

9.6.2026 Trinity 14 (Galatians 5:16-24)

Hear what comfortable words our Savior Christ saith unto all who truly turn to Him: *“Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus’ invitation to the weary and the burdened to find rest by taking His yoke upon you are comfortable words that His original audience would’ve easily understood, but the word yoke isn’t as familiar to us. In our day and in our culture many farmers work their land with 700 horsepower, self-steering, GPS guided tractors that cost over half a million dollars, but in the regions of first-century Galilee and Judea people used oxen and cattle to plow fields and pull carts, and a yoke, a wooden beam that was placed on their neck, was the means by which they guided these animals in their work. Through the yoke a farmer could communicate with the oxen or cattle, directing them where to go, what to do, how fast, how far, how much work he intended for them to accomplish together.

It’s interesting, and important to note that our Savior Christ’s invitation, *“Come unto me... take my yoke upon you,”* is offered specifically to the weary and heavy laden. In the original context of this passage, our Lord’s Jewish audience was weary and heavy laden by the weight of the Law. Not only were the people given 613 commandments to keep, but also, in order to prevent accidental sin the Pharisees had created additional, man-made traditions that expanded the biblical commands into an enormous, burdensome system of strict, detailed rules. It was this heavy burden that Jesus said the Pharisees had tied up and laid on the shoulders of the people (Matthew 23:4), it was this burden that St. Peter described at the first council in Jerusalem as *“a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”* (Acts 15:10), and it was this burden of self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, and legalism that our Savior Christ offered to relieve. To the weary and heavy laden He said, *“Come unto me... take my yoke upon you,”* and in doing so, *“find rest unto your souls.”*

You and I may not bear the yoke of 613 commandments, or the additional

traditions created by the Pharisees that governed every aspect of daily Jewish life, but the fact that our Lord's gracious invitation is the first verse of the comfortable words spoken in our liturgy for Holy Communion certainly points to the truth that we're all wearing a yoke. Every one of us is guided and governed by someone or something, and in addition to that fact, all too often the yokes we choose to place on our shoulders come with a heavy burden as well, and therefore Jesus' invitation is clearly not only to those who are weary and heavy laden by the weight of the Law, but also to all those who are yoked to someone or something other than Him, all who are being led to an end that God never intended.

When I read the Epistle appointed for this Sunday, I was reminded of the different yokes we choose to place on our shoulders, the way these yokes so often guide us in opposite directions, and the eternal consequences of being yoked to anything other than Christ. In this letter, St. Paul wrote, *"Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do"* (Galatians 5:16-17).

In these verses, St. Paul brings to mind an image, on one side, of walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit of God because you are yoked to Christ, and on the other, being guided and governed by the desires of the flesh. He tells us that these are opposed to each other and actually *keep you from doing the things you want to do*. In other words, if we have accepted Christ's invitation, if we are yoked to Him, then we're guided by the Holy Spirit and kept from doing what our flesh, what our fallen human nature would lead us to do. Likewise, if a person has rejected our Lord's invitation and chosen to place a yoke on their shoulders that stands in opposition to Him, then by that yoke a person will be led down an entirely different path, guided in such a way that they're prevented from doing the good we ought to do.

We're all wearing a yoke. Every one of us is guided and governed by someone or something, and as we consider this passage the question that arises is this: Whose yoke are you wearing? Addressing a group of Christians in church on Sunday morning you may think the answer is obviously Christ's yoke, but remember Paul is also addressing a group of Christians. He wrote

this letter to the churches in the region around Galatia, and his words reveal the truth that it's easy to tell what yoke a person has placed on their shoulders.

According to St. Paul, if someone is guided and governed, or yoked to the flesh, that fact will be revealed by their works, or to use the words of our Lord, *"Ye shall know them by their fruits"* (Matthew 7:16), and Paul offers examples of the corrupt fruit that's manifest in a person's life when they're led by the flesh. Examples such as *"Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like"* (5:19-20). Paul lists these works of the flesh, and then again, writing to Christians, he declares, *"I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"* (5:21 ESV).

St. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote these words to Christians to warn them, to warn us, about the seriousness of sin, the danger and eternal consequences of being yoked to those forces that lead us away from God. Paul isn't speaking here of the Christian who stumbles, who gives in to temptation and sin but then humbly confesses and turns back toward God clinging to His promise that He is *"faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). Rather, when Paul states *"those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God,"* he's speaking about the person who willfully continues in grievous, habitual sin, because like a stubborn ox, they obstinately refuse to be guided and governed by our Lord and God.

St. John, in one of his letters to Christians, communicated the same truth in this way, he wrote, *"No one who lives in (Christ) keeps on sinning..."* (1 John 3:6). *"No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God"* (1 John 3:9). Again, St. John isn't writing about sinless perfection. He couldn't be, because in the same letter he wrote, *"If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves..."* (1 John 1:8). St. John knows the struggle against sin in this fallen world continues even for those who've been born of God, that at times we fail as we wrestle against human weakness, but the objective truth that he communicates here is that Christians cannot just go

on sinning, because God, in Christ, has broken the heavy yoke that once guided us down that miserable path. Jesus has not only given us new life, He's given us an easy yoke, by which He leads us in paths of righteousness for His names sake.

Jesus said, "*Come unto me... take my yoke upon you,*" and it's through being yoked to Christ that we produce what St. Paul referred to as the fruit of the Spirit - "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). By describing first the works of the flesh, and now the fruit of the Spirit, St. Paul has given us an easy way to tell what yoke we've placed upon our shoulders. All we must do is examine our lives, and consider the evidence. Do we find corrupt fruit or good fruit, do we see a catalog of sins or a number of Christian graces, do we carry the heavy burden of being yoked to the flesh or experience the perfect freedom of being led by the Spirit of God?

Hear what comfortable words our Savior Christ saith unto all who truly turn to Him: "*Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matthew 11:28-30).