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MY YOKE IS EASY AND MY BURDEN IS LIGHT

We have all read Matthew 11:30 at some point.

For my yoke *is* **easy**, and my burden is **light**. (Matthew 11:30)

What did Jesus Christ mean? Did He mean that the Christian life would be "easy"? Is Christianity "a light burden"? It seems that all the other Scriptures that refer to the Christian life imply the opposite ... that the Christian life will be filled with trials and with difficulties and with persecution.

Consider the following statements by Jesus Christ.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. **In the world you shall have tribulation**: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

"Tribulation" is not something we would think of as "easy" or as "light". Similarly:

Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any *man* will come after Me, **let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me**. (Matthew 16:24)

To "deny ourselves" is not that easy; and "taking up our cross or stake", a symbol for a particularly cruel form of punishment, is not really "a light burden". Consider also:

And **a man's foes shall be** they of **his own household**. He that loves **father or mother** more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loves **son or daughter** more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:36-37)

The prospect of members of our own families possibly becoming our "foes" is not an easy one to contend with. We certainly must be prepared to put faithfulness to Jesus Christ above any and all family loyalties, but in many cases that may involve much more than "a light burden" for people to live with.

Jesus Christ also said:

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted Me, **they will also persecute you**; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also. (John 15:20)

This is a clear statement that a true Christian has to be prepared for a certain amount of persecution. But persecution is never "easy" or "light".

As an example, let's look at some of the trials the Apostle Paul had to face.

Of the Jews **five times** received I forty *stripes* save one. **Thrice** was I beaten with rods, **once** was I stoned, **thrice** I suffered shipwreck, **a night and a day** I have been in the deep. (2 Corinthians 11:24-25)

That is a dozen major trials right here in this partial list of trials endured by Paul. These experiences can certainly not be described as "easy" or as "light".

In the past many of God's true servants were put to death, precisely because they were the servants of God, and that goes back all the way to Abel. This situation is expressed by the imagery of "**the souls of them that were slain for the word of God**" in Revelation 6:9. There is nothing "easy" or "light" about having to die for our commitment to God.

So what did Jesus Christ really mean when He said "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light"? Let's take a closer look at these statements.

THE CONTEXT

Let's notice the verses leading up to this statement.

Come unto Me, **all you that labor** and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

The Greek verb here translated as "labor" is "kopiontes", a form of "kopiao". This is not the usual Greek verb for "to work". The Greek verb for "to work", as for example in the expression "go work in my vineyard", is "ergazomai", the noun for "a worker" being "ergates", and the noun for "work" being "ergon".

But the Greek verb "kopiao" has a different focus. This verb includes the meaning of: being tired or **exhausted with grief**. It involves **beating one's chest with grief**. It implies a sense of being discouraged or despondent. This is different from simply "working".

The translation "you that labor" conveys a somewhat misleading picture, by focusing purely on "working" without in any way conveying the emotions or attitudes of the people involved, emotions which are the main focus of the verb "kopiao". Some translations have tried to correct this somewhat by rendering the Greek text as "all who are weary" (e.g. NRSV, NAS, etc.).

So first of all we should recognize that Jesus Christ was not addressing "all people who work hard". Jesus Christ was only addressing **a very specific group of people**. Christ was addressing all those who have a certain frame of mind, those who have a specific attitude.

After all, Jesus Christ also said: "**no man can come unto Me** except it were given unto him ..." (John 6:65). So in Matthew 11:28 Jesus Christ was assuredly not inviting all people to come to Him, as is implied in most of our English language translations. Christ's statement is directed at **a very select group of people**, those who are exhausted by this life's pressures, and who are "beating their chests with grief" over how society around them lives.

The first part of verse 28 basically says:

"Come unto Me all you who are beating your chests with grief over the stresses this life imposes on us".

This is basically a re-statement of Ezekiel 9:4.

And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of **the men that sigh and that cry** for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. (Ezekiel 9:4)

So in Matthew 11:28 we are talking about a very specific group of people, people who have the specific attitude which happens to be a prerequisite for real repentance, a prerequisite for a real changing of the mind.

Let's now look at the next expression.

The expression "**and are heavy laden**" is a translation of the Greek words "kai pephortismenoi", the latter being a form of the verb "phortizo". For a start, there is no specific word for "heavy" in the Greek text. However, the word "phortizo" refers to "**loading onto a ship**", and that action implies that what is being loaded is "heavy". So the word "heavy" is appropriate in this context even though it isn't literally present.

Jesus Christ was addressing people who are carrying a heavy load. Now what is "a load"? "A load" is not something that is a part of us. No, "a load" is **something that is imposed on us** by someone else, and implied is **against our will**. It is something we would not carry if we had the choice to get rid of this heavy load. But also implied is that it is beyond our own control to get rid of this heavy load.

So what is that load?

That load is **the way of life** which "the god" of this world's societies has imposed on us! It is the way of **selfishness**, of always putting self first, of always striving and competing to get things. It is the way of vanity and greed and lust and coveting and envy and hatred and fear and insecurity. It is a way of life that enslaves us and **forces us to be selfish**.

And that whole way of life is a very heavy burden indeed, when compared to the way of life that God had intended for human beings when God created Adam and Eve.

The last part of this verse reads "**and I will give you rest**". The Greek text here reads "kago (= and I) anapauso humas (= to you)". So Jesus Christ said that He would "anapauso" those who would come to Him.

"Anapauso" is a form of the verb "anapauo", and "anapauo" literally means "**causing to cease from some activity**". Think of our word "pause". So let's note that **Jesus Christ was not really offering "rest"** to those who would come to Him! "Rest" is a wrong focus.

Look at it this way:

You are engaged in "**activity A**". To have rest means that you stop doing "activity A" and do nothing else. Then you are "resting". But if I come to you and say: I want you to stop doing 'activity A' and instead now do '**activity B**', then I am not really offering you any rest, am I? I am not offering you any "resting" at all; I am only offering you a **switching from one activity to a different activity**. And "resting" doesn't enter the picture. You follow?

With the expression wrongly translated as "and I will give you rest" Jesus Christ was really saying:

"and I will cause **the cessation of your present stressful activities**".

But in this statement Jesus Christ was not saying anything at all regarding what activities He would enjoin on us **in place of** the activities that would cease. That aspect is simply not addressed. So "resting" is not really a consideration in what Jesus Christ was saying.

How will that "cessation" be achieved? That is what Jesus Christ explained in the next verse. Think of verses 28-30 as follows:

Verse 28 states a condition which is stressful, i.e. it is a problem.

Verse 29 states the solution to this problem.

Verse 30 states why and how verse 29 is the solution.

So now let's look at verse 29.

Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. (Matthew 11:29)

To the people who are beating their chests with grief over the ways of this world Jesus Christ says: there are **two things** you will have to do. You will have to voluntarily "**take something**", and you also have to "**learn something**".

The thing we voluntarily have to take upon ourselves is Jesus Christ's "yoke". And the thing we have to learn is Jesus Christ's attitude of humility and meekness.

The difference between "the burden" of verse 28 and "the yoke" of verse 29 is as follows:

"The burden" is forced on us, whether we like it or not. We have no choice in this matter. It is imposed by Satan unilaterally on all people. "The yoke" of Jesus Christ is not imposed on anyone. Rather, "the yoke" is something that we ourselves individually have to decide to voluntarily accept. "The yoke" requires each one of us to exercise our free will to accept it, or to reject it.

Now the important difference between a burden and a yoke is this:

A burden does not give the one carrying that burden any focus or direction. The burden doesn't tell us to go left or right or forwards or backwards. And a burden does not lead to any specific goal or conclusion. A burden is an end in itself, which isn't trying to achieve anything in particular.

A yoke, on the other hand, is a tool towards achieving a goal. It is aimed at achieving cooperation and direction. A yoke serves a very specific purpose. And when that purpose has been achieved (e.g. a field has been ploughed by yoked oxen, etc.), then the yoke can be removed. A yoke does constrain and limit activities to some degree. A yoke can help achieve desirable goals or results. And a yoke is never imposed when there isn't a specific job that needs to be done. A yoke always serves a very specific purpose.

We saw that the heavy load or heavy burden is the selfish way of life that Satan has imposed on humanity. So **what then is "the yoke"** that Jesus Christ is telling those with the right attitude to voluntarily accept?

It is the yoke that will lead to the cessation of stressful activities. It is the yoke that will produce a desirable result. It is the yoke that enables us to throw off the heavy burden. It is the yoke that joins us to Jesus Christ.

What is that yoke?

That yoke is **God's way of life**. It is the way of outgoing concern for the well-being of others, the opposite of selfishness. Or, as Mr. Armstrong used to call it, it is the way of give. The "restraints" which this yoke imposes on us are that we must reject all of Satan's selfish ways of living. In addition to our commitment to God above all else, this yoke requires us to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves".

This is the yoke that Jesus Christ instructs us to accept. And once the mind is willing to accept this yoke, then we must learn how to incorporate that yoke into our daily lives. Now the way to learn how to do this is for us to consider the example of Jesus Christ's life as a human being.

The expression "**and learn of Me**" means: and learn from Me, learn by observing how I have lived. And then we need to try our best to copy the way Jesus Christ lived His life. In this process we are not to focus on the miracles Jesus Christ performed, but on His character and His attitude to life.

"**I am meek and lowly in heart**" means that Jesus Christ had a meek and a humble character. It took great meekness and enormous humility for Jesus Christ to voluntarily submit Himself to His persecutors, all of whom He could have destroyed in the blink of an eye. He really did have more power than all of His enemies combined, but He didn't use that power because He was "meek and lowly in heart". And fulfilling the will of God the Father was far more important to Jesus Christ than His own physical well-being (i.e. during His ministry).

The way for us to implement that yoke is to live in obedience to God's laws with a meek and humble attitude towards all people. And when we do that, then we shall find "a cessation" of the pressures which Satan's selfish ways of living place on us.

Putting into practice in our own lives the things Jesus Christ taught throughout the gospels will demonstrate that we are indeed "learning from Jesus Christ". And doing this will slough off that heavy burden which Satan has forced upon humanity in general. It will free us from that burden. It will take a load of pressure off us.

That brings us to verse 30.

For My yoke *is* easy, and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:30)

The Greek word here translated as "easy" **doesn't mean "easy"** at all! This Greek word is the adjective "chrestos". This Greek adjective means: kind, good, virtuous, excellent. The related Greek word "chrestotes" means "goodness, kindness", and the verb "chresteuomai" means "to be kind, loving", and the noun "chrestologia" means "friendly speech". You get the idea? "Chrestos" has nothing to do with "easy". To us "easy" means the opposite of "difficult". But the opposite of difficult is not what Jesus Christ was referring to.

So **Jesus Christ did not say "My yoke is easy"**! What Jesus Christ really said was "**My yoke is kind, good and virtuous**", whether it is easy or not. Jesus Christ was referring to the actual attributes of His yoke, not to the degree of ease or difficulty that might be involved.

In plain language:

Jesus Christ was comparing **the vital attributes** of His yoke with the attributes of the burden that Satan has imposed on mankind.

Satan's burden is selfish.

Christ's yoke is kind.

Satan's burden is covetousness and greed.

Christ's yoke is selfless service to others.

Satan's burden is a spirit of competition.

Christ's yoke seeks cooperation.

Satan's burden produces resentment and animosity.

Christ's yoke seeks friendship and the betterment of other people.

Can you see that the translation "My yoke is easy" creates a completely false picture?

The things Jesus Christ's yoke achieves are the opposite of what Satan's burden achieves. That is the focus of Jesus Christ's statement in the first part of verse 30. Now let's look at the last part of this verse.

Let's look at the statement "**My burden is light**". Recall that the expression "are heavy laden" in verse 28 is a form of the Greek verb "phortizo". This Greek verb refers to loading a (heavy) load onto a ship. The Greek word for "burden" here in verse 30 is "phortion". Now "phortion" is **the diminutive** of the Greek noun "phortos". Here is the point:

Both the verb "phortizo" and the noun "phortion" are derived from and based on the word "phortos".

"Phortos" means: a burden, a load for a ship. And "phortion" means "**a little burden**, a little load for a ship". That's what we get when we deal with a diminutive.

So with this last statement in verse 30 which is translated as "My burden is light" Jesus Christ is now referring back to the statement He had made in verse 28, and **presenting a comparison** to that statement.

Satan's burden on mankind is heavy, and ultimately difficult to cope with. By comparison Jesus Christ's "little burden" (i.e. phortion) is quite light and easy to carry. This is not a reference to tests or trials that may confront us at some point in our Christian lives. This is really a comparison to the heavy load that Satan imposes on humanity as a whole.

A part of Satan's load on us is **the pressure to conform** to the customs and traditions of whatever society we may have been born into, or in which we happen to live our lives. For people in the world peer pressure is a real threat. **Conform or you will be rejected.** If we reject some or all of the customs and traditions of our people, we will be ostracized.

For example, in our world in general terms women dress and groom themselves in a way that will be accepted by other women. And we men do exactly the same thing in various other areas of our lives. All of us so easily fear what other people may think of us. And so we just conform. That's true for all those who are still under the sway of the "god" of this present age.

Now the fear of death is the ultimate slave-master of people in this world (see Hebrews 2:15). As Satan himself said to Jesus Christ, "all that a man has will he give for his life" (Job 2:4). That's how Satan rules this present world, by instilling a spirit of fear in people.

Coming to God and willingly taking Christ's yoke upon ourselves takes the fear of death out of the equation. Instead of a spirit of fear God gives us a spirit of power (see 2 Timothy 1:7). And the removal of the fear of death makes the difference between "a heavy load" and "a little load". The removal of the fear of death makes a huge difference in any person's life.

When we submit our lives to God, then we also have to reject Satan's enslaving spirit of fear. As Paul put it:

So that we may boldly say, The Lord *is* my helper, and **I will not fear what man shall do unto me.** (Hebrews 13:6)

When we can confidently say this, then through the help of God's holy spirit we have truly thrown off Satan's heavy burden. The fear of what other people may do to us is a huge burden. One reason many people, who have become aware of some of God's laws, don't put those laws into practice in their lives is because **they fear what other people may do or say or think.** Once we no longer fear what other people may do or say or think, then we are free to follow our consciences regarding all the things we are learning about God's laws and God's way of life.

The physical circumstances may still be the same. By this I mean that other people may still do or say bad things to us and think bad things about us. The only thing that has changed is **how our minds respond** to such situations. When we can say "I don't care what they may do or say or think about my commitment to the ways of God", then we have thrown off a huge burden. And it is the power of God's spirit that enables us to throw off that spirit of fear.

And then Jesus Christ's "little burden" will indeed be light. And the "yoke" we have voluntarily accepted will indeed be excellent and kind and good and virtuous. It is a pure way of life that Jesus Christ instructs us to live. And any trials or tests God may allow us to be exposed to are not worthy to be compared to the future that God is offering us.

For I reckon that **the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.** (Romans 8:18)

But the statement "My yoke is easy" is a significant mistranslation.

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