

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.” (Matt 11:2-30)

For the last few weeks we have been hearing Jesus exhort, instruct, and warn his disciples about the challenges ahead of them. All the while his words have been spoken in opposition to the traditional teaching of the Pharisees. But it’s not just the Pharisees who have rejected him. The villages of Chorazin, Bethaida, and Capernaum have not been convinced by his words and deed of power. He has just pronounced judgment against them and has concluded that the supposed wise and learned ones who have rejected him are fools and that those who have heard him are the innocents with open hearts. His last words here are meant as words of encouragement to those who have accepted him.

The yoke to which he refers is the burden of the teaching offered by the Pharisees with their strict rules and regulations – all of which Jesus has been accused of breaking – when “the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’” (Matt 19). But it’s not that Jesus is rejecting the Torah, he was an observant Jew but he was concerned that the focus on some aspects of the law was distorting its overall focus on the love of God, the love of neighbor made explicit in God’s desire for justice.

We hear Paul’s perspective in today’s passage from Romans. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” (Romans 7:15, 22-23)

Bottom line, Paul knows that the law tells him what to do and not do but because of sin he doesn’t follow ends up breaking the law anyway. Ain’t it the truth for us all?

We see the reality of Paul’s reflection every day in the news. Our aspirations as a people, our laws, social mores, do not prevent us from making terrible mistakes, human mistakes, sinful mistakes.

You may remember that in the last 60 years or so politicians from JFK, to Ronald Reagan, and Barak Obama have referred to the phrase “city upon a hill” to show how we think of ourselves as an example to the rest of the world. The phrase comes from a lay sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” given by John Winthrop, an early leader in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. *It described the ideas and plans to keep the Puritan society strong in faith, as well as the struggles that they would have to overcome in the New World. He used the phrase “[city upon a hill](#)” (derived from the [Sermon on the Mount](#))^[121] to characterize the colonists' endeavour as part of a special pact with God to create a holy community.^[122] He encouraged the colonists to*

"bear one another's burdens" and to view themselves as a "Company of Christ, bound together by Love."^[123] He told the colonists to be stricter in their religious conformance than even the Church of England, and to make it their objective to establish a model state. If they did so, God would "make us a prayse and glory, that man shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England." (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Winthrop)

This was a vision of American exceptionalism that has been an underlying theme throughout our history.

Those aspirations became evident when we declared our independence from Great Britain to try a great new experiment in governance. In the words of Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

It was a great start to a great experiment that would immediately run into trouble as the signers of the Declaration of Independence would put their aspirations into operation. "all men are created" equal skipped over the practice of slavery. The issue of slavery was discussed, and debated, and put aside and slaves, who were considered property, were reclassified for purposes of taxation and representation in the Congress, as 3/5 of a person. That legacy is at the heart racism in our society today.

We can pass laws to change how people are supposed to be treated but it is far more difficult to change hearts and minds. Yes Paul was right. "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

If law, isn't the answer, even God's "laws" as we understand them, how then are we to live, how are we to strive for what is right? One again Paul comes up with the answer as he concludes our passage. "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord"

Paul is speaking about grace, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." These words were written by the notorious slave-trader John Newton who had a conversion experience. They really say it all. We can't do it ourselves. God's grace is our defense against the power of sin and darkness and the means of our salvation. God's grace gives us knowledge and insight into the love of God so that we can respond with hope and faith. Through God's grace we are reconciled to God and each other in Christ.

I think what Jesus is saying is his yoke isn't that complex, it's straightforward like the acronym KISS – keep it simple, stupid.

That doesn't mean that the burden and the yoke are without challenges. Jesus showed us the way. To lose life is to find life. This is of course the paradox that is at the heart of the gospel. To love God and to love neighbor and to pursue justice – that takes us outside of ourselves. That's where we learn that we are not in control, that the standards by which we operate are not those of the rest of the world. Only God's grace will give us the strength to endure, only God's grace will give us the words to speak when we are challenged, and only God's grace will give us the wisdom to know what to do next. And there is work to be done. The city on the hill inspires us. The words of our founding fathers ring true however flawed were the acts of those who wrote them. The words of Rabbi Tarfon in his commentary on the Mishna are clear: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either" (2:16 Pierkei Avot – Ethics of our Fathers) Commentary from the Mishna (Oral Torah)

And when we stumble, which we will, and when we fall, which we will, Jesus is right there with us because he has been there before us.

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Amen