

God hides spiritual understanding from “the wise” who consider themselves too sophisticated for Jesus, thus leading to turmoil and judgment; but he reveals spiritual understanding to “the simple” who come to Jesus, take his yoke, and learn from him, thus leading to soulful rest. Seek your rest under Christ’s yoke.

Introduction – We’ve been considering some “hard sayings” of Jesus, and with this passage we’ll end this series. I suspect some of you are breathing a sigh of relief! It’s about time for a change. After all, summer is almost finished, our vacations are now just memories, and we’re all energized by a long, restful summer break. Or perhaps you’re not feeling well-rested at all. Why is that?

I. The Yoke of Religion Brings Judgment

A. Today: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (vv. 27-30)

1. What is a yoke? It is a wooden harness that fit over the shoulders of animals, binding them together so they are forced to work in unison. In the OT the image of a yoke was commonly used to describe Israel’s submission to foreign oppressors (Lev 26:13; Isa 10:24-27). By the NT era the yoke had become a common metaphor for the law of God (i.e., for discipleship), which crushed the people who sought to keep it (and all the various Pharisaical additions) in their own strength (Mt 23:4; Acts 15:10).
2. By “religion” I mean a set of beliefs that one acts upon to earn God’s favor. Whatever you believe and do, if the motivation is to be judged by your performance, then that is the yoke of religion, and it will always bring judgment.
3. The yoke of Jesus is contrasted with the yoke of the religious teachers. To discover what Jesus says the yoke of religion brings, look at the opposites of his promises: rest (restlessness), light burden (heavy burden), easy (difficult), gentle and lowly (rough and haughty). Chronic fatigue, emotional exhaustion, mental burnout, and spiritual restlessness—these are all symptoms of wearing the yoke of religion.

B. Last Day: judgment (vv. 20-24)

1. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities on the Mediterranean coast in Phoenicia (north of Israel). The OT prophets often denounced these cities for their Baal worship, pride, greed, cruelty, slave-trading, pleasure-seeking, and presumption (Isa 23; Ezek 26-28; Joel 3:4-6). Sodom was the prototypical city of sin (Isa 3:8-9; Gen 18-19) known for its licentiousness, excess, sensuality, violence, and perversity. God dramatically judged these cities because they did not repent.
2. These verses are a frighteningly hard saying. Jesus did most of his miracles (mighty works) in the respectable Galilean towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (his ministry base). What privilege these residents received! God says it would be better for you to be a Baal-worshipping Sidonian, a slave-trader from Tyre, or a violent Sodomite than a respectable church-going person who knows the gospel yet will not repent!

II. Why the Yoke of Religion is Attractive

A. It appeals to our pride of accomplishment (vv. 20, 23)

Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum did not repent because they proudly wore the yoke of religion. Religious people who think they are good at keeping rules and knowing right doctrine don’t have much need of the gospel. Secular people who consider themselves good at being moral, tolerant, and

productive don't have need of Jesus at all. People proud of their moral accomplishments think they don't need to repent. A religion that rewards morality (religious or otherwise) is more attractive than the gospel, since the gospel requires a person with empty hands and a criminal record.

B. It appeals to our pride of superiority (vv. 16-19)

Jesus compared the people of the three towns to contrary children. His parable unmasks their superiority complex. Their mood is stubbornly contrarian and they refuse to cooperate with God. First they didn't listen to John the Baptist, who came neither eating nor drinking, accusing him of being demon possessed. Then they didn't listen to Jesus, who came eating and drinking, accusing him of being a glutton, a drunk, and a friend of notorious sinners.

C. God hides spiritual understanding from the proud (vv. 25-26)

What are "these things" God hides from the proud? The gospel of repentance, and salvation. The "wise and understanding" are wise in their own (and the world's) eyes. They are stubbornly proud of their perceived superiority. In this instance they are those who wear the yoke of religion—believing they can (and have) earned God's favor by their good works. But human wisdom and understanding are irrelevant and powerless for knowing God (1 Cor 1:26-31) because God wills to hide himself from the proud to glorify his grace.

III. The Yoke of Christ Brings Rest

A. Jesus makes us wear a yoke? (v. 29a)

This is also a hard saying. Even those who repent and turn to Christ will wear a yoke! But Jesus transformed the yoke metaphor. So this is a gentle "hard saying." Believers are under his yoke, which in a certain sense is hard because we are not free from our responsibility to give total obedience to God. But consider: everyone wears some kind of yoke. In this sense Christ's yoke is easy, because life is only blessed when lived under his yoke.

B. God gives spiritual understanding and rest to the simple (v. 27-29)

Jesus contrasts "little children" with contrarian, stubborn children (vv. 16-19). The simple receive Jesus and his message gladly and with a repentant heart. They realize they are saved by God's grace alone, and put their trust in Christ. They are the weary and heavy laden, weighed down with sin and guilt in this life, trying feebly to rid themselves of their burden which only Jesus can remove.

C. Changing yokes (vv. 28-30)

1. "Come" and "Take" reflect the conversion of a sinner to Jesus (Jn 6:35), encompassing knowledge, assent, and trust. They are the entrance into salvation and the Christian life. But even mature Christians learn to never stop coming to Jesus and taking his yoke. So "Learn" reflects the continuation in the life of faith. Learning who to trust, what to believe, and how to obey.
2. Right now Jesus is inviting you to exchange all your sub- and anti-Christian yokes for his teaching and way of life. The rest he gives brings peace of mind and heart (Jn 16:33; Rom 5:1), and assurance of salvation (2 Cor 5:1; 2 Tim 1:12; 4:7-8; 2 Pet 1:10-11).

Conclusion – Jesus literally carried all the heaviest burdens of this life when he yoked the cross across his weary shoulders on the way to Calvary. He was crushed under the unfathomable weight of sin as he was crucified to death. He experienced total spiritual restlessness as the Father abandoned him. But through his loving sacrifice he won for us and shares with us forgiveness of sins, intimate and personal knowledge of God, and everlasting soulful rest.