

Introduction

- In many churches being on fire for God has led to some Christians being burnt out for God:
 - we've sometimes placed heavy burdens upon those who are enthusiastic to serve
 - or even just on those who can't think of a reason to say "no" quickly enough!
- The words of Jesus in this passage act as a cooling balm:
 - *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (11:28,30)
- Wonderful words - refreshing words:
 - **but what do they mean?**
- And what sense can we make of them when set alongside another of Jesus' statements to his disciples:
 - *"Those who would come after me, must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* (Mark 8:34)?
 - the cross was a horrific symbol of pain, torture and death
 - to take up a cross was neither easy nor light.
- Was Jesus contradicting himself?
 - **which did he mean:** take up cross, or take up an easy yoke, a light burden?

Digging into the text

- The yoke was a commonplace farming item that all rural people could immediately identify with.
 - it was **'a shaped piece of wood placed across the necks of draught animals such as oxen or donkeys to enable a pair to pull a plough, cart or heavy load together'** (The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary)
 - the yoke was used to **guide and lead** the animals in a **certain direction**
 - the image that would have sprung to every mind as Jesus spoke of yokes and burdens would have been of **two** animals straining every sinew as they pulled along a heavy load
- The other thought that would have sprung at once to many minds was the **demands of the Law**.
 - for Jesus' listeners would have been used to hearing of the yoke as an analogy for the Rabbinical law
 - *(eg Lamentations 3:27, "It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young")*
- Thus, **Jesus' listeners would have been struck by two things:**
 - Jesus spoke of a **light and easy yoke**.
 - he **applied the analogy to himself** and not the Pharisaic law, thus directly challenging the latter
- Jesus was implying that the yoke of the Pharisees was heavy and burdensome
 - an idea few ordinary Jews would have disagreed with but which none would have dared utter
 - the **hundreds of regulations** which had to be observed proved a great **drain** on people's energy
 - every daily action had to be done with the tiniest care to avoid breaking a rule
 - no wonder Jesus spoke to those **'who are weary and burdened'**!
- This was **not** a **one line throwaway sound bite** offered by Jesus to win over the crowds
 - he returned to the theme of breaking away from the burdens of the Pharisaic law **time and time again**
 - one of his greatest criticisms of the Pharisees was that **"they tie up heavy loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them"** (Matthew 23:4)

- The early church, too, saw the importance of breaking away from the **legalism** of the Pharisees
 - at the Council of Jerusalem, when some believers wanted all Gentile believers to be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses, Peter replied vehemently: "Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:10-11)
- The context of Jesus' words is clearly therefore one of **being set free** from the **regulations and legalism** of the Pharisees to **live a much freer life under his guidance**.

Jesus' application

- Matthew shows how Jesus applied this teaching in practice over the next few verses (Matthew 12:1-14):
 - few areas of daily life were more tightly regulated than that of observing the Sabbath
 - the Sabbath, initially instituted for people's refreshment, had become a major burden for people
 - Jesus, therefore, freely breaks the excessive Pharisaic regulations, while fulfilling the spirit of the original purpose of the Sabbath - **refreshment and service**
 - he allows his disciples to pick and eat corn, and he heals a man with a withered hand
- The point is that **Jesus set us free to serve and do good**
 - Jesus' words on the easy yoke and the heavy cross do not therefore contradict
 - in being set free from excessive religious duty, Jesus' listeners were being set free to love and serve...
 - *the most graphic illustration of that being the self-sacrifice of the cross*

The challenge

- Involvement in our communities is costly
 - it will place demands on our time, our money, our personal space, our energy
 - it may cause us to spend our time with people and in places beyond our normal comfort zones.
- The challenge is twofold:
 - on the one hand, to remind ourselves that we are loved, accepted and saved through God's grace, not through fulfilling myriad regulations and rules - **burning out for God does not earn us our salvation!**
 - but on the other hand, a true response to God's grace is one of **self-sacrificial service**; we cannot hide behind a 'my yoke is easy' text, because Jesus' own response to his words was to go out and challenge unjust religious structures and heal the sick!

Questions for personal reflection

- What areas of my life have become burdensome in my attempt to win God's or other people's acceptance and approval of me?
- In what areas of my life should I be prepared to pay a greater cost in God's service?
- What changes can I make in my life in response to what I've learned?