoke of Jesus, these same things happen here! We are provided for by God. We experience his presence. We receive fully his love, grace, and mercy. We can have this same rest here. The only difference is that it comes in a different context. On earth, there is still sin and destruction all around us. And we see it. It influences us. But when we have this eternal rest, it gives us a whole new perspective to deal with this context. When we know that we are eternally provided for by God, that we are eternally loved by God, it makes the issues with our finances seem much smaller. It makes what he said or she said much smaller.

It makes the differences between you and another person much smaller. And this leads to rest here. It doesn't mean that life will be perfect. But living under the yoke of Jesus, obeying his commands, will open you to a new perspective that gives eternal rest. Jesus wants you to take his yoke. He says it here, literally, "Take *my* yoke upon you." He wants you to have the eternal rest that he offers. But I want to be really clear with you -- Taking Jesus' yoke may cause us to give up something.

Jesus' yoke is not the only yoke that we may find ourselves under in this life. There are other yokes that exist that are not from Jesus but are from the world -- yokes that burden us, yokes that tear us from one side to the other, yokes that inflict pain and suffering. And I think we all know how it feels to be under one of these yokes. There's the yoke of money. It brings stress and worry. No matter how much you have, it's never enough. You feel pulled in so many directions just trying to keep ahold of it. There's the yoke of addiction. It brings chaos and destruction. Whether it's alcohol, drugs, or another harmful behavior, this yoke harms our bodies and minds in so many different ways. There's also the yoke of yourself. This yoke brings an unfulfilled life. You feel like your performance is everything. You live to be approved by everyone. This yoke can bring selfishness, pride, and lead nowhere.

I love the image of the yoke. I think Jesus was so wise in describing life in this way. Because when you're under the yoke of a good, gentle leader, it works to guide you gracefully. It doesn't cause harm. It's easy. It leads you to a better place than you were in before. Jesus' yoke leads to eternal rest. But if you're under the yoke of a bad leader, it inflicts pain, suffering. It causes you to stumble. It's rough on your body. It's rough on your mind. It's rough on your life. These yokes only lead to death and destruction. So I want to ask you: What yoke are you under? The yoke of money? The yoke of yourself? Jesus calls us all to grab hold of his yoke. Like the passage says, it is open to everyone. But you cannot be under two yokes at once. Taking on Jesus' yoke requires us to take off another yoke we are living under. And this isn't going to happen overnight. Some of these worldly yokes have deep convictions and roots within us. But Jesus is full of grace. As we walk with him, he will help us uncover some of these things. So I'm going to leave you with a couple of practical things that you can do that will help you live under Jesus' yoke and not under another yoke of the world.

1. Obey the commands of Jesus. This may seem really obvious. But Jesus graciously explains through his ministry what his yoke looks like. He portrays this through the commands that he gives us. So, if we're going to live under his yoke and learn from him, we're going to have to obey his commands. These aren't harmful or arbitrary commands. Instead, these are commands that, as we obey them, we experience more and more of this heavenly rest. His commands work to establish the Kingdom of God here on this earth. With that comes peace, love, justice, and the new Heavenly perspective that we talked about before. This brings rest from the chaos, the suffering, the injustices that come from the sin in the world.

2. Establish a ritual of worship in your life. Now sometimes, at least from what I have heard, the word "ritual" can carry a lot of negative connotations with it. People may think that they are empty, or ingenuine, or 'just going through the motions.' But I don't think that this is always the case. A ritual is a reoccurring behavior that centers your being on God. These could take place daily, or weekly, or really whenever you want. I think that rituals are important as we are living under the yoke of Jesus and not

other yokes of the world. I've had a spiritual ritual in my life recently. I noticed that throughout the day, I would often get so distracted with work and other responsibilities that it felt like it was putting a strain on my relationship with God. I felt like I wasn't prioritizing him, and instead I was living under the yoke of performance and myself. So I decided that every day after I ate lunch, I would escape my work-at-home space and take a walk around my neighborhood to spend time in prayer. For about 20 minutes, I would leave my phone and my computer behind and simply spend time with Jesus. This simple ritual made such a difference in my life. God honored this moment of me stopping what I was doing and offering time to him with a deeper intimacy that I had never experienced.

What ritual will you establish heading into the new year? It could be doing a prayer walk like me, or spending time during the day praising and worshipping, reading, or praying. It could be practicing the Sabbath every week or committing an act of kindness. If you already are practicing a spiritual ritual, I encourage you to try out something new as well. Experiment in your worship. You may find a deep connection with God and something that you could never see yourself doing. Whatever you choose, it will certainly help you live a life under the yoke of Jesus.

3. Take a step of faith. Jesus' yoke is a mobile yoke. When he puts that yoke upon us, he leads us somewhere. He doesn't just put the yoke on us and stand still. No, he guides us along in his ways, teaching us his ways of life. And through it all, he establishes the presence of his Kingdom here on earth. But if we're not moving with him, if we stand still – not advancing with him – it will put a strain on the yoke. In other words, if we keep our faith hidden, never putting it into action, we put a strain on Jesus' yoke. If we ignore the commands of Jesus, living a life that is indistinguishable from the rest of the world, we put a strain on Jesus' yoke. If we sit idly by as we witness the injustices of hate, pain and suffering, emptiness, depression, and anxiety all around us, doing absolutely nothing to address it or offer the love and compassion of Christ, we put a strain on his yoke. We need to take steps of faith. These look different in everyone's life. Only you know what you are called to do. But I want to challenge you. Pray and think of one, big, life-changing step of faith you can take this upcoming year. And write it down somewhere. Put it as your screensaver on your phone. Share it with your small group. Stick it in your Bible. Be intentional about it. Because, church, the world needs us right now. This is urgent. We need to take steps of faith for the sake of our lives and for the sake of the world.

2020 has been a year of heartbreak, pain, suffering, inconveniences, changed plans, lost hope, and so much more. But the reason that Jesus is worthy of all of our praise and all of the glory is because he does exactly the opposite of what you would expect someone with his power and his authority to do. Rather than leaving us for death, ignoring our needs and our suffering, he actually meets us here! He identifies not with the powerful, not with the popular, but with the beaten down and the bruised. And in this space where he meets us, he gently and lovingly says, "Child, I want rest for you. Take my hand, walk with me, learn from me, and you will have eternal rest for your soul."

In 2021, as much hope as we may have, COVID will likely still be with us for a while. The hate and the divisions will likely be with us, too. I know that we all wish that when that fourth digit changes on the calendar, all of these things will change, as well.

But unfortunately, that will likely not be the case. But what we can change going into 2021 – what we do have the opportunity to decide on – is whether or not we are going to take Jesus up on his offer for eternal rest. We actually have the opportunity, like right now, today, to take Jesus' yoke upon ourselves and receive his rest amidst the chaos of the world. In Jesus' yoke, you will receive an eternal future in Heaven – something that nothing on this earth can take away. How much rest and peace does this reality bring?

Jesus is calling you to 'come to him' right now.