

of our basic needs for physical, mental, and spiritual rest. I call this “practicing grace.” It is cultivating specific practices in our lives that enable us to touch our relationship with God, with our true selves, and with the world around us as God’s good creation.

Practicing grace, taking on the yoke of Jesus, involves NOT taking on every need and task that comes our way. We want to serve life around us. We want to be generous and giving. So we end up saying yes to every request, every need, everything that calls for our attention. We take on so many things that we become scattered, overwhelmed, and end up so unfocused that we really don’t do much good at all and are inwardly miserable. Taking on the yoke of Christ means saying NO to those things to which we are truly not called. It means growing in our understanding of who we are, our uniqueness, our gifts, and the things we are particularly called to do. As we discover that sense of call in our own lives, and as we stay in touch with it and nurture it through our inward journey, then we not only have more energy for what we are called to do but also live with more clarity and effectiveness. None of us is called to do everything. Each of us is called and gifted to do something that serves the life of the world. Jesus’ yoke is light and easy because it has to do with our true selves and is not something foreign to us, some external weight laid upon our shoulders and our spirits. No longer are we living out of obligation or moralism or legalism. We are living out of God’s love for us and the world.

July 6, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

The Yoke of Christ

Romans 7:15-25a

*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

*“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle
and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

In our reading from the Letter to the Romans, Paul gives us an amazingly honest glimpse into his own soul and his inner turmoil and confusion. He wants to do what is right, but finds himself doing wrong, in spite of his strongest moral effort. He wills to do what he believes God wants, but finds that he cannot simply will himself into right living. Paul uses himself as an example of the failure of religion based on legalism and moralism.

Our own struggles may not be exactly Paul’s struggles in this regard. What attracts me to this passage, however, is that I often find myself right where Paul is. I imagine myself doing all the right things, living the sort of life I value, consistent with all my beliefs about what is important and true. I experience moments when all of that happens. More often I realize what a complex and messed-up human being I am! I want to be forgiving, merciful, understanding, and peaceful. Yet most days it doesn’t take much to arouse my anger, insecurity, fear, judgmentalism, and the like. I want to do the right thing and live the right way, but I share Paul’s experience that this is more than just a matter of the will. There must be a surer foundation for living the kinds of lives we feel God has made and calls us to live.

What can save us from this “body of death,” this inability to live only by laws and morals? “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” That’s where Paul finally ends up. We need to come home to our relationship with God in Christ. Our lives need to be rooted in God’s grace, God’s unconditional love for us. Only then can we then do what is right and loving. Our motivation is no longer self-centered, governed by our fears or the need to prove ourselves or to be “good” people. When we are trying to make ourselves and others

“good,” we set ourselves up for defeat. Life becomes an arduous and constantly disappointing process of measuring ourselves and others. We are always dissatisfied with ourselves and others. Paul points us to Christ as the one through whom we regain our relationship with God who loves us not on the basis of our religious or moral performance, but unconditional love alone. God’s grace.

I think this is what Jesus means when he invites us to take his yoke upon us, a yoke that is easy and light. I think he is expressing great confidence in who we really are and who God is. Jesus does not treat us as hopeless sinners, hating ourselves and believing there is nothing good in us. That’s where I disagree with Paul. It certainly feels sometimes like there is no good in me, but that is when things have built up inside until my view of myself and the world has become completely poisoned. When we go back to grace, to life as gift and ourselves as beloved children of God whom God pronounced good at creation, then we find the rest for our souls Jesus is offering.

I think we need to work more with these words of Jesus. We tend to devote most of our attention to Jesus’ moral teachings, his call to a compassionate, just, and peace-making life. That is important. However, we risk turning Jesus’ teachings also into legalism and moralism. We become discouraged, disheartened, and burned out when we are detached from the inner life where we touch our relationship with God. We who are serious-minded followers of Jesus, working to make life better for others, tend toward self-destructive habits of living. We confuse making our lives a witness to Jesus with wearing ourselves out, exhausting ourselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. We feel guilty taking a day off or a vacation. We talk about the importance of the inward journey, but we neglect times for prayer, resting, reading, touching again our relationship with God. I notice in mission group meetings how often we arrive talking about how busy our lives are and how tired we feel.

There’s something wrong with that. We seem to be attending to only half of what Jesus talked about—what we DO with our lives, what we call the outward journey of the life of faith. Jesus also teaches about prayer, going apart, being at peace, and here, taking upon ourselves his yoke which is light and easy. We need to take just as seriously Jesus’ call to find rest for our souls. The yoke of Christ provides the foundation and wellspring for right living. It brings together the outward and inward dimensions of the life of faith.

Maybe we don’t really trust Jesus on this one! Maybe we are afraid that taking care of ourselves—body, mind, and spirit—means being self-indulgent. In our moral compulsiveness we tend to skip over such teachings as of less value than Jesus’ call to just and compassionate living. The two go together, the inward and the outward. If we are running around all the time, putting great pressure on ourselves to work constantly, filled with worry and anxiousness about the condition of the world, how are we being of help to anyone? We become too tired to pray, too scattered to think clearly, too preoccupied to let our minds become quiet enough to see more deeply into things and gain deeper understanding of ourselves, others, and the situations we face. We become distracted so that we are not really present to others who most need someone they can talk to. Most people don’t want us to solve their problems for them. They need someone with whom they can talk about the things in their lives so that they can better deal with them themselves. Quite often our DOING FOR OTHERS is mostly trying to fix others’ lives, which robs them of their own inner strength and confidence to find their own way. There is an important difference between caring for people and TAKING CARE OF people. Sometimes what people most need is for us to take our hands off of them, to listen to them, to show them our confidence in them by NOT trying to do things for them.

I think Jesus’ words need to be taken quite literally. It is why we have developed a small retreat center here, why we call it a place of refuge. We want to provide a place for those who need refuge and rest for their souls, and their bodies, too. A place for people to touch their true selves and let go of the yokes that oppress—the demands of others, the pressures of life that distort and rob us of joy and the capacity to love, the general craziness of our society with its empty values and illusions. When we come to a place that is beautiful, quiet, and peaceful, where we feel that no one is going to judge us or even expect something from us, we are able to find our true self blossoming once again. With both physical and spiritual rest, we are able to get back in touch with our uniqueness, the gifts we have to offer, and God’s call in our lives.

Coming to Jesus, taking on his light and easy yoke, learning from him who is humble of heart and seeks only our well being—this is very important. It is what the psalms call taking refuge in God. It is not running away from life. It is not escapism. It is finding our true personhood and a wiser, more compassionate path through life. We do this each day when we take time for silence, prayer, reflection, spiritual reading, writing in our journals—our daily inward journey time. We do it when we take a real day off, a day to be mindful

