

Title: A Gospel Reality Check: Keeping Law and Grace in Proper Perspective

Subtitle: In Jesus, we experience the promise of rest and fulfillment.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/l68ODq7iydg>

For the past few weeks, our lectionary readings have given us a Gospel reality check. They have covered mistaken notions that our faith will somehow make life easier without conflicts or problems. Today's readings continue that theme as the Apostle Paul writes about the inner conflicts we face as we deal with the residual realities of sin.

Let's face it; human nature is conflicted. Philosophers and theologians have talked about the subject for centuries. Seneca, a Greek philosopher, asked, "What is it that draws us in one direction while striving to go in another; and impels us towards that which we wish to avoid?" The Apostle Paul expressed the same sentiment in our New Testament lesson when he admits, "***I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.***"¹ In its context, Paul admits that he is weary and frustrated. There is one part of him that loves God's law, for its injunctions are "***holy and righteous and good.***"² Yet there is another part of him that rebels, for the law not only exposes his shortcomings but it also produces a desire for the very thing it forbids. Therefore his sensitive moral nature produces a deep sense of conflict and guilt that drives him to despair.

Once, when speaking to a counselor about this reality, I admitted that my inner turmoil made me feel like a giant

¹ Romans 7:15

² Romans 7:12

hypocrite. In return, the counselor said, “I wouldn’t be so hard on yourself. You are just conflicted.” The Apostle Paul understood this. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes, **“*For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They conflict with each other to keep you from doing what you want.***³

The description of this conflict looks something like guerrilla warfare that takes place within the arena of our hearts, and that jungle is filled with snakes of every size and color. It is not a pretty picture. Jesus said, **“*For out of the heart come evil thoughts-murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person.***⁴

 When looked at from this point of view, none of us has reason to boast. The Apostle John writes, **“*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.***⁵ The Psalmist exclaimed, **“*If You, O LORD, kept track of iniquities, then who, O Lord, could stand? But with You, there is forgiveness, so that You may be feared.***⁶ The reality of indwelling sin, which the law painfully points out, reminds us of our continual need to depend on Jesus, who is **“*our advocate with the Father.***⁷ Jesus didn’t come to condemn us even though he is well aware of our human nature. In this tension, He is for us and not against us. **“*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.***⁸

As a pastor, I have heard story after story of people who, in their attempt to live a holy life, have become deeply discouraged. To such, Jesus declares in our Gospel today,

³ Galatians 5:17

⁴ Matthew 15:19-20

⁵ 1 John 1:8

⁶ Psalm 130:3-4

⁷ 1 John 2:1

⁸ 1 John 2:2

“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”⁹

We need the rest Jesus offers. There is something about it for which we all hunger. I don’t think you need a preacher to point out all of your shortcomings. You don’t need me to point my bony finger at you because when I do, there are three pointing back at me.

The yoke Jesus offers is something that is meant to help us. At first, we may not look at it as something positive. A yoke on an animal is a constraint that was designed to get work done. And when I take God’s yoke upon me, I am happier. I discovered that I am more fulfilled and productive. It helps me to see that life has meaning and purpose when I am walking with Jesus side by side, yoked together with him.

When Jesus used the analogy of a yoke, he was picturing a relationship in which two would walk side-by-side in the same direction, covering the same ground, encountering the same obstacles, and traveling at the same speed. By inviting his audience to submit to his yoke, he asked them to come alongside him for comfort and assurance, **“...for I am gentle and humble in heart.”**

He understands our weaknesses. The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as a **“...high priest who is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but is one who in every respect was tempted as we are, yet without sin.”¹⁰**

These verses highlight the tender compassion of our beloved Savior, who invites us to come boldly to **“...the throne**

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:15

of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.¹¹ We may be tired, worn out, and burned out on religion, yet the offer still stands, “***Come unto me.***”

This invitation offers three things. First, connection: Be with me. Yokes are made for two, not one. Then, with His yoke upon us, He comes alongside us with the strength to shoulder our burdens. When we lay our burdens down at his feet, we recognize that all was taken care of at the cross.

Secondly, the idea of a yoke pictures the forward motion of two joined together. You cannot be yoked to Jesus and go your own way anymore, but with that constraint, we find the perfect freedom of going onward and upward toward the heavenly call of God.

Thirdly, Jesus described his yoke as “easy.” This word in Greek is an adjective that describes a blend of being “useful, serviceable, well-fitted, gentle, and kind.”¹² It is both kind and good for who we are and what we are called to be. Matthew Henry commented that it is “well-fitted” because it is “lined with love.”¹³

Therefore, let us come to him now. As the old Gospel hymn declares:

What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
And what a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.

¹¹ Hebrews 4:16

¹² Strong’s Concordance, #5543 And

¹³ Matthew Henry’s description of Christ’s yoke

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, thank you for allowing us the privilege of intimacy with your Son. Thank you for the promise of rest and freedom in willingly surrendering ourselves to you, for in your loving arms, we find everything we need for life and godliness.*

Amen