

FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION

During the days ahead reflect on the following scriptural passages in which Jesus speaks of Himself:

Matthew 5:17, 18; 11:4-6; 20:28

Mark 12:1-11

John 5:17-47; 6:32-40; 7:16-38; 8:12-19;
8:54-58; 9:35-37; 10:7-9; 14:6-12; 17:1-8



Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Mt 11:27-30).

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CHRIST'S PROMISE FOR TIRED SOULS





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There are some people who are of the opinion that the Church is an “institution” inundated with rules and regulations. Compared to what was expected of the Old Testament people, we have it made! More than six hundred laws and regulations are contained in the first five books of the Old Testament alone.

Such regulations placed enslaving demands upon a believer. Moreover, some rules took great intelligence to even figure out. Many became discouraged. Those who were ardent in their efforts to follow the Law probably had personalities similar to the pharisees that we hear about in the New Testament. By Jesus' teachings we know that their dispositions were far from those which we are challenged to imitate.

BURDEN OR HELP?

A yoke is a device carefully fitted to be placed like a harness on two animals, oxen, for example, to enable them to work together. A yoke can also be thought of as a frame fitted to a person's shoulders to carry a load in two equal portions. Any type of yoke was always carefully made to fit well, so as to be a help

rather than a burden. The rabbis often used the term yoke as a metaphor for the Old Testament laws because Jews were bonded to them in servitude to God.

In the New Testament the implication is made that these laws had lost their original spirit and had become a burden rather than a help. There were human interpretations and extensions of the Law that went beyond God's intentions and will. Many felt that following the Law without question, rather than catching the spirit in which the laws were promulgated, was of prime concern. The pharisees, for example, were so concerned with the externals of religion that they completely ignored its personal, internal value in terms of loving God and others.

Jesus came to change all of this. He did not intend to abolish the Old Testament Law but, rather, to fulfill it by improving its imperfections. He summed up the conditions for eternal friendship with God in these words: “The one who does the will of my Father in heaven” shall enter the Kingdom of God (Mt 7:21). This is the justice that “surpasses that of the scribes and pharisees” (Mt 5:20).

Still, we know quite well that pursuing the path of righteousness and holiness that Jesus left us to follow is anything but easy. In fact, many

give up out of frustration. Others concoct excuses to skirt living a Christian lifestyle. And there are those who jump for joy when Christianity makes them “feel good” but collapse spiritually when faced with the need to make essential changes in their lives. “Loving your enemies,” for example, is not exactly an easy thing. Neither is striving for the perfection with which Jesus constantly challenges us.

Does this contradict what Jesus said in the Gospel about His yoke being easy and His ability to lighten our burdens? A true disciple would interpret this claim to mean that nothing is a burden when we do it out of love. This is especially true when our sights are set on the end for which we do it. “The Law,” writes Saint Paul, “kills.”

That to which Jesus' new law of love binds us is the ultimate freedom and liberation and burden-lightening. And accepting the simplicity of Jesus' vision, then, is the greatest challenge of all.