

“He descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth” (D&C 88:6)

Christ came to save us from our sins. He came to show us by word and deed how we might live lives of joy and happiness, despite the afflictions we all experience, so that we might taste the bitter and know to prize the sweet. His invitation is simple yet profound.

“Come unto me....Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me....For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Let us turn to him and learn from him how he has exemplified this invitation. Our approach will be two-fold: first we will seek to understand the meaning of the invitation and second we will review several New Testament stories that demonstrate the yoke of Christ.

Come Unto Me

At the heart of Christ’s saving work is his invitation to come to him, to be embraced in his loving arms and to be healed of all our sins. But notice that we are the one who are to move, we are the ones who are to act. Christ cannot save us if we are not willing. Christ cannot save us if we do not come unto him. I will illustrate this by looking at this phrase from a different perspective (a different language).

On my mission I eventually learned Spanish. Only after many mistakes and the kind help of others was I able to properly express myself in the Spanish language. For example, as missionaries it was a common for us to invite people to church. In the English language we simply say, “Come to church.” So making a straight translation into Spanish I would say, “venga a la iglesia” (“come to the church”). Usually people gave me a funny look but in their considerate way nodded, which I interpreted as indicating that they were agreeing to go to church. In reality they were probably thinking, “Ah, you are one of those silly gringos that doesn’t know how to really speak Spanish!” What I soon discovered was a grammatical mistake in my speaking. In Spanish you cannot invite someone to come to a certain location *unless you are already there*. For example, if I am at my friend’s home I can tell my friend to “go to church” but I cannot say “come to church” because I am not *at* the church. However, if I was *at* the church and called my friend at his home I could rightly say, “Come to church,” because I am already there.

How does this apply to Christ’s invitation “Come to me”? *Christ is already there!* He is where *we* want to be. He is already in the place *he* wants us to be. He is at the center. He is the focus and he is the place. It is as though we are out in the dark and dreary wilderness and he is in the celestial room of the temple calling us to come to him. And if we are willing we can turn our hearts, our minds and our souls to him. We can move to where he is, with his loving guidance and strength.

Take My Yoke Upon You

Let us delve into the Greek of the New Testament and the ancient Mediterranean world to better understand this phrase. The word “yoke” comes from the Greek word *zugos*, and it is used in a variety of contexts. It can refer to balances or scales, such as those used by merchants or those which symbolize justice (a relevant reference is Revelation 6:5). In the context that we have here in Matthew 11:29 it can refer to a heavy crossbeam, which is a metaphor for being bound in slavery to a heavy load. *Zugos* is also quite common throughout the Greek Old Testament. What is the Greek Old Testament? Let us pause for a moment to review some Ancient History.

Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East around 332 BC and with that conquering came an infusion of Greek culture and language into the Middle East. After a generation or two there were many Jews who only spoke Greek as their native tongue. Having the necessity to still read their sacred scriptures, a translation from the Hebrew into Greek was required. ((The situation of Greek cultured Jews is comparable to that of most Bible readers today. Those of us who do not know the original languages of the Bible (such as Hebrew) rely gratefully

on good translations into our native tongue, such as the King James Version for English speakers.)) Around 275 BC the resulting Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament was completed and called the Septuagint (The Greek Old Testament). Quite often in writing the Septuagint is abbreviated as LXX, the Roman numerals for 70, because according to tradition 70 Jewish elders translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in just 70 days.

So why mention the Septuagint? Well, we find the word *zugos* in many passages of the Septuagint, which can offer us interesting insights. For example, *zugos* is often used in the Septuagint to refer to the tyrannical and oppressive rule of foreign powers over Israel. Similarly, God speaks of breaking oppressive yokes and delivering his people (see Leviticus 26:13; Isaiah 9:3; 10:27; 11:13; 14:5, 25). ((Remember that these references are based on the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) translation. The English translations, such as the King James Version, may not necessarily have the exact English word “yoke” but other words that are related to “yoke.”))

On the other hand, *zugos* is also used in the Septuagint to refer to the “yoke of God” or in other words to covenant fidelity to God’s commandments and his everlasting grace. But as we have witnessed all too often, the natural man desires to be “free” of all constraints and all yokes. Thus even the yoke of God, which is to be easy and light, is rejected (see Jeremiah 2:20; 5:5). ((*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translator and editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 896-901.))

Christ’s Yoke

During the life of Christ there were many different sects of Judaism, much like today there are many sects (or denominations) of Christianity. One sect of Judaism during Christ’s day was Pharisaic Judaism. ((Christianity in its original context was another sect of Judaism.)) The Pharisees were zealous for upholding both the written and oral Law of Moses. We have today the written Law of Moses recorded in the first Five Books of Moses of the Bible. The oral law was those practices, beliefs and traditions that some Jews handed down over many generations via word of mouth and attributed to Moses. In reality, most of these beliefs and observations were interpretative predilections which served as normative guide posts for certain groups of practicing Jews, particularly those who adhered to Pharisaic Judaism. The Sadducees (another sect of Judaism) had many warm disputes with the Pharisees over these oral law traditions as did Jesus. So it is clear from the New Testament record that not all Jews believed that the oral law was revealed from God.

Many of these oral law traditions were unnecessary and burdensome. In some instances such oral law traditions precluded doing that which is good, which is ultimately the law of God. So in Christ’s time, many of the Jewish people were burdened with an oppressive yoke of servitude to so-called laws and ordinances which did not come from God but were being taught as though they did come from God. In reality, the laws and covenants of God, though a yoke they are, will lighten us from servitude to the things of this world, to sin and to the natural man. Thus, Christ invites all of us to drop the yoke of false traditions and beliefs and instead bind ourselves to him in covenant and wear the yoke of his discipleship, which leads to life and salvation. Nephi of old understood this mighty principle when he exclaimed:

And now, my beloved brethren, seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off. (2 Nephi 10:20)

Learn of Me

The underlying Greek word for “learn” is *manthano*, which can mean several things: (1) learning through instruction, (2) learning through inquiry, and (3) learning through practice. ((mothy & Barbara Friberg, *Friberg Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (2000), *manthano*.) Christ does indeed teach us through instruction and if we are desirous we can learn marvelous truths through inquiry:

And if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous; therefore thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth. (D&C 6:11)

One of the most important ways for us to learn is by practice. This life is the time for us to prepare to return to God's presence. Everyday we have numerous opportunities to prepare by practicing the gospel principles. If we err, the atonement of Christ can save us, if we repent.

My Yoke Is Easy and My Burden Is Light

We studied above the significance of the word "yoke." Let us now explore these parallel statements:

My yoke is easy
My burden is light

Christ tells us that his yoke is *easy*. Great significance and meaning is packed into the Greek word for "easy", which is *chrestos*. ((Do not confuse this word with a similar sounding Greek word *christos*, which means "anointed.")) This word is used to refer to something that has a good or excellent purpose, pleasant requirements or it is used comparatively for something that is better or superior to something else, such as the Law of God (the yoke of Christ) as superior (more excellent and pleasant) than the law of Pharisaic Judaism (law of oral tradition). ((Friberg, *chrestos*.)

Greek *chrestos* can also refer to loving-kindness and mercy, comparable to the Hebrew word *hesed*. Thus when Christ says that his yoke is easy, he is telling us that it is suitable for excellent and virtuous purposes (i.e. salvation) and that the yoke will bind us to his everlasting kindness and mercy.

The word parallel to "easy" is "light" and this further emphasizes that Christ's commandments, Christ way of living, is easier, less of a burden than false traditions and beliefs and a much lighter burden than the oppressiveness of sin.

Let us now search the scriptures and discover how Christ taught in word and deed that his yoke is easy and his burden light.

Doing Good on the Sabbath Day

Matthew 12:1-13 and Luke 13:10-17 comprise three stories which have one central purpose: to teach that the works of God (good deeds) are lawful on the Sabbath and that the oppressive yoke of false traditions can preclude us from doing righteousness. Thus if we follow the example of Christ and take his yoke upon us we too will do that which is good, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, relieving the sick and afflicted, comforting those who mourn and visiting the lonely, even if it defies social customs or traditions.

Harvesting on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-9)

In this first story the Pharisees complained to the Savior that his disciples had profaned the Sabbath by plucking ears of corn, rubbing them in their hands and eating. We read in the Old Testament that the Law of Moses did make a statement about plucking ears of corn:

When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbour, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbour's standing corn. (Deuteronomy 23:25)

So, the disciples were not in violation of this particular law of Moses. However, according to Pharisaic *interpretation* (i.e. the oral law tradition was simply an interpretative tradition) they were in violation of another law of Moses:

Six days thou shalt work, but on the seventh day thou shalt rest: in earing time and in harvest thou shalt rest. (Exodus 34:21)

The Pharisees interpreted the act of plucking corn, rubbing it in your hands and eating it as harvesting ((See the later Rabbinic tradition which states the view that plucking is reaping, *Mishnah Shabbat* 7:2.)) and thus they accosted Jesus. But in his masterfulness Jesus taught them the oppressiveness of their unnecessary traditions and yokes. He reminded the Pharisees of the example of David who ate the shewbread of the temple when he was hungry. The shewbread was sacred bread dedicated to God and set upon a special table in the holy precincts of the temple. Only consecrated priest were authorized to partake of this bread. But at one point David was deeply hungered and all that was available was the temple shewbread and so he availed himself of it. ((This would be akin to an extremely hungry individual asking for something to eat and all that we had on hand was the left over sacrament bread to offer them. In this situation feeding the hungry, even with the sacred bread of sacrament, is the greater good.))

As if this was not strong enough reasoning, Christ then used the example of the priests performing sacrifices at temple on the Sabbath. They are at work and thus they profane the Sabbath. But theirs is a holy work.

Christ then went further in his reasoning. He testified that he is greater than the temple; he also testified that ultimately mercy is greater than sacrifice. Thus if the temple sacrifices are a greater good than Sabbath observance, and if mercy is greater than sacrifice then it is a greater good to have mercy upon hungry disciples who are with the One who himself is greater than the temple. Ultimately, Christ is the Law and he is the Lord of the Sabbath. No amount of peculiar observances or traditions will bring souls closer to Christ unless they come from the Lord himself.

Healing on the Sabbath: Example 1 (Matthew 12:10-13)

In another brilliant episode, which displays the blindness of refusing to do good works on the Sabbath, Christ entered a synagogue to teach how we might take his yoke upon us by doing that which is good. In the presence of all, Christ healed a man with a lame hand. Then to teach the lesson of the yoke of righteousness, he explained that if it is lawful to deliver a domestic animal trapped on the Sabbath in a pit, then indeed it is lawful to deliver a human soul. Because a human soul is more valuable than that of an animal, it is lawful to extract them from the pit, whether that pit be physical challenges, sin or social oppression, etc.

Healing on the Sabbath: Example 2 (Luke 13:10-17)

In a similar story of healing, Christ entered a certain synagogue one Sabbath and finding there a woman who had been physically suffering for over eighteen years laid hands on her and commanded that the infirmity depart. The laying on of hands is a representation of power and strength conveyed from one individual to another. Christ, the Author of all creation, has the power to heal all things. His are the hands of healing. ((Even the mere touch of the hem of his robe conveyed sufficient power to heal a woman that had a bleeding wound for many years.)) And so here, Christ placed his hands of power upon this woman and she is made straight. What does straight mean? It comes from the Greek word *anortho'o* which means "to restore" "to strengthen" "to rebuild" or simply "to make straight," as we have here in this passage. ((Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft (German Bible Society): Stuttgart, 1993) *anortho'o*.) Christ is the great Restorer who has the power to make our weaknesses strengths and to rebuild with us that which we thought was lost.

The Healing Balm of Forgiveness (Luke 7:31-50)

Lest we misunderstand, we should be careful not to paint Christ in an adversarial relationship with all of the Pharisees. For example, in Luke 7:31-50 Christ dines with a certain Pharisee named Simon. In this context Christ once again shows forth his merciful healing power and exemplifies what it means to carry his yoke.

During this time period, some of the Jewish dining practices were borrowed from the larger Greco-Roman cultural environment, just like many Mormons today tend to follow the dining practices of the nations and communities in which they reside. In that ancient time it was common for individuals to gather reclining around a low lying table; their feet would be extended out away from the table. At this particular meal, a penitent woman entered and washed Christ's feet and anointed them with ointment. ((Ointments were used for various circumstances: (1) cosmetic for festive occasions, (2) funerary, (3) medicinal, or (4) ritual. Smith's Bible Dictionary, "Ointment.")) Such a gift must have been costly, for alabaster (akin to marble) was a highly prized possession and was quite expensive. And the act of washing a guest's feet was one of the greatest acts of hospitality.

Christ rightly rebuked Simon who did not offer such hospitality but rather silently condemned the "sinful" woman who did. Christ then delivered a memorable parable on the power of forgiveness, showing that those who have the greatest need of forgiveness will love the most. We also see in this story the truth that the atonement is real only for those who are real. In other words, only those who recognize their sins, only those who acknowledge their weakness, only those who turn to the Lord can partake of the expiating power of the atonement. Those who seek to hide their sins, those who deny their weaknesses and put forward a false appearance, or those who act as those they have no need for the atonement in the end cannot partake of the atonement. They have denied reality. They have denied the truth and they have failed to be true and real. And thus the atonement cannot be real for them because they have not been real.

Conclusion

Christ invites us to be equally yoked with him. He knows of all of our trials, sufferings and difficulties. He has condescended below all things that he might be in all things and comprehend all things. Because he perfectly comprehends us he can fully share our burdens. Yet Christ did not come to just share our burdens, he came to invite us to put aside our burdens and instead share *his* burden, *his* yoke. When we heed his invitation to come unto him, when we take his yoke upon us, the worldly, sinful burdens that we carry are expurgated and we are bound in everlasting covenants to our Creator. We then carry together with him the "burden" of living the gospel principles, of spreading goodness and righteousness across the earth and find the enlivening joy of purifying peace only offered through the atonement. The atonement is a gracious gift to us when we are bound to God in covenant fidelity. Then the promises of his everlasting kindness and mercy will be fulfilled unto us. Then our burdens truly will be light.