

Matthew 11 • Choosing a Yoke

Introduction

Too often we think of Jesus as Someone “way up there in heaven”, like a corporate officer who issues commands and directions but is so far removed from our place in life that we never really interact with Him. Yet, not only is He always with us, He teaches that He is with us, sharing the actual burden of our life each and every moment.

²Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”

[Read v.2-3]

Q: Which “John” is this particular John? Why is he in prison?

A: This is John the Baptist. According to Mark 6, John had publicly rebuked Herod Antipas for marrying his brother’s wife Herodias.

Background: Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus who married Philip. Philip, Aristobulus and Herod Antipas were **ALL** sons of Herod of the Great. So Herodias began by marrying her uncle (Philip) thus committing incest and violating marriage laws which was horrendous in and of itself, but compounded it further by committing further incest by marrying **ANOTHER** uncle (Herod) and leaving her husband (Philip) in further violation of marriage laws. Since the breaking of OT law is taught by the example of marital unfaithfulness – plus God’s teaching that as the righteousness of the king goes, so goes the nation’s righteousness – you can see that this very public display of unfaithfulness was especially egregious. This is an important backdrop to Jesus’ teaching in this chapter that righteousness is measured in individuals and groups by faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God’s Word.

Q: What is significant about John’s question? Why is “Expected One” capitalized?

A: Due to various Scriptures (have someone read Genesis 49:10, Numbers 24:17, Deuteronomy 18:15, 19; Daniel 9:24, and Zechariah 9:9-10) this was a common name ascribed to the Messiah.

Background: Their study of the Scripture which they had to that point – the Old Testament – provided them with two, accurate yet different pictures of the Messiah which they called “The Son of Joseph” and “The Son of David”. Joseph pre-figured the Messiah as the “suffering servant” aspect of the Messiah’s ministry, and David pre-figured the “conquering king” aspect of the Messiah’s ministry. What they didn’t understand was that these two depictions described the Messiah coming **twice** in separate yet complimentary roles. By the time of Jesus’ arrival, their long captivity under other nations made them desirous for the “Son of David/Conquering King” Messiah much more than the “Son of Joseph/Suffering Servant” Messiah.

A: In regards to the above question, John was asking the question that was on **EVERYONE’S** mind – the authorities, John the Baptist and his disciples, all the people – “Who are You? Are you the Son of David, the ‘Conquering King’ Messiah who will come and restore the kingdom?”

Point: The Book of Matthew is a series of presentations to force the personal decision, “Who is Christ?” In this chapter, we have several examples of people and how they act on their conclusion.

⁴Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. ⁶And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me.”

[Read v.4-6]

Q: How does Jesus answer John – directly or indirectly? What is Jesus referring to?

A: Not answering directly, Jesus allows John’s faith and knowledge of the Word lead him to the only conclusion that a person with the right heart would come to. Jesus quotes directly from passages of Isaiah that indisputably speak of actions that only the Messiah will perform.

Q: What does Jesus mean in v.6?

A: That a person who accepts by faith that Jesus is the Messiah will indeed be a happy person! Those whose hearts are not right with God (Pharisees, scribes, non-believers) will indeed find Jesus a “block of stumbling” (Romans 9:32, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:23). It’s a reference to Isaiah 28:16, “*Therefore thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed.’*”

⁷As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces! ⁹But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written,

[Read v.7-15]

Q: Who does Jesus quote in v.10 and who does Jesus say that John the Baptist is in v.14?

A: Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1 stating clearly that John was the one predicted as the messenger by the last of the OT writing prophets. Jesus is effectively pointing out that those who don’t fully follow God’s Word cannot fully understand it even when they see it being fulfilled before their very eyes. If they couldn’t see that John was the “*Elijah who was to come*”, then they won’t be able to recognize the Messiah to follow after him.

‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER
AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE
YOU.’

Q: What is Jesus saying in v.11? What is the contrast between John and all prophets before him, and then between John and us?

A: John is the most blessed of the OT prophets because (a) he actually got to see the One about Whom all other prophets had spoken, and (b) John’s ministry consisted entirely of preaching and faith – John never performed a sign or miracle.

¹¹“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. ¹³For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

He is contrasted to us – or to all believers that followed – in that we are even more blessed because (a) we will reap the benefits of the Messiah the Son of Joseph Who would die for our sin, and (b) we will come to Him in faith through His Word.

Q: What is the meaning of v.12? [Hint: It’s a difficult and much debated passage. Meditate on it a bit and share what the Spirit reveals to you.]

A: Think about this in terms of Matthew’s overall message in this book, “Who is Jesus?” Is He the Messiah, another prophet, a liar? Each of us must decide, but Matthew’s point is to show, over and over again, overwhelming proof that Jesus is the Messiah. This decision comes about “violently”, with a great deal of force on the part of each person. Those who accept Jesus as Christ “violently” throw down their past to cling to Him as the fulfillment of Scripture; those rejecting Him “violently” oppose Him, seeking to shut Him up or even kill Him. It’s interesting to note in John 6:15 that misguided followers intended to “*to come and take Him by force to make Him king.*”

¹⁶“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, ¹⁷and say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’

¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁰Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. ²¹“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²²Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

²³“And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

²⁶Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. ²⁷All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

[Read v.16-24]

Q: What is the basic meaning of v.16-19? What is their problem?

A: This describes people who know Scripture but refuse to believe **ANYONE** can fulfill it unless it is fulfilled **EXACTLY** as they want it to be fulfilled. They have no capacity of faith or spiritual depth to seek **GOD’S** ways of fulfilling Scripture. They reject Jesus and continue to live according to their own rules, rejecting **EVERYTHING** that comes along for whatever reasons, even when their own reasons contradict each other.

Q: What is the problem with the cities He denounces in v.20-22?

A: They witnessed signs and miracles – indisputable and physical evidence that Jesus is the Messiah – yet never changed their hearts. They were “entertained”, so to speak, but never repentant. They believe that seeing Jesus is enough and fall short by never accepting Him as their **personal** Messiah.

Q: What is the problem with Capernaum in v.23-24?

A: This was Jesus’ hometown during His 3-1/2 year public ministry. These are like people who go to church every Sunday, claim Jesus as their own “local hero”, yet are ultimately rejecting Him because they are never personally transformed by accepting Him in their heart. They believe that living “close” to Jesus is enough.

Point: All of the people mentioned – the authorities, the people, those living near or far, even John the Baptist himself – all were witnesses to the same earthly ministry, to the same signs and wonders. What is the difference between them all? Whether or not they accepted Christ’s message.

If you study signs and wonders from Genesis through Revelation, you’ll discover the disturbing pattern that they almost never result in mass conversion or spiritual revival of those who witness them. Spiritual awakening always comes through accepting God’s Word to the point of allowing it to change one’s personal behavior and attitude.

Application: What “miracles” do you pray for? What “signs” do you wish God would provide? What does this indicate to you personally about your spiritual life?

[Read v.25]

Q: This identifies those whose hearts accept and follow Jesus. What is the difference between an infant and all the above individuals and groups?

A: An infant takes you for your word. They don’t demand signs or proof. We must come to Jesus with the heart and mind of a child, knowing that He – as our parent – would never deceive or mislead us but that we can believe and trust in everything that He says, willing to abide in and by His Word, and His Word alone.

[Read v.26-27]

Q: How is this actually the answer to John the Baptist’s original question in v.3?

A: Jesus **IS** the Messiah, the only Way to the Father. In every example given, each person/group is accepting/rejecting Jesus as He shows them the Father through His actions and teaching.

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²⁸“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

[Read v.28-30]

Q: Granted this is one of the most famous and oft-quoted Scriptures in the Bible, but read it carefully, considering each sentence. To begin with, is Jesus talking to everybody? What’s the significance?

A: According to v.28, He is speaking specifically to “*all who are weary and heavy-laden*”. It speaks to the condition of each individual heart, whether it is seeking something beyond their self. It’s not necessarily speaking to those whose pride is so thick and established that they don’t believe they really need a Savior. This is the chief difference between those who see and hear Christ and accept or reject Him: The condition of their heart.

Q: What is the first action we’re to undertake according to v.29? What does it mean?

A: To take off the current yoke under which we’re living and put on Jesus’ yoke. The classic example of a yoke is a wooden device that’s not just around one oxen’s neck to allow it to pull a load, but which **PAIRS** of oxen are yoked together. Jesus is not just referring to the weight of the burden being pulled, but that we will be yoked side-by-side with **HIM**, Who assists in toting the burden and is always present beside us.

Q: What is to be our second action according to v.29?

A: “...and learn from Me...” It’s not a one-time event but a **process** by which we change the course of **all** behavior, decisions and attitude going forward for the rest of our life. He is with us, side-by-side, guiding and encouraging and educating all the way.

Q: According to v.29, what is the end result of our taking Christ’s yoke?

A: “...rest for your souls.” It’s amazing how content and peaceful one’s life becomes – even while pulling life’s loads and facing life’s roads – in the knowledge that you are never alone, never pulling the load alone, always being guided and cared for.

Q: How is the statement in v.30 true – “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” – when compared to the examples of the individuals and groups mentioned in this chapter that reject Him?

- They have only task masters who never share the load, but actually increase it.
- The hardness of their hearts precludes learning anything that will ease the burden or address the issues of their life.
- If their master is not Jesus it is Satan, who is anything but “*gentle and humble in heart*”.

Application: Salvation is an ongoing work that addresses all three aspects of our life: Past, present, and future.

- The past is addressed through justification, that the work of Jesus on the cross has removed our past, sinful life by the covering blood of Christ.
- The present is addressed through sanctification, the work of Jesus to separate us from this world and cling only to His yoke as we proceed through life.
- The future is addressed through redemption, when Jesus will return the second time and redeem both the believers that are present on the earth and those that have fallen asleep.

Are there areas of your life that still need to be give over to Him? Are you relying on the one-time conversion experience to cover any “shortcomings” or mis-directions that are taking place since?