



Easy Yoke, Light Burden
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (July 9, 2023)

Pride and arrogance can be a real problem which can set people up for tragic consequences.

A priest, a preacher, and a Rabbi walked into their favorite bar, where they would get together two or three times a week for drinks and to compare notes.

On this particular afternoon, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear.

One thing led to another, and they all took to the challenge and decided to do an experiment. They would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

Seven days later, they're all together to discuss the experience.

The priest, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, and has various bandages, goes first.

"Well," he says, "I went into the woods to find me a bear. And when I found him, I began to read to him from the Catechism. The bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So, I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled it on him and baptized him. You won't believe it, but he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation."

The minister spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he claimed, "WELL brothers, you KNOW that we don't sprinkle! I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read to my bear from God's HOLY

WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So, I took HOLD of him, and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we came to a creek. So, I quickly DUNKED him and BAPTIZED his hairy soul. And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus."

They both looked down at the rabbi, who had been rolled in on a hospital bed, was in a body cast, had both his legs in tractions and a portable IV stand next to him. He was in bad shape.

The rabbi looks up at them and confesses, "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start."

C.S. Lewis called pride "the great sin."

According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind... it is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.¹

Pride might be the worst of sins according to C.S. Lewis, but I think everything, ultimately, goes back to living in fear. It is fear that makes us do all sorts of foolishness.

In today's gospel, Jesus celebrates the power of humility as he thanks his Father that his message has come home to the humble. We can imagine Jesus almost dancing with joy as simple people listen to him and get it. Not everybody has accepted Jesus' message, though, no matter how he has delivered it.

Jesus sounds disappointed with people who have refused the message whether it came with a joyful invitation (his) or through a dire warning (John's). We say, "Different strokes for different folks," but diversity of venue doesn't necessarily translate into acceptance of the message.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 109, 111.

There is a necessity for the soil to be made ready to receive the seed for any new life to sprout.

Sometimes, the message is readily mocked, ignored, and rejected. One has to wonder as to the lack of trust and the amount of hurt in one's heart that solicit such a response. Who knows what has hardened a heart to the point of resisting the invitation to get closer to God? What's prompted defensiveness and judgment from those who had accused John of being demon-possessed and Jesus of being an over-indulgent associate of sinners?

One wonders what brings on disillusionment with God. Is it, perhaps, a certain understanding of God that expects God to always intervene in one's favor, to rescue one in challenging situations, to change difficult people, to smite one's enemy, to improve one's health, wealth, and social status? Or is it the deep disappointment of seeing evil prosper and innocent people suffer, a sense of powerlessness, and an indictment of God's compassion? Is God truly All-Powerful, All-Present, and All-Knowing when injustice goes unchecked? What causes one to lose faith or never try it in the first place? What difference does God make in a believer's heart?

Paul is discouraged as he confesses to fellow Christians in Rome. He knows what's the right thing to do yet he feels enslaved to bad habits and sin, giving in to worldly things.

There are reasons, both internal and external, to get discouraged. Often, what we get from a certain Christian line of thought, including our Lutheran Tradition, is an affirmation of us being borne into sin and an extreme negative self-assessment. Paul, in fact, says, "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh." in Romans 7:18.

Perhaps, this is an attempt at saying we cannot save ourselves and need divine intervention, that which we call "grace." And this is true: we cannot pull ourselves up by the bootstrap. We need a divine intervention.

Paul understood that. Thus, even as he considered the discouraging drama of the ongoing internal conflict and how sin is always ready to

sabotage our best intentions, he trusted and blessed God for the mercy and closeness of God through Jesus Christ, for the power of the Word dwelling in us, and the freshness of new life in the Spirit.

Awareness of one's fragility and vulnerability opens one to the suffering of others: it puts one in solidarity with the rest of humanity, not above them. This realization enlightens the mind and expands the heart.

In fact, to those tired listeners who receive his message, Jesus offers the consolation that his yoke is not really a burden but will actually give them rest. What a strange idea: The yoke as a means to rest! Hearers of this biblical passage would have known a yoke to be a means of using the energy of oxen as heavy lifters in the enterprise of farming.

Using allegorical speech, Jesus instructs us that the call is to surrender and submit. Picking up the yoke, that is, receiving and embracing his message, a burden we don't want to refuse, will make us free and light and beaming with joy. At times, it's true, the message is hard, and we may experience all sorts of rejection, ridicule, and persecution. Yet, nothing compares with the joy of knowing the Lord and be found in him:

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So, Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69)

But why would just some be open to the Word and not others? Jesus explains the privilege of "little ones," those who are the antithesis of the "wise and learned."

The wise ones he's talking about are too proud and full of themselves. They don't bother with what Jesus has to offer. In fact, doing that, they reason, would be puny and rather ridiculous. In their mind, "Non-violent ways lead to nowhere." "Might is right," they would insist. Strength-and-toughness-is-the-only-way-one-can-stay-afloat-in-this-world is their philosophy. "Conquer or be conquered," they warn.

Those who know it all, the sophisticated, know better than falling for Jesus' offer. Solidarity, empathy, humility, acceptance, trust, gentleness, hospitality, cooperation...those are weaknesses they are not willing to explore even, as they insist, they are God-fearing people and Christians. Jesus' message, in their mind, is hopelessly naïve, unobtainable.

The little ones? They're different. Their strength lies in the fact that they don't think they know it all. They're open to the free gift of God's love, never expecting to deserve it. The more they discover, the humbler they become and thus even more open to God. This cycle of continual growth in humility creates greatness of soul, true magnanimity.

Not only that, but the humbler people are, the freer they become. The freer they are, the less impressed they will be by the self-acclaimed sophisticated ones. They can laugh at parodies of power and importance and pity those who rely on them. Paul would recognize them as spiritual people; people whose humility and confidence, whose courage and strength, all spring from the energy of God's Spirit dwelling in them.

Grace touches us from within. It takes great inner freedom to be a follower of Jesus. His life is an option, a choice, a call, a vocation for us, and we are totally free to say "Yes" or "No" or "Maybe." We do not have to do this to make God love us. That is already taken care of. We do it to love God back and to love what God loves and how God loves! We either are baptized "into his death" and "resurrection" (Romans 6:3; Philippians 3:10–12), or Christianity is largely a mere belonging system, not a transformational system that will change the world.

This brings us to Jesus' invitation, "Come unto me all who are burdened ... my yoke is easy." Imagine the freedom of never feeling you had to impress others or demonstrate your worth! (No more being "debtors to the flesh." To refer to Paul in Romans 7:7-25) Imagine what it would feel like to have genuine sympathy for the "wise and learned," who rely on themselves, compelled to make a show of their prestige. Imagine laying down all those heavy burdens!

Blessed be God who has burdened us with the Word of Justice and
Consolation. Blessed be God for the yoke of Mercy and Compassion.
blessed be God forever. Amen.