

Choosing Our Yoke

Putting on the Yoke of Jesus for Self-Control

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Well, we recently counted 50 days leading up to Pentecost, and we did it because we are commanded to do it. That is a good reason to do it. But we did it also because it teaches us to carefully measure and use the time we have to focus on our spiritual growth toward the fullness of Christ. But is our counting now done for the year? Can we have a little time off, so to speak? Are we counting the next 118 days (thank you, Joe, for doing that math for me) until the Feast of Tabernacles?

We know that Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 5 and Romans 13 that we should see that "we walk circumspectly, redeeming the time, knowing that now it is high time to awake out of our sleep, for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed." We are always running out of time, brethren. And reflecting on Richard's call to action, has our work in God's spiritual field this week been fruitful? Have we produced the fruit of God's Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

Now, I do not know why I did not notice this before, but I picked up on the fact that most of the spiritual fruit here are outward facing. They are demonstrated through how we interact with God and others. But there is one that is very different. One fruit, the last one, is more inward facing. It is a divine given ability to govern our impulses, our emotions, our desires, and to make the right daily choices. It is called self-control or temperance, and it means just that, one who masters his desires or passions. They have self-control.

There are a lot of biblical scriptures on self-control, but we do not often see that word self-control used. We usually see things like discipline, wisdom, or restraint. And we know that all the fruits of the Spirit are intertwined. They are all interrelated, but I would argue the bookend fruits are actually fruits that unlock the rest. The bookend fruits: love and self-control. (Very

interesting that Ted spoke a lot about love.) Now I will be talking about self-control. I would argue it would be almost impossible to produce any of the fruit of the Spirit without a measure of self-control. And it would be impossible to produce any of the fruit of the Spirit without a measure of God's love, His Spirit of love.

Now this ties nicely into Paul's description of God's Holy Spirit. What does he say? He says in II Timothy 1:7, it is a Spirit, that is, a powerful Spirit of love and self-control. Bookends. Kind of interesting. Self-control is an essential characteristic for producing good spiritual fruit, and as important, it is essential for producing no bad fruit, because we know a good tree can produce no bad fruit. And we only need to go and look at the fruit of the flesh and just think about those, because if we are producing those, that is bad fruit. Bad fruits produced by a bad tree. It is that simple.

Self-control is required to regulate our thoughts, our attitudes, our impulses; to manage our reaction to life's circumstances and to drive the right actions and resist the instant gratification each day to become a better steward over all our God-given gifts. That is indeed why we are here. We do not own anything. We are solely to be stewards over everything God has given to us on loan. And everything we have is on loan from Him, including our bodies, including the Body of Christ. Each of us is a gift to each of us in our growth into God's character.

Our work in God's spiritual field is very difficult. And anyone who has any experience in a physical field on a farm or even a little garden knows it takes a lot of work in a field to produce a little fruit. I had the opportunity to work side-by-side with my grandfather in his garden and it was hard work and it was a great life lesson. And I carried the tradition forward for my family, mostly as a life lesson for my kids. We had a small little garden. Because the return on investment on that garden was not great. I think I calculated one time I spent over \$10 on a single tomato.

The work required to till hard clay by hand is backbreaking. And there is an important spiritual lesson here because just like that physical field, working in God's spiritual field, if we do it alone, is very tiresome. It is worrying and unproductive, but there is a better way.

Turn with me to Genesis 27. Now not long after the creation of man, the domestication of farm animals introduced more horse-and-ox power to farming. But it was the invention of the wooden yoke that enabled the harnessing of the power of animals for farming which made the work much more bearable and fruitful. One of the oldest preserved wooden yokes was found in the mud of northern Italy, about 10 years ago. It is estimated at over 3,300 years old. So they have been around for quite some time.

We are here in Genesis 27, and we are going to pick up right after Rebekah and Jacob are successful in deceiving an old, near-death and almost blind Isaac. They convinced Isaac that Jacob was his brother Esau and thereby Jacob received a firstborn blessing. When Esau returns, Isaac realizes his mistake, and if you read that scripture, he literally trembles very exceedingly. It says he "trembled exceedingly." But despite the deception of both his wife and son, he somehow retains his composure, realizing the sovereign God allowed the deception to happen and thereby the sovereign God wanted the blessing to go to Jacob.

In fact, in Psalm 135:4 we read,

Psalm 135:4 For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure.

Now Esau begs Isaac for a blessing too. "Come on, father, you got something for me too, don't you?" So we pick up now in Genesis 27, verse 40, Isaac's words to him.

Genesis 27:40 "By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; and it shall come to pass, when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck."

And here we find the first use of the Hebrew word yoke. *Strong's #5923, l*, it is a yoke as imposed on the neck, literally or figuratively. In this blessing from Isaac, we actually see a prophecy here of Esau, also named Edom. Esau would marry his half-uncle Ishmael's daughter, and the Edomites would be neighbors and rivals to the Israelites, using their sword to take from others versus farming to produce fruit for themselves. Kind of interesting, is it not, when you read that scripture. But Esau and his people would be under the

supremacy, the yoke of Jacob and the Israelites until they eventually do break that yoke off. That is in II Kings 8.

Now I find it very interesting, just before the first use of the word yoke with a physical application there of bondage, we actually see, I think, a hint of something. Perhaps a spiritual yoke of sorts within Isaac that allowed him to restrain that anger. Despite the deception from those that he loved, he was able to keep his composure. Can you imagine how you would feel if your wife and your son deceived you in such a way? And we should recall Isaac as a type of Christ, as a young man had submitted to his father on a mountain as he lay on the altar ready to be killed. He was no little boy when he submitted to his dad about to kill him. It gives us a sense for who Isaac was and what was inside him, driving him to submit to the father.

Paul explains, I think pretty nicely in Galatians 4, verses 28 through 29,

Galatians 4:28-29 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.

And in verse 31,

Galatians 4:31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

So Paul is connecting Isaac to the Holy Spirit because he was born by divine miracle, as he contrasts Ishmael, who was born according to the flesh. Remember, he was born according to the impatient actions of Abraham and Sarah. Now have we ever read through Genesis 26, the story of Isaac and the wells and wondered, how did he keep his composure all of those times? Well after well he digs, only to see the herdsman come and dispute the ownership. And he was clearly on the right, but each time he moved on without fighting, seeking peace, and trusting God until that seventh well yielded fresh water. How many wells would we have made it through, I wonder, before we actually rebelled and created war?

Over to Romans chapter 9 now. Isaac's life was defined by a constant presence of God's favor. We see this in Genesis 26:12 "and the Lord blessed him" and verse 24, "I will bless you." God said, I am with you, I will bless you. And we see Isaac walking side-by-side with God, and no doubt God's Spirit was in him, helping him control that carnal mind. Because we know the carnal mind is enmity against God so clearly there was something there helping him to yield to God.

Reading now Romans 9, verses 7 through 13.

Romans 9:7-13 "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but when Rebekah had conceived by one man, even our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated."

And finally in verse 16,

Romans 9:16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

God the Father does the calling and chooses who He will extend His mercy to. He chooses the children of promise, counted as seed, and the seed must grow into mature Christians and produce good fruit.

Now in Jacob's dream in Genesis 28, verses 13 through 15, we read,

Genesis 28:13-15 "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. . . . and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep

you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

So God chose Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Israelites. He gave them His promise to be by their side, to never leave them if they would only do their part.

Over to Leviticus 26, verse 13.

Leviticus 26:13 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves; I have broken the bands of your yoke and made you walk upright.

Here we see God delivered the Israelites from under the yoke of the Egyptians, and He made them to be able to walk upright.

In Deuteronomy 28, verse 48 now, let us see the curse for disobedience to God's commandments. We will see another example of the yoke.

Deuteronomy 28:48 Therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites find themselves in this cycle. Bondage to the yoke of sin and slavery, then God in His mercy redeems them, they are free, the yoke is released; they rebel in idolatry, they get put back under the control of somebody else, and it goes back and goes forth.

Let us go to Jeremiah 2, verse 20. We will read just a couple of these examples where God says He puts the yoke on them and then God says He takes the yoke away.

Jeremiah 2:20 "For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds; and you said, 'I will not transgress,' when on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot."

Jeremiah 28:14 "I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon."

Jeremiah 30:8 . . . 'That I will break his yoke from your neck, and will burst your bonds.'

Ezekiel 34:27 . . . they shall know that I am the Lord, when I have broken the bands of their yoke and delivered them from the hand of those who enslaved them.

Let us go over to Isaiah 9 now. We are going to read these together here in Isaiah. I know I went through those pretty quick. We will start with verse 4.

Isaiah 9:4 For You have broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

Now we see a reference here to God's miracle deliverance from the yoke and oppression of the Midianites accomplished under Gideon recorded in Judges 7 and 8. And then next scripture here, we are going to see a clear reference to God's final deliverance from the yoke of Satan and bondage.

Isaiah 9:6 For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

One chapter over now to Isaiah 10. We will read verse 27 to continue this theme right along.

Isaiah 10:27 It shall come to pass in that day that his burden will be taken away from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be destroyed because of the anointing oil.

Now, the original context here likely refers to the deliverance of Israel from the Assyrian oppression through the anointed King Hezekiah from David's lineage. But I would argue this also appears to be a prophecy. A prophecy

pointing forward towards the Anointed One, the Messiah who would bring ultimate liberation from the real yoke, the bond of Satan and sin. And in fact, it could tie nicely to Acts 10, where we read that,

Acts 10:36-38 The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

It is through Jesus Christ that we have the true burden-removing, bondage-freeing, yoke-of-sin-destroying power of God's Holy Spirit, and the Word of God, which gives us power to overcome our carnality and control—control our emotions, our attitudes, and our actions.

We will not go there for the sake of time, but maybe in a future study, you could go to Hosea 11. Because there is some beautiful image imagery there. God is taking Ephraim by their arms like a little kid, teaching them to walk. He is drawing them in with His bands of love. He is taking the yoke of bondage off their neck, stooping down to feed them with the manna in the desert. But then we read later in verses 5 through 9, that they refused to repent and so they once again returned into the yoke of slavery. But God is merciful. He says. "My heart churns within Me, My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man." And how thankful we are that God is God and not man, for He is very forgiving and merciful.

Now we know in Psalms 38 and 40, we see David crying out under a very heavy burden and yoke of sin. He says, my iniquities have gone over my head. It is like a heavy burden, too heavy for me. I am troubled. I am bowed down greatly with this weight. I feel feeble, I am broken. I groan because of the turmoil of my heart and my strength fails me. My iniquities have overtaken me, he says in Psalm 40, so that I am not able to even look up, they are more than the hairs of my head, therefore my heart even fails me. David's sins were so heavy. It was a burden, a yoke that he could not bear until God removed it.

Over to Matthew 11. We have been building up to this for a while now, so let us see if this can possibly come together here. We have seen a lot of examples of the Israelites going under the yoke of bondage as a result of sin, God restoring them. Now let us see what Jesus Christ has to say about the yoke.

Matthew 11:28 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Let us unpack this first. So we get an invitation here. Jesus says, "Come to Me." Who is to come to Him? Well, He is calling out His people who are weighed down by the yoke and cares of this world, the people who He has called to come out of this world, but are struggling because they are still in this world. The calling is to us, brethren. What is He promising now here at the end? He is promising rest from the heavy burden of this world and the yoke that comes with it. Reading on now in verse 29,

Matthew 11:29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Again, let us unpack this one. "Take My yoke upon you." Ah, right there is a clear choice here. So there must be more than one kind of yoke. He says, take My yoke, that means there is some other yoke out there, right? There is a choice that we have to make and that choice is we either take His yoke voluntarily on ourselves or we by default are wearing the yoke of Satan, who owns this world that we live in. We have to choose to accept, to put on His yoke, Jesus Christ's yoke. He says, take My yoke and become attached, hitched to Me all day, every day.

Then He says, "learn from Me." He says, let Me tell you about My heart. Let Me tell you about who I am as a Being. I am going to show you My way of life. Jesus describes the very heart of God using two descriptors. We looked at this before. Meek, remembering the meaning here, is gentle, humble, mild, but not weak. Meekness is a great power held back in restraint. And Jesus' heart is lowly, meaning cast down, humble, of low degree, a heart that lowers oneself to serve others. Jesus' heart is not self-seeking. He is always doing the will of His Father. He lived to serve; He died to serve; and now He lives at the right hand of the Father as our High Priest to serve and guide us

in living His way. And again, Jesus repeats His promise, when we take His yoke, He leads us to rest from the burden.

Matthew 11:30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Now easy is not a good translation here. In fact, this Greek word is used seven times throughout the New Testament. It is *Strong's* #5543, *chrestos*, and it is an adjective meaning better, good, gracious, kind. So His yoke is not easy, it is gracious, kind, and good. It is not harsh, overbearing, or oppressive, but rather very gentle, meek and merciful in His governance. His laws are reasonable and easy to obey. He goes on. He says His burden is light. And we can tie this to I John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

Now in Ted Bowling's 2023 message "Yoked with Christ," he described how they often yoke a younger oxen to an older, more stronger and experienced ox. This allows that stronger ox to teach and lead the younger ox and pull the heavier load. And as we take up the yoke of Jesus Christ, we have Him then right by our side as that metaphorically stronger spiritual ox. He is helping us align our will to His and to the Father's. Instead of a harsh burden, His yoke teaches self-control by replacing self-reliance with Christ's reliance, replacing self-reliance with His strength, allowing us to walk in obedience to find rest and peace. By submitting to His teachings, we keep Him by our side each and every day, all day long as we are plowing in the spiritual field, and we learn to replace our impulsive, carnal driven reactions like anger, jealousy, envy, impatience, with His gentle, meek, humble, forbearing character, and we produce the fruit of His Spirit.

When we make a choice to be yoked with Christ, this is not a once and done decision. This is not like a, hey Jesus, take the wheel so I can relax and go play some pickleball or watch a movie. This is a decision each and every day that we have to make as we wake up to work in God's spiritual field. Each and every day we have to respond to His calling to come to Him, He says. Come to Him and put on My yoke, He says, Jesus' yoke, at the beginning of each and every day and keep Him in the forefront of our mind and by our side all day long, guiding us through the inevitable challenges. It requires us praying to Him throughout the day to help us follow His lead when we want to stray off the path and He is leaning to the right and we want to go left or

vice versa. It requires meditation and reflection to bring our thoughts, our attitudes, our decisions, our actions, our anxieties, to ask for His help in aligning to His way of life and putting our trust in Him. And it requires learning from Him by studying His Word and applying it to our life to develop a heart that is just like His, a heart that is meek and lowly.

Remember, being like God requires us to have a heart like God. It requires us to be able to give unmerited sacrifices—sacrifices to others that are not deserved, that are not earned. We do not retaliate, we give and we give more because that is what God's Spirit does in us. That is the Spirit of self-control working.

As Jesus tells us in John 6, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." Our minds, our attitudes, our character, and conduct are cleansed by the water of the Word, by God's Holy Spirit, and we need to study it each and every day. Each and every day we need to be spending time putting His Word into our mind, because Satan is continuing to throw all kinds of darts and things into our mind inevitably in this world, and the way to counteract that is grounding ourselves under the yoke of Jesus Christ through the Word of God.

As we deepen our relationship with Him, and He remains right by our side, He gives us better self-control. And we might change that to the better "Christ control" because it is really Him in us doing the work. That is what comes from being directly yoked to Jesus Christ. It is through His enabling Spirit that we have that inner strength necessary to discipline our mind against all of the worldly distractions, temptations that are out there.

Over to Romans 8 now as we start to wind down. In Romans 8:6, Paul tells us, when our mind is governed by the Spirit, we have life and peace. And then in Romans 8:14, we read, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God."

Romans 8:29-30 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

These are really incredible scriptures. That word conformed, by the way, comes from two underlying words that denote a very tight union, being together, being beside, a companionship, a resemblance. And we can see the imagery here that Paul is using as we are yoked together with Jesus Christ becoming conformed to His image.

Turn with me to Galatians 5 for our final scripture here. As we examine our calling as mere stewards over all our many God-given gifts, how are we doing in putting on the yoke of Jesus Christ to use His Spirit to control our mind, to regulate our thoughts, our attitudes, our impulses and reactions, to drive the right action in our relationship with God and each other.

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

Just as a physical yoke is used to control the direction of an animal, Jesus Christ's spiritual yoke, His Holy Spirit can help us overcome and control our carnal minds and hearts that want to always rebel and do what we want to do. Through His help, we can bring our minds into alignment with His heart that is meek and lowly. And when our heart becomes like Jesus Christ—meek and lowly—we inevitably produce the fruit of the Spirit. Because it is God's Spirit in us that is coming back out to others.

We must remember that *each of us* is a gift to *each of us*. We have an opportunity to grow together under Christ's yoke, under His Spirit, to become transformed in our mind, to become like our great God and Creator.

But we have to work. We have to do our part. God wants to see us working hard in the field. Remember, just like the physical field, it takes a lot of work to produce fruit. In God's spiritual field, it takes a lot of work, growing, maturing to produce abundant fruit. We have been given so many blessings—*so many blessings*—and Jesus Christ Himself at the right hand of the Father, ready there to be our Intercessor, to support us in this journey, to help us pull the heavier part of the load, but we still have to do our part. We have to put on His yoke, His powerful Spirit of love and self-control.

As we end here, I will just point you to John 14 and 16, where Jesus Christ tells us that His yoke, He says, God's Holy Spirit, the Helper, will first (John 14:16), never leave us and abide with us forever. It will (John 14:26), teach us all things. And third (John 16:13), the Helper will guide us into all truth. And we see a really good tie-in here to Jesus Christ's description of His yoke and what He does for us.