

WEEK 2



DAY 1 – PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS

Perhaps more than any other, Matthew 11:28 - 30 is instructional concerning how to practice the way of Jesus. This passage is an invitation to live differently.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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.”
– Matthew 11:28 - 30 (NRSV)

Rest. Easy. Light. These words should stir a deep longing in your soul for union with God. In reality, however, these characteristics often elude us in the 21st century. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, sheds light on how we engage Jesus in this way.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”
– Matthew 11:28 - 30 (MSG)

These three verses detail the “easy yoke” of Jesus, which is no less than a way of life. The easy yoke is an invitation to live a particular way; to live and find peace by following Jesus and emulating his lifestyle. The yoke being referenced was an agrarian collar used to bind two animals, often a younger animal with a more experienced, for the purpose of pulling heavy loads such as plows. It may also refer to a yoke designed for use by people, consisting of a wooden cross beam for the purpose of distributing weight across the shoulders. In Matthew chapter 11, Jesus is using the yoke as a metaphor for a lifestyle of discipleship.

In the 1st century, “yoke” was also used to refer to the cumulative teaching of a Rabbi. To take the yoke of your Rabbi or teacher essentially indicated you were taking on their way of life, submitting yourself entirely. Similarly, Jesus extends an invitation to plunge headfirst into his way of life, inviting us to experience lasting, authentic change, peace and rest.



DAY 1 – PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS

At this point, you may be thinking a yoke sounds like an awful burden, and you would rather prefer not to have a wooden cross beam on your shoulders! Jesus wasn't attempting to place a burden on us but was instead contrasting his way of living with not only the imposition of the religious leaders and their burdensome requirements but also the weight of life itself. Jesus was affirming the best gift he could give was an entirely new way of thinking and living that would produce lasting rest both now and at the end of the age.

Jesus isn't offering escapism, but rather a tool with which to navigate life. Frederick Dale Bruner says the yoke of Jesus "...will develop us in a balance and a 'way' of carrying life that will give more rest than the way we have been living."

The words "you will find rest for your souls" are quoted directly from Jeremiah 6:16. The entire verse is steeped in OT language. Jesus is communicating how the ancient paths and the good way of the prophets are fulfilled in him. Jesus is the culmination of history and the only one who can offer real, lasting, imperishable rest.

The reality is that there is an emotional weight to life. Generally speaking, the older you get, the more responsibility you carry. The levity of childhood dissipates as the increasing responsibility of adulthood settles. Children must be provided for, mortgages and rent paid, retirement accounts funded, degrees earned and success in business had. Sometimes discipleship seems like another burden on top of an already burdensome life, but pay close attention to the language Jesus uses. A yoke was almost always used to bind two animals together. Jesus is inviting us to come alongside him and match our pace with his. He is saying he is willing to do the heavy lifting, walking beside us each step of the way.

Adopting the easy yoke isn't an abstract concept; it's practical, involving a re-orientation of how we think and live. When we adopt the easy yoke, which by extension includes the lifestyle of Jesus, we can find genuine rest for our souls. We are to emulate his way of life and come alongside him, not forge ahead on our own, mimic culture, or pave some new path.

BE with Jesus by reading Matthew 11:28 - 30 several times and then rest on this passage. Sit and wait, allowing it to permeate your thinking.

BECOME like Jesus by committing Matthew 11:28 - 30 to memory.

DO what Jesus did by sharing this passage with someone who needs it.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What does it mean for you to be yoked to Jesus? To match his pace?
- If we are taking on the yoke, or cumulative teaching, of Jesus, which components may be currently missing?
- If taking on the yoke of Jesus feels burdensome, why might that be?

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DAY 2 – A NEW WAY OF LIFE

In the Old Testament, the metaphor of yoke was almost always carried a negative connotation, usually referring to social or political oppression (e.g Gen. 27:40; Exod. 6:6 - 7; 1 Kgs. 12:4 - 14, Psalm 2:3). In later Jewish literature, the term came to refer to the demands of and obedience to the Torah (first five books of the bible, or the law). This usage would have been understood positively, with faithful Israelites willingly accepting the “yoke of the Torah.”

The yoke of the religious leaders, however, would have included additional demands outside of the Torah. So, when Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,” he very well could have been developing a double meaning of yoke to refer not only to the difficulties and pressures of life in general but also to the religious leaders and their excessive legal demands and requirements that were nearly impossible to follow (cf. Matthew 23:4; Acts 15:10).

We also tend to forget that humans, as well as animals, could be burdened with a physical yoke. People would bear a wooden crossbeam that sat across the shoulders in order to distribute weight more evenly, but these could obviously be quite fatiguing. Whether the analogy referred exclusively to an animal or human yoke, the point Jesus was making is quite clear: we need an entirely new yoke, a yoke that frees us both from the burdens and anxieties of everyday life and the weight of oppressive religious systems.

Jesus is not only offering to come alongside us but is offering an entirely new yoke or way of doing things. His yoke will not add to our already oppressive burden, but, paradoxically, will do the opposite, bringing refreshment and flourishing. It’s because we serve Jesus, who is a gracious, loving “master” that his burden is light and the yoke he offers can bring not only a reprieve from current burdens but replace those burdens with an entirely different type of lifestyle free from the crushing weight of a life without Jesus. It is under the yoke Jesus places on us, a yoke we willingly accept, that we begin to feel the weight of the world diminish.

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DAY 2 – A NEW WAY OF LIFE

As is the case with anything new, adopting the yoke of Jesus can sometimes take practice. When we switch from one paradigm to another, it often takes considerable effort. Sometimes we fail to see the need to dislodge ourselves from the burdens of life, and, to be honest, the “religious norms” we are accustomed to. The first step is recognizing the need to “bear” the easy yoke of Jesus.

You may also be thinking, “I’m already a Christian and therefore by default get the easy yoke, right?” Yes and no. When we decide to follow Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and enter into a new way of life. However, it’s a common misconception that, after professing faith in Jesus, we become passive recipients. Yes, we are recipients of his grace, but his invitation to live differently requires active participation and effort.

When Jesus invites us to come to him he is simultaneously inviting us to profess him as our Lord, the Messiah, who offers salvation, and, to adopt his way of life. As you progress through this curriculum, consider this invitation to live differently. As mentioned, it may take considerable effort to actualize the necessary reorientation of your thinking in certain areas of life. We all have preconceived ideas that influence our thinking. Whether or not we care to admit, we see even Jesus and our faith through a very particular lens. Unfortunately, it’s often true we are carrying substantial baggage that prevents us from adopting the easy yoke of Jesus. It’s true that, in order to adopt the yoke of Jesus, we first have to shrug off the oppressive yoke previously burdening us. Given, this may mean different things for different people but holds true for nearly everyone.

When Jesus invites us to take his yoke, he is asking us to sit at his feet and learn. He is inviting us into a new way of life. As we step into the easy yoke of Jesus, continually orienting our attention toward him, we can begin to feel the “ease” of his burden. Only Jesus offers rest that takes place at the deepest level of our being. It’s only Jesus who offers rest for our souls. This “conditional” rest is not cheap. In fact, Jesus asks for everything, including the abandonment of all else in favor of his way of life; his way of doing things. It’s in this place of apprenticeship and submission we find the imperishable blessing and rest Jesus offers.

BE with Jesus by taking 10 min. to consider the invitation of the easy yoke.

BECOME like Jesus by committing to adopt the easy yoke.

DO what Jesus did by prioritizing God in a tangible way.



DAILY RESPONSE

- In what ways has your faith been passive? In what ways has it been active?
- As you think about adopting the easy yoke, what adjustments might you need to make?
- What are some biases you have that might prevent you from adopting the yoke of Jesus and a new way of life?

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DAY 3 – FOR NOW OR LATER?

If we are being honest, most of us probably have a difficult time relating to Matthew 11:28 - 30, the easy yoke. The vast majority of us live with a low-grade anxiety and fatigue that rarely subsides. Vacations, social-media, Netflix, sex, alcohol, and other coping mechanisms sometimes bring a temporary reprieve, but not the authentic rest we crave.

The pessimist may look at the easy yoke as a mere wish to be obtained after we die. We are saved by grace, not by anything we do, so not much can be expected of us let alone enjoyed by us, or so the reasoning goes. Contrast this with a palpable life-style and relationship that fosters hope; the easy yoke of Jesus. The fact of the matter is that Jesus calls us to follow him now, not exclusively after death. We simply weren't designed to wait idly till death.

William Ralph Inge suggests a very different paradigm. "A more reasonable estimate of human costs and values will lead us to think that *no labour is better expended than that which explores the way to the treasure-houses of the spirit*, and shows mankind where to find those goods which are increased by being shared, and which none can take from us." (Emphasis added).

Make no mistake about it, apprenticeship is a way of life and requires effort. Practicing the way of Jesus is sometimes a dramatic re-orientation of thinking and living, but in the end, it is the only way to produce the results we desire (lasting peace, contentment, effective outreach). Furthermore, we must consider the cost of non-discipleship. To depart from the easy yoke of Jesus is to live a life full of disappointments, anxiety, stress and endless other unresolved problems.

If we desire to follow Jesus, and to walk in the easy yoke, side by side with him, matching his pace, we must adopt the sum total of his way of life, which flows through the Holy Spirit. The centrality of this concept to our faith is often overlooked. Adopting the easy yoke is the practical aspect of our faith that accompanies the intellectual surrender of our whole being to his offer of rescue.



DAY 3 – BUT, WHAT IS IT?

Okay. We get the metaphor. Jesus isn't asking us to physically put on a yoke, but is instead inviting us into a way of thinking and living. So, what exactly is it that Jesus is asking of us? In addition to being the Messiah, Jesus was at his heart a teacher. Open any of the Gospels and you will observe Jesus teaching others about the Kingdom of God. He taught people how to pursue God, how to live in the Kingdom, what to do, what not to do, and, most importantly, invited them to be a part of his unique group of followers. However, as is true with any good teacher, Jesus didn't simply issue a list of imperatives to be followed. To the contrary, he taught people how to live.

If we are to learn how to live differently, we have to be taught, which in turn means we need to yield to a teacher (in this case, Jesus). The yoke of Jesus, amongst other things, incorporates the sum total of his thoughts as recorded in the NT. This is especially true of the Gospels, but includes the inspired writings of the Apostles as well.

The Gospels are a perfect place to start as they record the teachings and practices of Jesus. It is through the lens of the Gospels we can get a very concrete picture of his teachings and life. It should also be noted the yoke of Jesus is more than just his teachings. In a real way he invites us to sit at his feet, today, in the 21st century and learn from him beyond what is recorded in the pages of NT. When we say "beyond what is recorded in the NT," this refers to relationship, not new revelation per se. It means we come before the living God as our teacher, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us, as we adopt the easy yoke of Jesus. To acquire a teacher's yoke, an apprentice would study their teachings, spend time with them, watch what they did and listen intently when they communicated. Let's do the same with our teacher.

Be with Jesus by spending 10 minutes in quiet reflection. Ask Jesus to reveal to you how he is and can be your teacher.

Become like Jesus by identifying one unhealthy "coping mechanism," committing to replace it by orienting your attention to Jesus whenever you think of it.

Do what Jesus did by thinking about other people you might be able to start teaching.



DAILY RESPONSE

- What role do coping mechanisms play in your own life? Have some become harmful?
- How have you been guilty of being an “after I die and go to heaven” type of Christian?
- How familiar are you with the teachings of Jesus? If not very, what has prevented you from becoming more aquatinted with his teachings?

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DAY 4 – AND HE WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER HELPER

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

– John 14:16 - 17 ESV

Jesus taught his disciples about the future arrival of a “helper” or “advocate” that would be with them through all things. Jesus went as far as to say it was to the disciples “advantage” that he ascended to heaven because it meant the arrival of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Jesus taught his disciples not to be troubled or afraid because he was leaving them not only with his peace, but also with the power of the Holy Spirit.

We see the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. It is with great power the “helper” arrives, imparting spiritual gifts and guiding the apostles and those who believed in the name of Jesus. Just as Jesus promised, the “helper” or Holy Spirit came, teaching and guiding the apostles and followers of Jesus, helping them to recall his words, just as he promised (John 14:25).

It is through this same frame of reference we should approach living life with Jesus. He lived a Spirit-empowered life and taught his followers that they too would live such a life. Essential to the easy yoke is a reliance on and submission to the will of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised a helper to come alongside us in everything we do, empowering us for ministry and showing us how to adopt the easy yoke of Jesus. It is through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit we find abundant life.

We should again note we are not simply passive recipients in this scenario. While it is true we passively receive the Holy Spirit, it is through our ardent pursuit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit that we come to closely associate their presence and proximity with our flourishing. We defer to the Holy Spirit in everything we do. The third person of the trinity leads and guides us, including in our relationship with Jesus. It’s incredibly important we remember the teachings of Jesus concerning the helper, our advocate. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit we find the rest and peace Jesus offers.

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DAY 4 – A PARADIGM OF REST

What do you think of when you hear the word rest? Most probably think of “static” rest or the absence of activity, but the rest Jesus is inviting us into is a dynamic and resonant life, full of fruitful labor and celebration. Jesus is teaching us to jettison the cacophony of noise and listen to an entirely new piece of music, one composed specifically by Jesus, for us, on the cross.

The author of Hebrews contrasts the temporary rest the promised land, law and the sabbath were to bring with the continuous rest that can only be obtained through Jesus and his way of life. The story of the OT was one of continual failure to find and enter that rest.

“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.”

– Hebrews 4:8 - 11

N.T. Wright suggests Hebrews 3:7 - 4:11 “...Envisages the entire new age inaugurated by Jesus as a great “Sabbath rest,” and speaks of those who “enter God’s rest” ceasing from their ‘works.’” When Jesus invited us to come to him and find rest, he was referring to the paradigmatic shift that took place through his death and resurrection, a time when God’s redeeming purposes intersected with human life, cultivating a permanent state of rest. But, we have to accept the invitation to enter into that rest.

As we move toward Jesus and his way of life, we enter into a continual, age-long sabbath rest. Jesus offers us rest at the deepest level, at the level of our very soul. We don’t achieve this rest through the absence of activity, but rather by submitting to Jesus as apprentices, the result of which is a new way of life that allows us to fulfill his righteous and loving demands. As we walk alongside Jesus, doing what he did, submitting to his teaching, we move toward nothing short of the restoration of our whole selves, body, mind, and spirit.



BE with Jesus by taking 10 minutes to reflect on and thank him for his work on the cross that ushered in continual rest.

BECOME

DO what Jesus did by regularly taking time to rest (daily and weekly).

DAILY RESPONSE

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DAY 5 – PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS

Earlier in section 1, you were asked to do some introspection. How did it feel to ask yourself what stage of apprenticeship you were in? Were you honest with yourself? Part of what differentiates a nominal or cultural Christianity with authentic discipleship is rhythm and discipline, equating to an overall lifestyle because the little things add up. Like a musician or athlete who adopts a particular lifestyle of preparation and training, the follower of Jesus who has taken apprenticeship seriously may “perform” when it counts. We may only see a concert pianist at their very best but must also consider the countless hours spent in practice. So too with the follower of Jesus. M. Scott Peck observes the following:

“They want, and believe it is possible, to skip over the discipline, to find an easy shortcut to sainthood. Often they attempt to attain it by simply imitating the superficialities of saints...Some even believe that by such imitation they have really become saints and prophets, and are unable to acknowledge that they are still children and face the painful fact that they must start at the beginning and go through the middle.”

– M. Scott Peck

It is a misguided notion that we can achieve what we want as Christians while completely ignoring the need for character change in our lives as a whole. It is an unfortunate irony that, in our effort to avoid the necessary discipline, we miss the way of Jesus he so desperately desires for our lives. Following Jesus is far more than simply trying to do what he did on the spot or under pressure. We cannot simply will our way to deep spirituality and right living. Asking ourselves the cliché “what would Jesus do?” when we are faced with decisions simply will not suffice. Sure, it will do some good and is better than nothing at all, but what Jesus desires for us is to walk with him and learn from, to do what he did, orienting our energy, time, and, ultimately, our whole being toward a relationship with him. It’s in this place, as apprentices, we will begin to bear spiritual fruit and experience the life-giving presence of Jesus.

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DAY 5 – PRACTICING THE WAY OF JESUS

The distinct goal of Deeper is to discuss how to actually follow Jesus. Don't be insulted by that phrase, because everyone is in the same boat. Every skilled artisan was once an apprentice. Be honest concerning your stage of discipleship and look forward.

As we progress together, reflecting on the way of Jesus, we acknowledge there is, in fact, a quiet stream, full of life, underneath the fluctuating rejections and affirmations of this world. This stream exists despite circumstances but can only be found by embracing discipleship as a way of life.

Jesus has extended an invitation, and to accept this invitation requires us to acquiesce our whole selves. Jesus is inviting us not to be different or forge a new path, but to be like him. Henri Nouwen put it like this:

“When we have given up the desire to be different and experienced ourselves as sinners without any right to special attention, only then is there space to encounter our God who calls us by our own name and invites us into his intimacy.”

– Henri Nouwen

Jesus is inviting us to come before the creator, laying ourselves bare, to experience intimacy, peace and rest. It's an invitation unlike any other. The remainder of Deeper details practices, formations and looks at culture in order to help in navigating the complexities of practicing the way of Jesus in the 21st century. Remember, the key to moving forward is to practice daily. Orient and re-orient your mind toward Jesus. Abiding in his presence and adopting his way of life are medicine to a culture that is not well.

BE with Jesus by spending some time worshipping (with or without music).

BECOME like Jesus by assessing if you are intentionally structuring your life around his. Identify areas where you may need to implement change.

DO what Jesus did by committing to live above temporary highs and lows.



