

**LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH**  
**SERMON: Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

**Readings:** Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30; Psalm 145.8-14

**Address**

Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

A yoke is basically a piece of wood or metal that is used to help bear a burden. It can either go across someone's shoulders, so buckets can hang off it and make them easier to carry than with our bear hands, or it can yoke together two people or creatures so they can share the burden between them.

A yoke is a tool, something we take up to do something, but it also has images associated with it of servanthood and of following the Law in the Bible, and in our wider culture of being under the yoke of a bad thing or person, forced to live in a difficult or unhappy state because of that thing or person.

So, after taking that onboard how do we engage with Jesus saying his yoke is easy and his burden is light?

If being a disciple, a Christian, a follower of the Way of Christ is so easy and convenient, why isn't everyone doing it, and why for many of us is it a daily struggle and challenge?

Firstly, let us acknowledge the context of these verses, Jesus is speaking to the crowd and contrasting his approach to that of the Pharisees.

We have this same argument replayed in a variety of different ways in the Gospels, in Jesus' healings and parables, where Jesus advocates compassion above all things in contrast to the Pharisees fixation on rule-following.

The heart of Jesus' message, of Jesus' declaration about how life should be lived striving after God's Kingdom, is to love.

If someone is lonely, spend time with them. If they are in pain, do what you can to alleviate it. If they are excluded, welcome them into your company.

If they have no money, food, water or shelter, do what you can to help them out.

If they are in prison, visit them and do your best to ensure they are treated humanely.

In whatever situation, if you have a choice between being loving, being selfless rather than selfish, be loving.

Jesus' message was incredibly simple, love. God loves you, love God, love each other, and love yourself.

The Pharisees believed the same thing, but they lost themselves in rules and regulations. The letter of the Law became more important than the spirit of the Law. So, the burden Christ places on us is light, he just asks us to love.

Secondly, let me tease out what an easy yoke means. You place a yoke over your shoulders, and for it to be effective it needs to be the right size and fit.

It's length and shape needs to take into account your height and width, so it fits well and therefore minimises the strain on you as you carry a burden.

An ill-fitting yoke can make a burden unbearable; a well-fitting one can mean you can go for miles without breaking a sweat. So, the yoke Christ offers is easy in the sense that it is tailor-made for us, it fits who we are.

So, our reading ends with Christ inviting us to take up a yoke that fits us, and will enable us to live out the commandment to love.

But how do we get there? Let us go back to the beginning of our reading. It begins with Jesus likening the crowd to children in the town square shouting at each other, complaining at, but ignoring each other at the same time.

The crowds have heard John the Baptist declaring the good news of God's Kingdom, but they chose to ignore it saying his Old Testament prophet style, appearance, and message of repentance meant he was possessed.

John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. His asceticism, his practise of self-denial and austerity and abstinence from worldly comforts and pleasures, scared them so they ignored his message.

The crowds have heard Jesus declaring the good news of God's Kingdom, but they chose to ignore it saying his acceptance of anyone, by breaking bread with those excluded from society, meant he wasn't of God.

The crowds blocked their ears to the good news of God because the messenger was either too harsh or challenged their expectations of appropriate behaviour.

Jesus sums up his consternation at the crowd's behaviour, which we can take as the whole of the population of Israel at this time, by stating: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Wisdom is a major theme in the Bible, sometimes called Sophia, and associated with the Spirit of God. Wisdom: insight, perception, understanding, knowledge. Wisdom is seen in actions. Wise actions are just. Actions that are in tune with God's Spirit are true, are blameless.

We then move on to Jesus offering a prayer. A prayer to God, who Jesus reveals as Father, the Lord of heaven and earth. A prayer thanking God for graciously revealing the Way of the Kingdom, revealing the good news Jesus declared, to 'infants', the child-like, those that are excluded and oppressed.

The ones who did respond to his message and accepted the call to follow, in contrast to the 'wise and the intelligent', the Jewish authorities of the time who ignored his message. We then have a declaration of intimate relationship between Jesus and God, affirming that Jesus reveals God as Father.

Our passage then closes with a beautiful invitation which ends with Jesus declaring, his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Offering us a yoke that fits us, and which will enable us to live out the commandment to love.

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

The invitation begins calling us to come to Christ, however we are feeling, whatever we are weighed down by, and with him we will find rest. We are invited to rest, to be with Christ, to be re-energized, renewed, liberated and freed.

"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."

When we have found rest, **then** the yoke is offered. The invitation is to rest first, then the yoke is offered, a yoke that is tailor-made for us, which holds together all that we are, and that we have been, and all that we could be, to help us live out the commandment to love.

To know that God loves us, and the invitation to love God, love each other, and to love ourselves. Christ offers the yoke, offers to teach us, and reassures us that he is a gentle and humble master who wants us to find rest, for our souls, for our spirits, to be at peace.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The central message of the good news of God in Christ, is love. The burden that Christ calls us to bear, is to love. To help us bear that burden Christ offers us a yoke that is tailor-made for us. A yoke that takes into account everything about us.

A yoke that we craft reliant upon the words of Christ we read in the Bible, listening for God’s inspiration, relying on the Holy Spirit in prayer, through listening, talking and sharing with our fellow Christians, reflecting on the insights from science and our society, and the still small voice of our consciences.

Christ calls us to love, a simple message but fantastically complicated when you try to put it into practice.

The yoke Christ offers isn’t a one-size fits all, it is crafted to fit us.

It is also true that as we follow Christ on the Way we may change as we strive after our calling to become more Christ-like.

Just as a child, or a young animal, will need its yoke altered as it grows; so, as we change, so our yoke is adjusted. When we start on this journey we may need a yoke that helps us bear what seems a very heavy load as we struggle to love.

As we become more loving, more compassionate, so our yoke may adjust to help us focus on specific challenges we find.

We may begin finding the challenge to overcome our selfish desires overwhelming, over time we may become more selfless, but there will still be particular issues or situations we find hard.

Christ’s call to us to love is never-ending, it is a journey we are invited on with our humble and gentle teacher, and one on which he wants us to ensure we take sufficient time out to rest. Rest is part of the journey, not the destination. We need to rest from time to time, to lay down our burdens and reflect on whether in love we should pick them up again or to lift others.

As well as making this journey ourselves, we also make it together as Church, and we are also called to invite others to join us on it.

In our life together, we need to discover ways of living, sharing and declaring:

“Come, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and rest.

Take Christ’s yoke upon you, and learn from him; for he is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your spirits.

For his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.” **Amen**