

# Thinking it Through & Talking it Over

A Study Guide for Small Groups  
By Rev. Dr. James R. Wilson

## *A Study Guide of the Texts of the Bible From the Common Lectionary Year A, Week 32 July 6, 2008*

*"Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."  
Psalm 119:105*

### **Sermon Title: *Hard Words of Jesus - "Take My Yoke Upon You"*** **Sermon Passage: Matthew 11:16-19 and 25-30**

#### **Lectionary Scripture Passages:**

Genesis 24:34-67; Psalm 45:10-17 Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19 and 25-30

#### **Warm-up**

How do you find rest for your soul? What activities "re-charge your inner batteries?"

#### **Introduction**

I remember the time (4:00 a.m.) our neighbor's indoor cat somehow got out of their house and - terrified by the world outside its comfort zone - took refuge high up on an arbor at the front of our house, directly outside our bedroom window. Out of fear, the cat persisted in a crying-like "meow" mixed with an agonizing growl. My efforts to rescue the cat were in vain. I first tried to gently coax it from its perch - no luck. After trying to be nice and gentle I resorted to being mean and ferocious. But the cat evaded the swipes of the broom. Finally I could take no more and at 4:30 a.m. resorted to the hose. The wet, terrified cat responded.

In the passage before us, Jesus describes the efforts made to invite Jews to respond to God's activity. John the Baptist came - but was rejected. Jesus is present - but is also being rejected. In this context Jesus turns to the people listening to him and says, "Come to me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... and find rest for your souls." He doesn't blast them with a hose but offers himself - the one who gives rest to our souls.

#### **Exploring the Texts**

##### **Read Matthew 11:16-30.**

1. Let's first look at verses 16 through 19. It comes on the heels of Matthew recording Jesus' words about John the Baptist - "He is the Elijah who was to come" preceding the Messiah (this refers to Malachi 4:5). His role is to prepare people for the coming Son of Man. Jesus compares "this generation" of Jews to children calling out to other children. What invitations are the children extending to the other children?

2. According to verses 18 and 19, how are these two different activities connected to John and Jesus? How was John's ministry like singing a dirge? How was Jesus' ministry like playing a dance song on a flute?

3. Jesus describes the response of the Jews who rejected him in verse 19. Why do you think some people failed to respond to John (somber, austere, dirge-like, Elijah) and to Jesus (dancing, friend of sinners)?

4. In his paraphrase entitled *The Message*, Eugene Peterson puts the last part of verse 19 this way: "Opinion polls don't count for much, do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating." (The NIV translates it: "But wisdom is proved right by her actions.") What is Jesus saying with regard to 1) John's and his activities, and 2) the significance of these activities despite the refusal of many to respond to either John or Jesus?

**Note:** We understand that God was at work in a significant way when John was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah and particularly when God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus - fully human and fully divine. While it is tragic and saddening to know that people - from the first century until now - do not respond to Jesus, God's purposes and intentions are being accomplished through him. The wisdom of God does not depend on the wisdom (or lack of) of human beings. God's purposes will be accomplished.

5. Now look through verses 20 through 24. What is the tone of this passage? In what ways is Jesus' tone like that of John the Baptist's described in Matthew 3:1-10? How would you paraphrase Jesus' words in the context of our world today? In what ways have people today failed to respond to Jesus? In what ways have you failed to respond to him?

6. Verses 25 through 27 record Jesus' prayer. He says, according to *The Message* "You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people." What is it about "the wise and learned" or "sophisticates and know-it-alls" that makes it difficult to see God's activity? What do you think about verse 26? How does God's "hiding" and "revealing" himself serve for God's good pleasure?

**Note:** That is a very difficult question. Theologians speak of God's sovereignty over all things and of the notion that everything unfolds according to God's purposes. Though we struggle to grasp it fully, it is conceivable that God having "hidden" and "revealed, that God condemning and exalting, that God causing good and allowing evil, that everything under God's sovereign will gives delight to the Creator. It is hard to comprehend - it seems to be a mystery. Yet, thankfully, we now hear the words of Jesus that spare us from any sense of despair or abandonment to a fatalistic view of God's sovereign will.

7. Verse 27 indicates that Jesus understands the mystery of God's purposes. How does this re-assure you? What does this verse indicate about the way people "hear and understand?" (this refers back to 11:15).

8. Re-read verses 28 through 30. How has Jesus' tone shifted compared to verses 20-24?

9. What is the gist of Jesus' call to people in these verses? To whom are they to come? Whose yoke are they to take upon themselves? Of whom are they to learn?

**Note on "yoke":** When a person carried a yoke (for toting heavy loads) it would be carried on their shoulders (this is described in Jeremiah 27:2). Judaism applied this image of subjection to obedience - carrying the yoke of the Law and obeying its statutes. Jesus invites people to place his yoke upon themselves and to experience true Sabbath rest (it would be appropriate to picture the "Sabbath" (Exodus 20:8) and "rest for one's soul" that results from the removal of God's wrath (See Jeremiah 6:16).

Jesus has made it possible for people to experience this true rest. As this is paraphrased by Eugene Peterson, Jesus says, "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."

10. What are the things that prevent people from experiencing rest for the soul that Jesus promises? What are the things that weigh people down? What are the yokes that cause people to be tired, worn out, burned out on religion?

**For personal reflection:** What things are like yokes upon your shoulders - causing you to be tired, worn out, burned out? What can you do about them? To whom can you turn for rest?

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Anne Rice is one of the most widely read authors in the world. Her bestsellers - most notably, her series of gothic books called "The Vampire Chronicles" - have sold over 100 million copies. After spending most of her adult life a self-described atheist, Rice converted back to Christianity in 1996. She has since focused her writing efforts on religious-themed works. Her newest book is entitled *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana*. She recently allowed the readers of *Time* magazine to ask her whatever they wished for an interactive piece called "10 Questions." When one reader asked about the reasons behind her conversion, Rice summed up her journey in these words:

Americans like to believe we turn to religion because of an accident or the loss of a loved one, but in my case it was simply the culmination of searching. I wrestled with a lot of theological questions, and then one afternoon, I thought, *I love you - I want to come back to you.*

"10 Questions," *Time* magazine (3-17-08), p. 6