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Christ's Yoke Easy.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church Sabbath morning Fredericton, July 29th.

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."—MAT. XI. 29, 30.

A yoke is a well-known and useful piece of ox-harness. It is from two and a half to three feet long, and is sometimes made straight, and sometimes crooked. Some ox-teamsters fasten the yoke on the forehead of the animals by means of leather straps around the horns, but by far the oldest and commonest method of yoking oxen has always been on the neck by means of wooden bows.

The ox is a patient tractable beast of burden, easily kept and trained, and capable of much endurance, and in almost all countries, and especially in their early settlement, his usefulness is highly appreciated. In New Brunswick thirty or forty years ago the ox was more to the country, and better known, than he is to-day; and indeed for the clearing up of new land, or the breaking up of stump land, a yoke of strong oxen is about as good a team as a settler can have. But in most parts of the country, and especially in the older settled districts, the horse has superseded the ox, the ox being considered too slow for general use. Then in Europe oxen have long since ceased to be used as working animals. In Palestine, in our Lord's day, they were, and still are, much used. In India and Africa they have splendid oxen, magnificent long-limbed, great horned, stately creatures, and they trot off like horses, and are very generally used for driving purposes.

Now, our Lord introduces the familiar figure of the yoke here to give us to know what the system of religion is that He had come to set up in the world. The people He was addressing knew all about oxen, far more about them than we know, and the homely illustration was to them full of beauty and force, and it helped them to take in the spiritual truths He was inculcating.

First of all, then, we see here that the christian religion is intensely practical. It is not so much a creed, a system of ethics, a set form of doctrines to be believed and professed, as it is a service to be done, a life to be lived. It is taking upon us His yoke. It is yoking ourselves along with Him to the world's work and working it out, and to its burden of sin and sorrow and helping to bear it away. It is working too as He works, bearing as He bears, with meek submission, cheerful patience, simple trust. It is learning of Him, copying His example, following in His footsteps, drinking of His spirit. Tell me not, my hearer, what you hold to as a creed, how orthodox you are, what you know and believe, and so on; but tell me rather what you are doing for the world's good and your own, what the life is you are living, and to what extent your faith is an active principle, a living force. Hear the Master's words: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart."

A yoke is for two, and the two here are the master and disciple, Christ and the christian. Christ bows his head, stoops from the throne of His glory, and lets the yoke of duty, burden-bearing for others, trial and temptation, suffering and sorrow, work and warfare, be put on His own neck. What meekness and condescension on His part! It was none of His burden—the world's sin and sorrow, none of His burden—the world's trials and temptations; but He makes it His for our sakes, and how it crushes and bruises His patient soul! He takes the heavy end of the yoke on His neck, and then He waits, yoked as it were, to see who will come and yoke himself with Him in the holy service of doing and bearing for the world's good, men's happiness and salvation.

Oxen, as a rule, are wonderfully submissive. They are to be admired in that respect, and our Lord seems to refer here to their submissiveness when He speaks of Himself as "meek and lowly in heart." If with one hand you hold up the yoke, and with the other the bow, and say, "Come along, Buck, and put your neck right here!" chewing his cud, and with slow steps, he will come, and let himself be yoked, making no complaints, offering no opposition,

frequent the billiard-halls and club-rooms, and so many other places where it is not best for them to be.

But this, let us understand, is the abuse and asking no questions as to what he is to do and bear, thus teaching us what we should be.

In the training of oxen, sometimes a reckless intractable three-year-old is yoked along with a strong steady patient ten year-old, an animal that never gets excited nor loses his temper. The unbroken ox behaves as ugly as he can behave. He jumps and kicks. Sometimes he plunges ahead as if he would carry everything before him, but his sober mate refuses to go with him. Then he stops, and holds back, but he has to go. All this is very annoying to his patient yoke-fellow, but he takes it all in good part, and by his meekness and good behavior seems to say: "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." And the lesson is not wholly lost. Very soon the reckless animal comes to find out that it is better to submit to the yoke and be obedient.

And Jesus teaches us by His own patience under the yoke, and by His meekness and gentleness, how to do our work, and bear the burden of trial that is laid upon us. How foolish to be reckless and headstrong, disobedient and rebellious! We are held as if by bit and bridle, and by a hand that there is no breaking away from. We may say, and we do say sometimes, in our stiff-neckedness: "I will submit to no yoke! I will have nothing to do with responsibility! no one will lord it over me!" And like a refractory ox, we may kick, and display our ugly disposition and bad training, and bellow loudly; but we only in this way reveal our ignorance and inexperience. We can no more throw off responsibility than an ox can his yoke. We are no more our own than he is, and the question for us to ask ourselves is, whose yoke shall we have on our neck; Christ's, or the Devil's, for one or other it must be! It is simply with us a choice of masters and a choice of service. And Christ is our true master, for He has bought us to be His, paying a great price for us; and now He comes to us with one end of the yoke on His own neck, comes, not as a master lording it over us, but as a yoke-fellow, a friend and a helper, and He says with a kindness that wins, and ought to win: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

This leads me to speak next, of the character of Christ's yoke. And it is an easy yoke. "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

So many to-day in the choice of a position or profession want to know if it is easy. That to them is one of the strongest recommendations in its favor. Men jump at certain positions. The moment a government office is vacant there are hundreds of applications; it is easy, or supposed to be easy. And you hear people speaking of how it is with a man in a certain position to the effect that he has a soft place. Servant-girls want places where the families are small, and there is little to do. Our young men want clerkships where they will have short hours and an easy time. Some even want to be clergymen, for they have such delightfully easy times, only on duty once or twice a week.

And there is something in this having it easy, I grant, although not as much in it as men think there is, but there is evidently something in it, for our Lord here recommends His yoke to us on the ground that it is easy. "My yoke is easy." We may indeed, and I am afraid we are, making a sad abuse of this ease-seeking business. We want to have it so easy to-day that there is no yoke at all, nothing to do, no responsibility, no work, no burden. We want to have the hours shortened up at both ends of the day until there is not time to do a fair square day's work. Then we insist upon having long holidays besides, not days indeed, but weeks, months. The truth is, in this country we have it too easy for our good or rather perhaps we take it too easy. There is not the rush here that we would like to see, and that there is in some other places, everybody at it, and at it with their might, and so we get into an easy-going loitering sort of way of doing things. If we did not have it so easy it would be better for us, better for our health, better for our prosperity, better for our morals, better for our happiness, better for our city and country. Because we have it so easy and time is plenty on our hands, we learn bad habits, and so go to ruin. It is not hard work, but the want of it rather, that is ruining the youth of our city. If they had it

harder, they would not be so much on the streets; they would not have time to do the easy, not its use, and there is a place for it, Christ teaches us here, and He recommends it to us. He counsels us to choose the easy yoke. There are easy yokes and hard yokes. There are yokes that gall the neck, and that are a load to carry, they are so heavy; and then there are yokes that it is almost a pleasure to wear and work with, so nicely do they fit, and so easy are they. Now, how foolish to take the hard heavy yoke, when there is an easy one to be had that is in every respect so much better. You know better than I can tell you that there is an easy and a hard way of doing everything, and some people will go on in the old hard slow way of work. They do not believe in improving on the old methods. The modern mowing-machine, for instance, is a very great improvement upon the laborious scythe in the hay-field; still, there are farmers who do not believe in it, and so they keep on from year to year in the old way, swinging and whetting their old black-snake scythe, and letting the world of progress push on past them, leaving them far in the rear. And so also in other things, and in religion as much as in anything else.

When our Lord came, He found the old heathen and Jewish methods of worship everywhere, the old idolatries and superstitions and religions of a thousand years before. He found altars swimming with sacrificial blood. He found a sensuous worship, a cumbersome ritual, burdensome requirements, a growing mountain of prohibitions and restrictions, thou-shalt-nots and thusthuses. In a word, He found that the religious life of the people had come to be a most cruel kind of oppression, an iron yoke that was too heavy to bear. So He introduced a blessed radical reform, a reform in harmony with the progressive spirit of the age. He did away with altars and sacrifices. He simplified religion. He glorified faith in the place of works. It had been do and not do, do and not do, and there was no end to it, and worse still, no good of it; but with Him it was simply, "believe, and thou shalt be saved." Thus His yoke was a great improvement on the old iron yoke of duty and sacrifice.

Let us not, however, fall into the mistake here that some fall into. "Easy!" you say. "I do not find it easy to be a christian. My experience of the christian religion is that it is hard, and so far as my observation goes, that is the general experience."

Now, you will observe here, it is an easy yoke our Lord promises; but there are those who have the idea that they should have the easy without the yoke. But there is no such easy. This is an age of improvements and progress, and wonderful indeed are the improvements and progress in every direction that are being made; but improve, and improve, and improve, as much as men like, and there is ever room for improvement no matter how much they improve, they are never going to improve away the necessity for work. You have your mowing-machines, your reapers, your threshing-machines, your steam-ploughs, and you are going to have more and more of these things as the world progresses; but you have to work all the same, and you have to work hard too. There is no getting past that.

So also in religion. The gospel is a great advance upon Judaism and all the multitudinous isms of the world, and as we come to know it better, we will find it to be still more and more of an advance. But there is a yoke here as well as in Judaism and the other isms. Christ's yoke is easy, however, compared with theirs. It does not crush, and weary and weaken; it rather strengthens and rests. It does not degrade; it dignifies. It does not enslave; it ennobles service, crowns work, gives men to feel and know how blessed it is to bear the yoke. The reason for this is, that the Christ of God is with us under the yoke, bearing with us, and inspiring us with His enthusiasm, and teaching us the joy and reward of consecrated work. It is indeed no play-life this we are living, or trying to live; no having a gay good time of it with nothing to do. Ah no! far otherwise. It is work, work. It is the neck under the yoke of duty, responsibility, trial, christian service, through the long weary years, and so real and exacting is the yoke found to be, that often the hard-worked christian longs for the day of yoke-bearing for him to be done. Still, he is glad of the yoke. Even though he might, he would not cast it off. Duty is sweet. Service for Christ is full of joy, sometimes a holy rapture, so that he is able to sing as he toils, yea, as he suffers. Blessed yoke! who would not take it upon him,

and be found yoked with Christ in the hard glad service of working out the world's good?

And now, in the third place, and briefly, let me urge some reasons why we should take Christ's yoke upon us.

And we should take it upon us because He asks us to do it. Who is He who asks us to do this? Has He any authority, any right, to make this request of us, to lay this duty upon us, to put a yoke on our neck? And we will find He has, for we belong to Him.

If you have raised a yoke of oxen, bought them with your money, cared for them when they were only an expense to you, trained them, and done all for them that has ever been done of good, you feel you have a right to say to them: "Take my yoke upon you." And they do it; they are not unwilling.

Now, if being bought with a price, if owing all we are to what He has done for us, if love and care for us on His part through the years, give the Lord any claims upon us; then indeed He has every right to say to us: "Take my yoke upon you." And we should be quick to acknowledge His claims to our service, and glad to have the privilege to do so.

Again, we should take His yoke upon us, accept His service, because it is a reasonable request He makes of us, and a service we can do and ought to do. He does not ask us to do something too hard for us to do, something far beyond our strength, a service that is too exacting. No. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

I know you think His yoke is not easy. When you are asked to do the duties of a christian, to accept the responsibilities of a church-member, to take hold with us and with Him in this work of good-doing; you say, "I cannot do it, I will be sure to fail. In other words, you make out that you know better than He does what you can do and cannot do. Ah! how different the spirit of the apostle and a true child of God. He says: "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me."

If indeed we take His yoke upon us and try to bear it in our own strength, we will find it too heavy and we will fail. But that is not the way we are to take the yoke. We are to yoke ourselves with Him, and thus yoked, nothing that there is for us to do can be too heavy, for He is with us. It is His strength that makes it possible for us to take the yoke and bear it, and not only bear it, but find it easy. The burdens of life are not heavy when He is with us and we are with Him. The christian service is not heavy when He is yoked with us in it, and His enthusiasm inspires us. Even the great trials are not too heavy when He is close to us. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me: Thy rod and staff they comfort me."

And again, we should take the yokes because of its rest and reward. There is rest for the soul here—rest even now, and the everlasting rest of Heaven by and by. How sweet to work with Christ and for Christ! No Master knows so well how much to lay upon us, and He never overloads us, nor ill-treats us. And there is great reward in His service. Not always indeed in the shape of gold and silver and worldly possessions, but in spiritual comfort, in the joy of hope, in the sweet consciousness that we are doing good, in the blessedness of a right service. Let us not spare ourselves then; let us be alive and active in the work. It is the weary dragging along that kills usefulness, and degrades work. Go into it with your might, and you will enjoy it. He says: "I delight to do thy will, O my God." It is more than meat and drink to Him to work. And so, catching fire from His zeal, and stimulated by His examples and enthusiasm, let us do our work, His work, as He does it, and we will know the joy of it, and the reward of it, and the rest in it.

Thus we may find here, my hearer, the blessedness of salvation. Let His words come to us as from His lips, and let us do just as He asks, and we will know what it is to be His, and saved. "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

AMEN.

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