

Watcha Gonna Do?

Pastor Hubert Den Draak – Pinegrove UC, July 9, 2017
(Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30: My yoke is easy, my burden is light)



Most of you are probably familiar with the classic Disney cartoon “The Jungle Book” from 1967. In it, there’s this group of vultures huddled together on a big dead tree in the middle of a gloomy swamp; they’re bored out of their vulture skulls. Says one of them to another: “Hey, what we gonna do?” Says the other, “I dunno, watchou wanna do?”

Says the first one, “Look, first I say what we gonna do? Then you say, I dunno, whatchou wanna do? Then I say, what you wanna do, then you say, what you wanna do? So what we gonna do?! Let’s do *something!*” Pipes up a third vulture: “Okay. So *what’s* it you wanna do...?” *D’oh!*, as another familiar cartoon character would say today.

I don’t do it justice, but it nicely captures the scene that Jesus describes in today’s passage by Matthew: two groups of bored kids calling back and forth to one another looking for a game to play; but neither of them wants to do what the others want. So watcha gonna do?

Before Jesus began his public ministry, a man called “John” preached about the One who was to come, the Messiah. When Jesus came, John’s mission was completed. But after a little while, John himself got disenchanted with what Jesus said and did, as did some of the people who came to hear Jesus. He didn’t match people’s expectations of what a Messiah was like.

Jesus was different. He preached – and lived – a way of life that was entirely soaked in God through the Spirit. Maybe that doesn’t sound much like a big deal now, but it broke the mold at the time (and frankly, it still does). In those days, people were told to live a good life by faithfully adhering to the Torah, the law of Moses. Easier said than done, because there’s whopping 613 of ‘em! And to add injury to insult, some of them contradict each other. In other words, no matter how hard you tried, it was impossible to ever achieve the good life.

Enter Jesus, who says, don’t sweat the small stuff. Look at the big picture, and that is to love God and your neighbour just as you love yourself. That’s what the law is all about. Nothing more, nothing less.

You’d expect that people would be happy to hear that. But they weren’t. On the one hand they didn’t want to be stifled by a nit-picking rigid traditional religion – but they didn’t want Jesus’ version of a heart and life committed to God’s radical love, either. That felt just as uncomfortable. So what gives...?

Or as Jesus himself pointed out: some people didn't like John because he didn't drink, lived in the wilderness, and ate weird food – and they don't like me (Jesus) because I drink, I love parties and crowds, and I'll eat with everyone and anyone. Sometimes there's just - no - pleasing - anyone...!

So, what *are* the signs of a good life, if it's not about trying to live up to the letter of the law? Depends on whom you ask. For a lot of people the "good life" means popularity, and success, diplomas and degrees, having a million FB friends. For others the "good life" is about getting ahead in life: big cars, big homes, having a pile of money in your bank account

Happiness then means you deserve the right vacation, the right house, the right furniture, shiny new electronics. Happiness comes from buying stuff; and when the happy feeling runs out, just go and buy the latest, more advanced stuff. Last year's model just won't do, *that's* why you're feeling unhappy!

I still remember, after immigrating to Canada and living in Toronto, my disbelief of the number of trucks and SUVs driving around in the city. I mean, who needs an SUV in the city? – until I saw how they were advertised: that's not a big gas-guzzling monstrosity you're buying, you buying yourself a sense of peace, or power, or admiration. These ads were selling the 'good life' through big, expensive vehicles.

Or the good life comes from being a number one, from beating everyone else around you, eliminating any competition. So-called reality TV shows like 'Survivor' or "The Apprentice" actually reward cut-throat competition and secret alliances to out-manoeuvre others in order to win the prize. You snooze, you lose! "You're fired!"

Is that what we think reality is like? Is that is how we think we can reach the "good life"? And even if we believe that, do we really want it? Do we really want to live in a world like that? What satisfies us, really? Whom do we serve? Whose yoke do we choose...?

The yoke Jesus is talking about here is a carved piece of wood most often used to harness together two oxen so that they can pull together for plowing or to haul heavy loads. Jesus calls people to come to him and leave behind the old ways that the world has been teaching them, and to follow in the new way he is teaching. He calls his followers to leave behind the demands of the law, the demands of which are always out of reach, and to accept the yoke (the requirements) of the gospel, his Good News. To simply live in and with God's love.

Now who in their right mind would happily take a yoke on their shoulders? I don't know about you, but if I had the choice between burdening myself and freedom, I know what I would choose! The reality of course is that there is no such thing as complete freedom. All of us carry a yoke on our shoulders, whether we're aware of it or not. We always end up serving someone or something, which prevents us from becoming whom God made us.

In Jesus' day it was the law that was being used to keep you feeling small and insecure and insignificant. In our day it may well be our consumer culture, that vicious cycle of buying and having and replacing and buying again. Or perhaps it is the yoke of excessive ambition and the relentless drive to succeed at any cost. Or the yoke of hectic schedules and busy-busy lives that exhaust us and prevent us from any serious reflection or meaningful prayer. We're so busy we can hardly hear ourselves think; and we wonder why we can't hear God's voice...

Jesus talks about another way, *his* way. He wants us to let go of all those yokes and to take on *his* yoke, *his* way of working and being in the world. He invites us to a life that's *actually* good and beneficial – good life, for you, everyone you meet and for creation we all live in.

But how? How can we make it off that never-ending merry-go-round of wants and unrealistic expectations and towering ambitions – or the treadmill of just wanting to be comfortable and not have your boat rocked? Well, we got to remember Jesus didn't come preaching a gospel of luxury or prosperity – he doesn't really care about how much money is sitting in your bank account. What he cares about is whether you have *enough*, and how *you* care about others by sharing what you have. It's a lifestyle that challenges what most people think is normal. You can't fit that lifestyle into another lifestyle – you couldn't 2000 years ago, you still can't do it now. This is it, says Christ, there is nothing else. Love God, and love neighbour as you love yourself. God – neighbour – self: the sacred love triangle.

That's a way to get off the merry-go-round, to say: "it's enough!" A way to commit to the One who is delighted with what and who we are; the One who lovingly accepts us just the way we are and then calls us to be all that we can be! We are valued not for our looks or our family name or diplomas or our possessions or how much we are admired. We are valued simply because we are all God's children. That is enough; *more* than enough.

Once we get that, and once we get over the initial hump of committing to a lifestyle that frankly will leave a lot of people scratch their head – then finally Christ can get to work in our lives. And he will remove the old yokes, the burdens that weigh us down, the burdens of a good life that seems so close but is always out of our reach, always slipping through our fingers. And we'll realize that the alternative that Christ offers *is* the good life, the real deal. It will give us rest, and peace, and purpose, and power. No need to buy a big SUV for that!

Still not sure you can do it? Then there's one more thing about yokes you need to know. They were usually designed for *two* oxen. So an inexperienced ox would be paired with an experienced ox so that the more experienced one could teach the younger one. Jesus invites people to share a yoke with him. We don't have to do it all by ourselves. When we decide to let Jesus walk right beside us, should to shoulder, and teach us, we'll be able to do the impossible. You just watch.

That's the yoke being offered to us; now it's up to you. So, watcha gonna do...? Amen!

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30 (My yoke is easy, my burden is light)

[Jesus says]¹⁶ “To what can I compare this generation? It is like children playing a game in the public square. They complain to their friends,

¹⁷ ‘We played wedding songs,
and you didn’t dance,
so we played funeral songs,
and you didn’t mourn.’

¹⁸ For John didn’t spend his time eating and drinking, and you say, ‘He’s possessed by a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!’ But wisdom is shown to be right by its results.”

²⁵ At that time Jesus prayed this prayer: “O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike. ²⁶ Yes, Father, it pleased you to do it this way!

²⁷ “My Father has entrusted everything to me. No one truly knows the Son except the Father, and no one truly knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

²⁸ Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take *my* yoke upon you. Let *me* teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For *my* yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”