

July 9, 20178

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Pleasant Yoke of a Child”

Matthew 11:25-30

*“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”*

The “these things” Jesus is talking about is the truth that Jesus just told some of John the Baptist’s disciples when they brought the question, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus in back-handed fashion explained that yes, He is the one, because you can see the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, deaf hearing, dead raised and good news preached to the poor. The truth is that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ words are an echo of what God foretold through the prophet Isaiah, *“Behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”*

The wise and smart ones, the Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and Levites, the leaders of the Jews who know Moses and the prophets backwards and forwards, they are rejecting Jesus, and thus are rejecting His reign over them and thus are excluded from the kingdom.

It’s the “little children,” the needy ones who don’t know enough to think they know better than Jesus who simply accept Him—accept Him because they know they are needy—who receive Jesus and thus receive the kingdom.

And this somewhat parallels the very familiar words of Jesus at the end of today’s Gospel reading, *“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

But let me explain a few details. First, if you don’t know what a yoke is, it’s that big harness thing you put on an ox or mule when it’s pulling a cart or a plow in a field. It’s kind of the burden an animal wears to do its work. Second, “easy” is a lousy translation. Sometimes the King James version of the Bible gets things wrong, but it just carries through to all the later translations. Jesus isn’t saying His yoke is easy. He’s saying it’s kind or pleasant or maybe generous, but lose any idea of how we understand the word easy here.

So, *“For my yoke is pleasant, and my burden is light.”* The parallel here is the other yoke that’s implied here—the yoke of the Torah. The Torah—the Law of Moses—is the burden the wise ones of Israel thought they had all figured out. Be Jewish in obedience to God, and you were good with God.

But Jesus had come along speaking the truth to that lie. The Law wasn’t saving anybody! He said, *“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,”* and *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* He was saying the yoke of the Law is an impossible burden.

But the opposition refused to hear. They liked being the wise, smart and righteous ones who had everything figured out. They couldn’t stomach being needy before God. They wanted to be worthy before God...by their own estimation and their own works. So they wouldn’t receive God’s Christ.

The little children Jesus speaks of are these who aren’t wise enough to try and outthink God’s law. They know the simple truth—the law crushes them! That yoke is too heavy. It’s a death sentence. They don’t hold up good works, obedience and righteousness. They have none. They can only humbly beg God’s mercy, and they find it, in God’s Christ. God’s Son.

This yoke of Christ is not easy, but it is pleasant. It is kind. It is generous. Receiving Christ's yoke is to believe, trust in and follow Him. And Christ's death to sin on the cross and resurrection to eternal life is the guarantee of God's promise that this yoke leads to peace and life with God forever.

It's not easy, and God's Word makes that clear. Following Jesus is to face the same opposition from the world that He endured. It is a life of striving to live in the righteousness Christ has given us in our Holy Baptism. It is a life of repentance and turning away from sin and the temptations of the flesh. But it is a life living in reception of all the gifts of God; it is life in the kingdom.

But the yoke of following Christ is being needy, being a child of God seeking the goodness and grace of His mercy. This is really challenging for you and me, because we don't like being needy. In the U.S.A. we're taught to take pride in being self-sufficient. We raise our kids to have pride and high self-esteem. Older parents never want to be a burden to their children. And quite frankly, we just don't care for being lowly and humble.

So we have this tendency to raise ourselves up in our own eyes, and though we may not even notice it, before God we start raising ourselves up to the level of...wise and understanding. We know how things are. We know how good we have to be to be good before God. Sure, there may be some sins going on, but they're not the really bad ones. Sure, God's Word says a lot about purity and holiness, but it's my life and I'm smart enough to figure out how much I can chase after the world and how much I have to follow God.

When we do that all we are doing is bringing the yoke of the law back into play. "How good do I have to be?" is what we're asking. That yoke is unyielding: "Perfect! You must be perfect!" If you are so wise and understanding that you think you can manage perfect and turn it into "good enough," you're not wise. You're a fool. "Good enough" gains you nothing.

No. Be the needy little child who has nothing to lean on save Christ the Lord. Be the kid constantly begging, "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" seeking the good gifts He provides. Be the sinner who is needy, following the Savior who doles our forgiveness abundantly in the Word, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Be the child that knows he or she simply doesn't have the smarts to explain a way out from under the law or devise an ingenious excuse or lie around it, but who is simply convicted by it. And who, caught in sin, simply and truly looks to Jesus and says "I'm sorry. I'll try not to do it again." Be the child upon whom Jesus lovingly smiles and says, "You're forgiven."

Be that child, dwelling under the grace and mercy of Christ, thus being in the kingdom forever.