

Jesus and You: A Good Fit

Isaiah 9:2-4; Matthew 11:28-30

Oct. 16, 2011 - First Baptist Church, Midland

There was once a pastor who made a visit to the home of a rather poor man who was trying to live on \$4,000 a year. The pastor talked with him for awhile and finally said, "Let's begin at the beginning and have a word of prayer in which we will dedicate one tenth of your income to the work of Christ." "No problem", thought the man. "That's only \$400 a year; only \$8 per week." So they prayed together, and he promised to give back 10% to the Lord and the Lord's work. Over the years this man became quite wealthy, and eventually came to the point where he was making almost \$100,000 a year! He came to the pastor and said; "I'd like to be released from that promise I made many years ago. One tenth of my income is now \$10,000 a year, and I have some other plans for that." "No problem," said the pastor, and as they bowed in prayer the minister prayed not for the release of the promise, but that the man's salary would be reduced to \$4,000 once more so that he could again afford to tithe. The man jumped up from

the prayer and stamped out of the room muttering, “That isn’t what I had in mind at all!”

Yes, today is Consecration Sunday, the day we set aside each year to bring our financial pledges forward and lay them on the communion table, promising to support the work of God in this place. It is something that some folks do more gracefully than others. Some people are just naturally generous in heart, and others struggle. Some people come down the aisle with a smile on their faces, and joy in their hearts, placing their stewardship pledge cards on the communion table with almost a flourish. Others come down the aisle with a pained expression on their faces, holding onto that pledge card, and having a hard time letting it go. I have a confession to make. I am in the “strugglers” group. Susan, on the other hand, is a very generous person. In fact, if it were up to her, she would just like to work and give her income away. It’s a terrible thing to admit; and me, a minister of the gospel, and all that. I know, I know.

Earlier this week, I borrowed a prop for this sermon from Pat McCourt’s sister, who lives on a farm. It’s one that fits me quite well. It’s a yoke (hold it up and put it on). A yoke is made to fit on the neck of an ox or a work-horse. It helps to keep them in line, and while it is burdensome, the yoke is useful and provides

assistance to the farmer (show picture on screen). Some yokes are for 2 animals, and helps to keep them working together, and some are for one animal only.

The Bible talks about yokes in several places; did you know that? It is used as a symbol of subjection of one individual to another in the story of Esau to his brother Jacob. Genesis 27:40 says, "You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck." The prophet Jeremiah used a yoke as a teaching tool, and put a literal yoke around his neck, to give illustration to the prophecy that God would break the yoke of submission that the people of Israel were experiencing from Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. You can find that story in Jeremiah 28.

In Lamentations 1:14, we find an allusion to the yoke of sin, that weighs us down: "My sins have been bound into a yoke; by his hands they were woven together. They have come upon my neck and the Lord has sapped my strength..." Yes, the weight of sin can so easily drag us down, and take away our joy, can't it? The burden of sin cripples us, and makes us ineffective in our service to the Lord. That's when we need to repent and receive God's forgiveness.

So far, all the passages I have shared with you talk about the yoke as a heavy and difficult thing to bear. The yoke is something that is portrayed in much

of scripture as something that weighs us down, and would be better if it were broken or taken away. It is a tool that chafes our necks and makes us feel like we are in bondage.

And when I think about giving money to the church, I must admit that the image of the heavy yoke seems quite appropriate to me. Isn't that terrible? Allow me to illustrate my inner dilemma. By the way, I'm going to guess that you might be able to relate to some of this. I came home from work, and found out that the washing machine, which is not even 8 years old, wasn't working at all. That means a call to a repair person. I called about 6 of them in the phone book. They wanted anywhere from \$40 to \$129 just to walk in the door and diagnose the problem. Can you guess which repairman I chose? Then there was the recent purchase of a used car for son Benjamin to have in wintry Vermont. He is buying it, but guess who financed the car? So now we have 4 people in my family, and we have 4 cars! And guess who is paying the insurance besides?

Then of course, we have the usual monthly home mortgage bill, the water bill, the gas and electric bill, the cable TV bill, the internet bill, the cell phone bill, etc, etc, etc.

Finally, there are the bills that come that you know are going to happen, but they still shock you, like new tires for 3 of the 4 cars that we now have. And the college tuition bills for 2 students, and the ever-present IRS quarterly payments. Yes, I feel sometimes like there is a real heavy yoke around my neck! But it is something I'm working on. I think that Susan might even agree that I have made some progress.

Yet, there is one more biblical reference to a yoke in the gospel of Matthew that is rather curious. It can be found in Matthew 11:28-30; Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and 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." Wow.

This passage is meant to be a response to the Pharisaical laws that were weighing down the people with endless rules and regulations. Jesus invites us instead to take his yoke upon our shoulders, and we shall then experience how light it is in comparison. When we know Christ, following him in obedience becomes a joyful journey filled with surprises and delight. This is the good news. The idea of this passage is that Jesus is inviting us to join Him in the work of the Kingdom. This is a two-sided yoke, one in which we have the privilege of pulling

with Christ toward the goal of accomplishing good things for the Kingdom of God. We are being invited to join Jesus in His work on the earth; “take my yoke upon you, and learn of me.” When we see the yoke from this vantage point, it makes us want to eagerly join in God’s work.

Verse 30 says that Jesus’ yoke is easy, and his burden is light. The Greek word for “easy” is chrestos, which is really best translated as “well-fitting”. You see, in Jesus’ day, ox yokes were made of wood, and the carpenter would actually measure the ox, because they were all different sizes and shapes. Then he would craft a yoke for each specific animal, who would then come back to the shop and be “fitted”. In this way, the yoke could be adjusted and would not chafe the animal, and so be “well-fitted.”

There is even a legend that Jesus made the best ox yokes in the country when he was working in the carpentry shop with his father Joseph. Men would come from all over Galilee to buy the best yokes that skill could make. There was even a sign over the carpentry shop in Nazareth that said, “My yokes fit well.”

Jesus is still saying, “my yoke fits well.” Or perhaps it’s not all that far off to say, “Jesus’ yoke is easy, and his burden is light.” This morning you were given a yoke to wear when you came into worship. It is a light stole with the words, “My

yoke is easy” on it. I would like to ask that as you come forward to place your pledge cards on the communion table, that you wear your yoke as a symbol of your allegiance to Jesus, and your desire to join Him in the work of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

As for myself, I am planning to dance, yes even skip, down the aisle with my pledge card. I am trying to see this commitment as a sincere desire to work with Christ, pulling my share of the load. I recognize that Jesus and I are working together, with the same yoke around our shoulders. And you know what? Jesus’ yoke really is kind of easy! Picture this; Jesus and you in a yoke together. What a good fit! Amen and amen.