

Greatest Hits: The Easy Yoke Pastor Mike Stern

Main Idea: Jesus offers an easy yoke that isn't easy to take.

Purpose: To invite people into a daily lifestyle of soul rest in Jesus.

Passage: Matthew 11:28-30

You know what I love about life? It's just so stress-free and easy. I mean, there's not a whole lot to worry about. Not a lot of problems to solve, or work to do, or overwhelming issues that crop up out of nowhere and totally disrupt your day or your week or your month or your life. Particularly the last few years—I feel like things just keep getting easier and easier. And all the people said, "Amen!" (Just kidding)

There's so much to worry about! Life is stressful sometimes—it can be a burden...And not to bum you out, but it's not actually getting easier, right?

The Barna Group does an annual, worldwide survey that they call the Global Emotions Report, and it measures things like people's negative and positive experiences in life, or how much stress they feel, etc. They recently released this year's report, and it's not pretty.

Negative experiences are on the rise, and positive experiences are on the decline. The world felt more stress, less happiness, and overall was less well-rested than the year before, and that's the trend. In just one year in the US, we dropped by 12 percentage points in regard to whether or not people reported being well-rested. In general, we are not a well-rested society.

We've been going through the **Greatest Hits** of the Bible this summer, looking at some of the most formative passages in the Bible that, throughout the centuries, have had a significant impact on individuals and the church. They're the passages that we just keep coming back to in our lives—they're the type of passages that we want to commit to memory so that they become like a wellspring in our souls that we can draw from whenever we need.

And we have a need, right? Life's not often easy, but we can rely on Jesus to be with us, to help us, and even to give us the rest that we need.

Today's Greatest Hits passage comes from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11. These are the words of Jesus that He is saying not only to His disciples but to the groups of people who are around him. Jubilee Rosensteel is going to read the passage for us today.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

(Matthew 11:28-30)

What a beautiful invitation from Jesus. Are you weary? Are you burdened? Is life hard? Are you not well-rested? Come to Me and I'll give you rest. I'm gentle and I'm humble in heart. What I ask from you is easy and light.

Notice that this passage is almost poetic. There are these pairings of phrases with the repetition of rest and yoke.

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
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**.
For my **yoke** is easy and my burden is light.*

There's obviously this contrast between a heavy burden that causes weariness and a light and easy burden that results in rest. And there's kind of this assumed contrast between the yoke of Jesus and some other yoke, that isn't mentioned, that is the heavy burden and the weariness.

A yoke, by the way, is something that you would fasten on an animal, like an ox, to plow a field or tow a cart. It probably didn't look like this, but this is a yoke. Basically, it's the thing that keeps the burden secured to the animal *or, in this case, secured to you.



There's another contrast that's happening in this passage. Just before this, Jesus says, "*I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.*" (Matthew 11:25)

The contrast is between those who have it all and think they know it all—primarily the religious leaders of that time—and all those who are under the burden of the expectations of those leaders. Elsewhere, Jesus says, "*And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.*" (Luke 11:46)

There's a little lesson in here for us: *Don't put a heavy yoke/burden on others.* In our brokenness, we put a lot of burdens on people; we put a lot of expectations on people. And sometimes that can really suck the rest out of somebody. Instead of putting burdens on people, the Bible says to, "*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.*"

Jesus says, regarding the burdens of the experts of the law, don't take on those burdens—instead, come be My disciple. The word for *learn*—"come and *learn* from me"—is just the verbal form of the word for *disciple*, which means *student*. "*Come and be one of my disciples. I'm a humble and gentle teacher.*"

It seems like a pretty nice invitation.

How many of you right now are feeling burdened? Do you feel like there's a heavy load strapped to you that just makes everything hard? How many of you want rest for your souls? We love this invitation, but we also struggle to accept it or to realize it in our lives. **It's an easy yoke that's not always easy to take.**

For some, it's not easy to take initially, and for most, it's hard to live out daily.

Now, specifically, this yoke is the yoke that takes us from bondage to freedom, which maybe sounds a bit funny because we still have a yoke with Jesus. We're still bound to something, which generally, in our American society, we don't like. We wish we could be fully autonomous, but we can't; it really is just wishful thinking.

God has always been in the process of freeing His people from bondage, from slavery. The archetypal example of this in the Bible is God rescuing His people from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for more than 400 years. They cried out to God and God rescued them through Moses.

God tells Moses:

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.’” (Exodus 6:6-8)

God breaks the burden of the yoke of slavery for the Israelites, takes them as His own people, and promises them a land that will be their own, a land that will be, He says later, a place of rest for them.

This story, this experience of the Israelites, and that passage from Exodus in particular, is like a paradigm for how we understand so much else that we read in scripture—but it’s also a paradigm for how we understand how God works in our own lives.

Without Jesus, we are under the yoke—under the slavery of sin and the powers of this world. We are in bondage to them whether we think we are or not. This is why Paul writes to the Galatian church, *“And that’s the way it was with us before Christ came. We were like children; we were slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world.”* (Galatians 4:3, NLT)

But Jesus has freed us from that yoke of slavery. He has redeemed us from slavery and made us His people, heirs in His kingdom (we’ve gone from slaves to heirs!). Our promised land is to live in the presence of God forever in what the Bible calls the “heavenly country” (Hebrews 11).

If you’re listening to this, and you haven’t taken Jesus up on His offer—His invitation to be redeemed from slavery—then you are still in bondage to your sin and to the forces of this world, but you don’t have to be, because this invitation is for you.

Jesus’ invitation is this beautiful, open invitation for everyone. But what we see in this passage is that it can be difficult to accept that invitation. Just before this, Jesus is talking about John the Baptist, and he says,

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’” (Matthew 11:18-19)

Their hearts were hard, and they were ready to reject whatever they saw. It takes humility to turn to Jesus and accept what He offers. But just like what God was offering to the Israelites in freeing them from captivity in Egypt, the offer that Jesus makes to us is really good, and leads to good things, like rest for our souls.

Speaking of the Israelites...

Once God rescued them from Egypt, He brought them to Mt. Sinai. After two years of instructing the people through Moses at the foot of Mt. Sinai, God says, “It’s time to enter the promised land.” So, they go up to Kadesh-Barnea, and they send out 12 spies to go on a 40-day journey up and down the entire land of Canaan to see what it’s like.

The 12 spies come back and they say the land is great—it’s everything God promised it would be—a land *flowing with milk and honey*, *and look at the size of these grapes! *But...there’s a problem (10 of the spies said)...the people of the land are really powerful. There’s no way we can overtake them. We’re like insects in their sight.

But two of the spies—Caleb and Joshua—said, “*Don’t be afraid, God promised us this land and we will have it—God is with us. He will give us rest in the land.*”

Of course, the people decide not to enter the land, but listen to what they say,

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?”

And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”
(Numbers 14:2-4)

They would rather return to slavery than face the challenges that God said they would overcome. God is promising them rest in the land, but they’d rather go back to the yoke of slavery.

Jesus’ invitation here is first and foremost an invitation to those who have not yet come to Him—that they might enter into His rest and might be relieved from the burdens of being in bondage to the powers of this world. But this is just the beginning of what He’s saying. Because to enter into that yoke of Jesus is to take on the life of following Jesus and learning to have rest in the soul.

Here’s the problem when you and I read these words, though. If you have already accepted Jesus’ invitation to be His disciple, to take His yoke upon you, **can you always say that you have rest in your soul?**

How many of you are feeling weary and burdened right now? I know at least some in the room probably are.

This week.

- I felt pretty weary this week
- I felt heavily burdened
- Frankly, that’s how a lot of my weeks feel
- But this week in particular was kind of a perfect storm of things coming together
- The whole time, in the back of my mind, I’m thinking about this sermon and Jesus’ easy yoke and the rest that He offers

Now, I could look at this week (or any other week), and think to myself, “*Jesus, you said I would have an easy yoke and a light burden if I followed you. Why then do I feel weary and burdened?*”

I think the answer is that I have a tendency to want to go back to Egypt. I stand at the entry to the promised land, Jesus says, “*Enter into my rest,*” and I look back at Egypt, and, like the Israelites, I say, “*Wouldn’t it be better for me to go back to Egypt?*”

Paul wrote to the Galatian church, “*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*” (Galatians 5:1)

Obviously, I don’t really say that. But that is the way that I live sometimes. I look back at this week, and I think, *these were all good things that I was doing, but are they the things that Jesus was asking me to do? Or did I approach them in the way that Jesus would approach them.*

What does it look like to go back to the yoke of slavery in the context of Jesus’ invitation of rest for the soul? I think it can look like:

- **Working to be loved by God**
 - o What Paul is talking about in Galatians
 - o God isn’t going to stop liking me if I don’t change or don’t do enough for Him

- **Working to be loved by others**
 - o More interested in pleasing others than following Jesus
 - o Finding our identity in others' approval
 - o When I have to please them in order to be happy about myself
- **Being the savior or provider for all**
 - o Thinking I have to be the one to fix everything
 - o Not liking to be dependent on others (independence)
- **Making things happen for God**
 - o I'm not seeing Him act, so I'll need to do it for Him
 - o The story of Hagar—Abram & Sara's solution to God's delay in giving them children
- **Proving your worth**
 - o Trying to prove to yourself or others what you're worth
 - o Ego and pride
 - o That's the opposite of Jesus being gentle and humble
- **Compensating for wounds**
 - o Hurts in your life that create a hole
 - o Filling that hole w/ something other than God

Now, we all face things that are difficult and also out of our control; that are burdens for us. But also, **so often, the burdens that we carry we put on ourselves.** We take back the heavy burden of slavery, because even though Jesus' yoke is easy, it's not always easy for us to trust in it or to know how to wear it. It's actually hard for us to rest, because the need to try to make our own way in the midst of our brokenness and our shame is overwhelming.

This is another lesson for us: **Evaluate your motives.** When you're feeling heavily burdened by life (and I'm not talking about circumstances out of your control), in what ways do your motives contribute to the burden? Are you trying to manage God? Are you trying to please people too much? Are you trying to control circumstances too much?

So, how do we experience more of this rest of the soul?

First, let me clarify something. Busyness is not necessarily slavery. I like to be busy. I want to redeem the time that's been given to me. I like to do things, and I don't particularly like to sit around and do nothing. But it's the mindset and the heart toward the busyness that is the problem. It's the motivation of it that's the problem. It's striving after the wrong things. The rest that Jesus is offering isn't a ceasing of doing things (*much to my wife's chagrin), but it's something that's happening internally to us in the midst of our circumstances.

*So don't picture rest as margaritas on the beach, but picture rest as serene Yoda in the midst of an intergalactic battle.

At the same time, God created you to have rhythms of rest. We have to build those rhythms into our lives, into our routines. And the rhythms of rest that we're created for are God-centered rests. In other words, vegging out in front of the TV is not actually restful for your soul. I'm not opposed to it. I do it sometimes. But it's not restful in the ways that we primarily need rest.



When the Israelites were at Mt. Sinai, one of the commands they received from God was to observe the Sabbath.

Second, Jesus didn't say that life would be easy. In fact, He said elsewhere, "*In this world, you will have trouble.*" Jesus had some hard things to say—just read the Sermon on the Mount a little earlier in Matthew to get a taste of that. Following Jesus does not equate to an easy life or easy circumstances, but the yoke of Jesus is easy in the sense that it's a better fit for us than the yoke of this world. And, regardless of our circumstances, it's possible to experience rest in our souls.

In fact, it's often these difficult circumstances that are a wearisome burden to us that cause us to turn to Jesus—because that's when we need Him most. Rest in the soul comes when we lay down our own striving and insecurities and instead:

- **Know our identity in Jesus**
 - o We don't have to work for God to love us and we don't have to prove our value others
 - o The more we understand who we are in Christ, the less we strive for others' approval
 - o And the more we know that we are already accepted by God through Christ, the less we try to manage our relationship with God
- **Trust that Jesus is for our good**
 - o The Israelites struggled to trust God in the face of adversity
 - o Jesus said that in this world you will face trouble, but to take heart
 - o We don't need to strive and struggle to make everything happen
 - o Dallas Willard says abandon outcomes to God—we don't need to make our own way
- **Know the presence of Jesus**
 - o The promised land was a place of rest for the Israelites, but God's presence was even more so
 - o At Mt. Sinai, the Israelites made a calf to be their god, so God said He wouldn't go with them to the land
 - o When Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the Israelites, God said, "*My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.*" (Exodus 33:14)

Basically, the more we are secure in who Jesus is and who we are in relation to Him, and the more we can trust Him with the outcomes of what we do, the less we are constantly trying to make a way for ourselves, or perform around others, or fill some void in our lives with something other than Jesus. All of that is scrambling in our lives, and the scrambling is the wearisome burden.

When we take on the yoke of Jesus and learn from Him, He shows us how He would bear our load, and in that place of trust is where we find rest for our souls—A daily rest regardless of our circumstances or busyness.

Psalm 127 is one of my favorites, and I love to quote it to people because I think its message is so important. The first half of it goes like this:

*Unless the LORD builds a house,
the work of the builders is wasted.
Unless the LORD protects a city,
guarding it with sentries will do no good.
It is useless for you to work so hard
from early morning until late at night,
anxiously working for food to eat;
for God gives rest to his loved ones.* (Psalm 127:1-2, NLT)

Are you scrambling to make things happen? Jesus says, "*Come to me, learn from me, take my yoke; I will give you rest for your souls.*" I will free you from the burden of having to have it all together, or accomplish all the things, or thinking you have to produce all the outcomes.