

The Yoke's on You

In the name of him who gives his people rest, dear friends in Christ: There is a lot truth to the statement “You can have too much of a good thing”. For example, food is good, we’d all agree; but if you regularly eat too much, it’s bad for you. On the other side, exercise is good; but you can overdo it there too and end up hurting yourself. Work is good: by performing our vocations we serve the needs of others. But too much work causes one to neglect family and leaves you worn out. Besides, it makes Jack a dull boy. On the other end, too much time spent pursuing play and recreation makes a person lazy and unproductive. What we need in these and all other aspects of our lives is a certain amount of balance.

The same is true in matters of faith and religion. A right understanding of theology requires proper balance. Almost all heresies, by which I mean false teachings that divide the Church, arise from taking what are usually good ideas too far in one direction or another. We don’t want to do that. As we practice and adhere to the Christian faith we need to be aware that a horse has *two* sides that you can fall from. Actually, perhaps I’ve mentioned that I’ve learned from painful experience that it’s possible to fall off the front and back ends of a horse too; but that only highlights the point: it takes steady balance and constant correction to stay on and keep moving forward in the faith.

What do I mean? Just this: last week we considered the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah. His task was to call the wicked and idolatrous people of Judah to repent of their sins and return to the right worship of the Lord, and the Lord alone. If we were to measure the relative success of his ministry in terms of the number of people who heard him, were stricken in conscience, and turned back to the Lord, then we’d have to judge him a failure because almost no one did. Instead they stubbornly clung to their beloved evil deeds and false gods, and they happily gathered around false prophets who (unlike Jeremiah) told them the things that they wanted to hear; namely that they were good, that God was pleased with them, and that they had no reason to fear his judgment. That turned out not to be case, and now they are lost forever. Fortunately for Jeremiah, a prophet’s ministry is not evaluated by counting converts, but by his own faithfulness to the Lord and in his accurately delivering God’s Word to people whether they are willing to receive it or not. Jeremiah did what he could, and he suffered greatly in the process. He has since entered into his rest and received his reward.

But in terms of the faith that saves, the people’s response to Jeremiah represents one extreme; that is, refusing to get on the horse to begin with. We see this today, both from those who don’t want anything to do with Lord and have no interest in the Christian faith on one end, to those on the other, who *like to call* themselves Christians, but who stubbornly hold fast to their sins and refuse to repent – even going so far as to gather to themselves false teachers who are more than happy to tell them the words they want to hear: that what God plainly calls their sin and rebellion really isn’t.

Okay. Like I said, that’s one extreme. But let us take the case of someone who hears God’s Word of wrath against his sin and rightly fears judgment, and who then repents and receives God’s forgiveness through faith in the Gospel. He gets on the horse, so to speak. He’s moving forward in the faith. Now, obviously there’s the danger that he might fall off again down the same side he came up; that is, back into unrepentant sin. That’s a constant threat and needs to be guarded against because temptations abound and the flesh is weak. But

there's another danger, and that's that he may lean too far in the other direction and fall off the other side of the horse.

Thus we come to the ministry of Jesus and today's Gospel reading because it's precisely with this other danger that he's dealing. You see, unlike Jeremiah, Jesus enjoyed a great deal of success in calling sinners to repentance. As a rule, it was the most notorious elements of society, tax collectors, prostitutes, and various others whose conduct was outside the bounds of respectable behavior who were most likely to be drawn to Jesus. They responded to his call to repent and they received his forgiveness with earnest faith and humble gratitude. They left their lives of open sin to walk in the path of those who are righteous by faith in Jesus. St. Matthew, who gives us today's Gospel account, was one of them. Let's turn our attention to what he has to say.

The text begins with the words "At that time", so to understand what follows it will be helpful to know what transpired before. It's this: Jesus was experiencing a lot of rejection. In particular, the people of the cities and towns where he was spending most of his time, those on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, which was his home base of operations – they were the ones who were at best not responding to Jesus and at worst who were actively hostile to him. And that's unexpected. You would think that those who were most familiar with him, who were hearing him teach, and who were seeing his many miracles, that they'd be jumping on his bandwagon; but they're weren't.

And so, in response to their stubborn resistance, Jesus pronounces a series of woes on them. Think of them as dire warnings. He compares them to places like Sodom and Gomorrah, cities whose names were infamous for the evil ways of their inhabitants, and he says that if the people of those places had witnessed the things I've said and done before you, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes. Therefore, he says, in the final judgment those people will be better off than you. Oh, they'll be condemned all right; but their suffering will be far more tolerable than yours because you had so much greater a revelation and still you rejected me.

It's immediately after this angry outburst that Jesus gives praise to his heavenly Father for revealing divine truths to little children and hiding them from those who are wise and understanding. And the word he uses that's translated "little children" means infants and the tiniest of toddlers: *very* young children who are completely dependent on their parents, which is the point. They cannot take care of themselves. They know they need help for everything. And they aren't ashamed to ask – usually simply by crying because they aren't able to describe their needs. All they know is I'm hurt and hungry and I've soiled myself and I need somebody who loves me to pick me up, clean me up, change my clothes, feed me, and comfort me while they hold me in their arms.

And to make it clear, it's necessary to understand that while the infants Jesus is referring to certainly would include infants in a literal sense, he's speaking here of spiritual infants. These are the ones who properly understand their relationship with Jesus; namely that he does everything and that they are entirely dependent upon him. He's the one who picks me up when I fall. When I soil my soul with sin, he washes me clean again and clothes me in his righteousness. He feeds me with his Word and he holds me in his arms to keep me safe. He treats my boo-boos. When? Always. You never outgrow it.

The notion that you can outgrow it is the problem. That's who the wise and understanding he speaks of are. They are wise and understanding only in the sense that they think they are. Having climbed on the horse of faith, they think they know how to stay on all by

themselves. The thought process is this: since sinning makes me fall, then the way to stay on is not to sin. So, I'll scrupulously study God's commands and devote myself to keeping them. I'll be good. I'll be religiously observant. I'll perform the required acts of worship and prayer and then some. I'll go beyond what God requires of me. I'll earn extra credit. And in these ways, I will keep myself in God's good graces and he will be pleased with me. Pretty smart, huh?

Well, no; not really. But that's what Jesus was facing. He was calling sinners to repentance, and many of those who were openly sinful answered his call. The people rejecting him were those who refused to admit that they had sins significant enough to repent of. No, they were very religious. They went to synagogue every Sabbath. They knew God's commands and worked hard to obey them. They even went above and beyond the commands. They kept a lot of clever traditions that smart people thought up to ensure they'd never get close to breaking a commandment. That's how serious they were about making and keeping themselves righteous. They were good people. They were pleased that Jesus was making an impact on those terrible sinners over there in the bad part of town; but that's them, not me. And yet, can you believe it? He treats us the same. He calls me to repent just like he does those people – as if I were one of them. What's he thinking? He's got a lot of nerve! Imagine: calling me a sinner!

This is why Jesus was experiencing so much rejection. He was calling everyone to repent. And those who imagined themselves to be wise and understanding in matters of the faith were deeply offended. They couldn't see that by thinking that they were living righteous, God-pleasing lives by their careful adherence to the Law, that they'd fallen off the other side of the horse. They thought they might have needed a little boost to get into the saddle; but once there they could manage on their own. Or to say it another way, they no longer needed a Savior because they were now saving themselves.

A few things need to be said about this. First, approaching this from our Lutheran perspective and with our distinctive emphases, it may seem painfully obvious how messed up this sort of thinking is. We know that in this life we remain sinners in desperate and constant need of a Savior – a Savior who lives a perfect life for us and offers that life on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins. It's pounded into us continually. And for good reason: coming to faith in Christ doesn't stop the struggle with sin, it starts it. What you may not know is how rare our point of view is. In most Christian churches the Good News of the Gospel is what gets you in the door; but after that it's taught that it's pretty much up to you to keep yourself in God's favor by keeping his commands. Many times I've heard it expressed this way: "First you claim Jesus as your Savior, but you're really not a Christian until you make him your Lord" – by which they mean the master whom you obey. In these churches you will hear far more about how to behave as a Christian ought than you will about how Christ lived and died for you. And don't get me wrong: learning to behave as a Christian ought is good; but it's a question of balance. And for many who claim (anyway) the name of Christ, it's too much of a good thing. It pushes them right off the horse and they don't know it.

More than that, it's a horrendous burden to bear. The idea that once I start the walk of Christian faith it's up to me to keep myself here by my obedience leaves me in constant doubt. I'm always wondering if I'm doing well enough. So, I have to try harder and do more and more and more to convince myself that I'm still on the path of righteousness. It leads to a lot of hypocrisy too. I don't want to admit my sins, even to myself; because that would mean I'm not making it. Even more, I can't reveal or admit my sins to others because then they'll say I'm a "backslider", which in evangelical-speak is about the worst thing you can be called. But the

trouble is that if I'm honest with myself, I'll have to admit that's exactly what I am. So now we're back to more worry and more and greater efforts to prove to myself that I'm still okay.

These are the burdens and heavy loads weighing people down that Jesus is referring to in today's Gospel. He saw all those people who were rejecting him staggering under the load not just of the sins they were trying to hide from themselves and each other, but even more of their desperate efforts to prove themselves good and righteous by keeping the Law. It's a yoke too heavy for any person to bear. It can only crush you, and sooner or later it will. And that is why Jesus with infinite compassion invites those who were rejecting him to come to him for rest. He's telling them, "I'll take that load from you. I'll bear it to the cross. I will be your Savior. And I'll exchange your load with mine – a yoke which you will find light and easy to bear."

This is the Gospel we proclaim. And I have read upwards of a hundred testimonials by former Evangelical and Catholic Christians who have stumbled upon the Lutheran Church who all say pretty much the same thing: trying to be a Christian was killing me. Now I've been truly set free in Christ. I say this not to boast. There's no room for it. We don't come to this truth because we are wise and understanding. We have it because by God's grace we are infants who have been shown that we are one hundred percent dependent upon Christ.

The result is that we bear the light and easy yoke of Jesus. His yoke is on you. It means that your salvation is entirely in his hands. He does all the heavy lifting. You are free from sin's burden and the exhausting work of trying to earn salvation by your own efforts. But it's still a yoke, which means there is a load to bear. What does it entail? Let me suggest a few things. First that you treasure the pure Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, and that you not allow human wisdom or any teaching to add anything to it – in particular anything that says you must do something to help earn salvation for yourself. Don't let yourself lose your balance by stressing too much of the Law's good thing. Second, that you be prepared to suffer for believing what you do. Jesus was rejected by most people – especially by those who were reckoned to be the most religious. So too will those who trust in him be rejected. And finally that you be willing to share the light and easy yoke of Christ. Jesus came to give people rest. And you can help them find it in him because his yoke is on you. May God give us the grace to bear it faithfully. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!