

ACCEPTING THE YOKE OF JESUS

Jerry Truex; November 21, 2010

A. Introduction

Today, we're going to examine a unique text in Matthew's Gospel regarding Jesus' call to accept his yoke. In that passage, Jesus:

1. Calls everyone to *submit to* and *rest in* divine Wisdom.
2. Invites everyone to put on his yoke, and practice the Torah as he teaches it
3. Promises peace and serenity to those who do this.

B. Matt 11:28-30

1. Exhortation: "Come to Jesus" (28)

²⁸ Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

²⁸ Δεῦτε πρὸς με πάντες οἱ κοπιῶντες καὶ πεφορτισμένοι, καὶ γὰρ ἀναπαύσω ὑμᾶς.

a. Come to me

This is the only place in the NT where Jesus says "come to me." Elsewhere he says "follow me" or "come after me" (Matt 4:19). His invitation is to "all" or "everyone" (πάντες); Jews and Gentiles, males and females, young and old. There are no exceptions.

b. Personified Wisdom

The phrase, "come to me" (Δεῦτε πρὸς με) is the same phrase we find in ancient Jewish wisdom literature. In that literature, the voice of Wisdom Herself, calls out, "Come to me." This is the voice of divine Wisdom. It was a literary device by which the attributes of God were spoken of as personal.

According to Proverbs 8:1-24, personified Wisdom was the agent through which God creates and sustains the world. This personified Wisdom cries out "come to me."

Proverbs 8:1-31. ¹ Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? ...⁴ To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live... ⁸ All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them... ¹¹ for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her... ¹⁷ I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me... ²⁰ I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice... ²³ Ages

ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race. (NRSV)

Sirach 24:19 "Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits (NRSV).

Sirach 51:23-27. ²³ Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction...²⁵ I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money.
²⁶ Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by.
²⁷ See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity [rest]. (NRSV)

In Matthew 11:28, Jesus speaks with the voice of personified Wisdom: "come to me" and "put yourself under my yoke."¹

c. Weary and carrying heavy burdens

The invitation is offered to "those who are weary and bearing heavy burdens." The verb translated "weary" (κοπιᾶω) refers to those who "labor hard" and "are struggling."

The verb translated "carrying heavy burdens" (φορτίζω) refers to being "being weighted down" and "heavy laden". This refers to people fighting the struggles and anxieties of daily life. During Jesus' time, these struggles included surviving at a subsistence level, being burdened by the religious demands of the Pharisees, and enduring the oppression of the Romans.²

From the context—looking at verse 29 with its reference to "the yoke," a metaphor for the Torah—Jesus is speaking to people who felt overwhelmed by keeping the Torah as taught by the Pharisees.

The Torah, with its 613 commandments, was not viewed as burdensome (the law was a delight to keep; cf. Psa. 119); but the rules (*halakōt*) of the Pharisees were onerous.³

d. Rest

Jesus also promises rest (ἀναπαύω). People who come to the divine Wisdom, who align with God's will, experience rest (cf. Sir 6:28; 51:27).⁴

¹ Earlier in the narrative, Jesus says, "Wisdom is justified by her deeds" (11:19), a self-reference meaning that his own works will vindicate him. So Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 311.

² Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 323.

⁴ Jesus not only speaks as divine Wisdom, but also like Yahweh, who said to Moses: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exod 33:14). Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 323.

What is this rest? It is rest from all the hard labors of life and, in Jewish thought, can refer to three different “time zones” so to speak.

- 1) Past: During Moses’ time, this rest referred to entering the Promised Land.
- 2) Future: The messianic or eschatological rest, a future utopia for the children of God. (4 Ezra 7:36; 8:52).
- 3) Present: A proper relationship with God or divine Wisdom places one in a state of peace or rest here-and-now. As **Hebrews 4:3** states:
 - “We who have believed enter that rest.” (NRSV)
 - Εἰσερχόμεθα γὰρ εἰς [τὴν] κατάπαυσιν οἱ πιστεύσαντες
 - “The ones having believed (aorist), continue to enter (present) the rest.” (JT)

How does one enter that rest?

2. Exhortation: “Take my yoke” (29)

<p>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.</p>	<p>²⁹ ἄρατε τὸν ζυγὸν μου ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς καὶ μάθετε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ, ὅτι πραῦς εἰμι καὶ ταπεινὸς τῇ καρδίᾳ, καὶ εὐρήσετε ἀνάπαυσιν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὑμῶν.</p>
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In verse 29, Jesus says, “Take my yoke.” His invitation to come and take his yoke is an invitation to discipleship—to follow him and his teaching.

a. Yoked to Torah

The word “yoke” (ζυγός) was originally a balance or pair of scales (cf. Rev. 6:5) and then came “to designate the harness placed on oxen to join them for farming or pulling carts.”⁵ Yoke came to represent submission. Animals submitted to the yoke of farming. Slaves submitted to the yoke of their masters.

For Jews and Christians, “yoke” also had a positive meaning of “worshiping God or obeying the Torah or wisdom (Sir 6:23-31; 51:26-27; Bar. 3:37-4:1).”⁶ Yoke was a common metaphor for the Torah (*m. Abot* 3:5; *m. Ber.* 2:2; 1QH 6:19; Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1).

“The key is the connection of ‘yoke’ to wisdom and Torah. Jesus is the Wisdom of God and the final interpreter of Torah” (Matt 5:17-20).⁷ This is the same point Jesus makes in the next clause: “Learn from me” (μάθετε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ). So, the “yoke” of Jesus is not just about following Jesus, it is loyalty and obedience and submission to Jesus as the Wisdom of God and Mediator of Torah.⁸

⁵ Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁶ Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁷ Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 324.

b. Yoked to Jesus

In addition, “yoke” implies a personal relationship with Jesus. Since a yoke connected two oxen together, being yoked to Jesus means being linked or united with him. To be yoked to Jesus means:

- Submitting to divine Wisdom
- Relinquishing control to God
- Keeping the Torah as Jesus taught

Interestingly, the Sanskrit word, *yoga*, means “yoke” or “union”. Thus, to practice yoga means practice that leads to union with God. As Christians, our yoga is to yield to the divine Wisdom in all our affairs and to keep the Torah as Jesus instructed.

c. Rest for your souls

Those who yoke themselves to Jesus—who keep the Torah as he teaches—will “find rest for their souls” (εὐρήσετε ἀνάπαυσιν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὑμῶν)—“a realization of a deep existential peace, a *shalom*, or sense of ultimate well-being with regard to one’s relationship to God and his commandments.”⁹

d. Find (*heuriskō*; eureka!)

People who yoke themselves to Jesus will “find” rest. The word for “find,” *heuriskō* (εὐρίσκω), means “discover, come upon, or obtain.”¹⁰ There is effort involved this type of “finding” and *heuriskō* suggests a deep sense of satisfaction is involved having found what one was looking for.

From *heuriskō*, we get the word *eureka*, which is the exclamation, “I’ve found it!” It became the motto for California when gold was discovered in 1849. So for those who yoke themselves to Jesus, they can shout, “Eureka! We have found—not gold—but rest for our souls.”

3. Reason: “My yoke is easy, my burden light” (30)

³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."	³⁰ ὁ γὰρ ζυγός μου χρηστός καὶ τὸ φορτίον μου ἐλαφρόν ἐστιν.
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a. Easy (*gratifying*)

In verse 30, Jesus says, “My yoke is easy.” The word translated “easy,” *krēstos* (χρηστός) means “kind, good, pleasant, or gratifying.” To practice the *yoga of Jesus*, or *the yoke of Jesus*, is pleasant! It’s enjoyable! Some people think the way of Jesus

⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, WBC Vol. 33A (Dallas: Word, 1993) 324.

¹⁰ Cf. Prov 8:17, which links Wisdom and “finding” (εὐρίσκω).

is bitter, harsh, or hellacious (very unpleasant). Jesus says just the opposite; it is *krēstos* (pleasant).

b. Light (sustainable)

Jesus also says, "My burden is light." The word translated "light" (*elaphros*; ἑλαφρός) means "not heavy or wearisome." The yoke of Jesus is light. It shouldn't tire you out. To practice the yoke of Jesus is sustainable over the duration of your life. Some people think the way of Jesus is heavy, difficult, and not sustainable over a lifetime. Jesus says just the opposite; it is do-able and not wearisome.

C. Preliminary conclusions

1. Jesus calls everyone to *submit to* and *rest in* divine Wisdom, which is available to everyone everywhere.
2. Jesus invites everyone to join him, put on his yoke, and practice the Torah as he teaches it
3. Jesus promises peace and serenity to those who release control and submit to the yoke of divine Wisdom, which is gratifying and sustainable
4. There are two implications:
 - a. We need to learn from and submit to divine Wisdom
 - b. We need to learn and keep the Torah as Jesus taught

D. Submission to God

1. *Gelassenheit*

Submitting to the yoke of Jesus, reminded me of the early Anabaptist understanding of *Gelassenheit*, a German word meaning "self-surrender, resignation to God's will, yieldedness to God's will, and self-abandonment." One article listed over 15 possible translations.¹¹

Sixteenth century Anabaptists believed that "human beings must 'yield themselves entirely to Christ,' 'die' to themselves, 'abandon' themselves to the divine will (*sich gelassen*) if God is to work God's will through them." This abandonment was often indicated in Anabaptist testimonies and writings by the word *Gelassenheit*. The Anabaptists insisted that a person "give up" and "stop striving" for one's own desires and accept what God wished to accomplish through one's life.¹²

Martin Heidegger, the 20th Century German Philosopher, defined *Gelassenheit* as "the willingness or ability to let things be as they are, in their uncertainty and mystery."¹³ Heidegger borrowed the term from Meister Eckhart.

¹¹ *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1950, 22, note 17, suggests about 15 possible translations, none fitting perfectly.

¹² C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (New York: Orbis, 2004) 40-1.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heideggerian_terminology.

2. The Third Step

Submitting to the yoke of Jesus, also reminded me of the Third Step in Twelve-Step programs for addiction recovery.

Third Step: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

This is submission to God. It requires *humility and radical acceptance of reality*: What is essential for submission to God is *humility* (self-honesty and self-acceptance) and *radical acceptance* or non-demandingness toward yourself and the world.¹⁴

In the third step, one must trust the Higher Power or divine Wisdom, who creates, sustains, and gives us the moment-by-moment realities of daily lives.

This type of radical acceptance of reality or submission to God eliminates the three major “demands” or “musts” that make us miserable:

1. I must do well or get approval (and I’m a worm if I don’t)
2. You must treat me nicely and kindly (and you’re a louse if you don’t)
3. The world must give me what I want quickly, easily, and with certainty (an it’s awful if it’s doesn’t)

These demands or musts are called the “King Baby” attitudes in Twelve-Step programs—the infantile whining and demanding that “I get anything I want whenever I want it” and “I can do things no one else can do” and “I’m in control.”

The antidote to the King Baby is humility,

1. The acceptance of ourselves as ordinary people with faults, failures, imperfections and weaknesses just like everyone else and
2. The acceptance that I am not God.

Radical submission to God means radical freedom; here is the logic:

1. The more you realize your lack of control, the more powerless you discover yourself to be.
2. The more powerless you discover yourself to be, the more natural it is for you to surrender to God.
3. The more you surrender to God, the less you struggle against the natural flow of life.
4. The less you struggle against the flow of life, the freer you become.
5. Radical powerlessness is radical freedom, liberating you from the need to play God and control the ocean of life.

¹⁴ An adaptation and modification of Kenneth Peiser and Martin Sandry, *The Universal 12-Step Program* (Avon, Mass.: Adams Media, 1999) xxii.