

# continuous conversion

July 2010

Volume 5, #7

## Being gentle

*“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.”*

Matthew 11:29

Here is one of the more famous verses of the New Testament, in which Jesus describes his humble, gentle nature while directing His followers to identify with him and learn from him.

And here we see the paradoxical Jesus, who likes to “mess with your mind” by mixing good things (rest) with bad things (yokes). He is the One who is willing to be yoked, to demonstrate His gentle nature, and Who urges those who will listen to him to do likewise. If they do, He says, they’ll find rest for their souls.

As usual, Jesus is upsetting the normal ideas of his society. “Rest” would be only for one who was in charge: a rich man or a conquering nation. Naturally, many of his hearers would think of their hated subjugation to Rome, which denied them the state of rest that they felt entitled to as a sovereign nation. Rest for them could come only after the strenuous effort of reclaiming political and economic power from the conqueror.

Yet Jesus connects rest with humility and gentleness, the attributes of a servant, not a conqueror. Jesus encourages his followers to voluntarily take a yoke on their shoulders and be yoked with the One

who is gentle and humble.

Why would Jesus use the yoke, a symbol of patient hard work and even of oppression, to explain what it means to follow him? And how does being yoked to the gentle Jesus bring rest for the soul?

### *What is a Yoke?*

Here are three definitions of “yoke” from the freedictionary.com:

- A crossbar with two U-shaped pieces that encircle the necks of a pair of oxen or other draft animals working together.
- Any of various emblems of subjugation, such as a structure made of two upright spears with a third laid across them, under which conquered enemies of ancient Rome were forced to march in subjection.
- Something that connects or joins together; a bond or tie.



The first definition is illustrated in the photo, where two oxen (known for their stolid, plodding nature) are yoked to pull a plow. They are under the control of the man, and must work together, like it or not.

**Continuous conversion is the process of living as a Christian; sanctification is another term for this process.**

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No doubt Jesus lost some of his audience at this point. What people in their right minds would follow someone who compares them to domestic beasts of burden? You might as well tell them to give up and just work, work, work, because life is a grind and there's no rest for the common man. Whatever "rest" Jesus refers to in this verse must be a fantasy; is he some kind of madman?

The second definition of "yoke" is more explicitly political:

- Any of various emblems of subjugation, such as a structure made of two upright spears with a third laid across them, under which conquered enemies of ancient Rome were forced to march in subjection.

For the revolutionists in his audience, this reference to a yoke might stir up some fervor. "Now we're talking! This Jesus person is playing it on the down low, not telling the Romans to their faces that he's against their power but telling us fellow Jews, in a subtle way, that he will join with us in the yoke of Roman subjugation in order to overthrow it!"

But just about the time that the revolutionaries were sharpening their knives in gleeful anticipation, here comes the kicker: "*for I am **gentle** and humble in heart.*" The image here is jarring to the street-fighting guerilla warriors who wanted to overthrow Rome's yoke. How can a gentle, humble leader take them where they need to go, shedding blood to restore the proper political balance by getting rid of the Roman occupiers? There must have been some perplexed listeners in that crowd.

For whoever was left to hear him, the third definition of "yoke," referring to the relationship of Jesus to his followers, might have clarified his intentions:

- Something that connects or joins together; a bond or tie.

This definition of "yoke" is the bridge that ties together the entire verse: Jesus is asking his followers to be yoked with him—and He is God.

Think about what that means: yes, you are yoked like a beast with no freedom or independence, but your "yokemate" is God Himself.

What's more, your yokemate is not someone to fear, a God who will make impossible demands of you and harshly judge your mistakes and stumbles.



Instead, He is a God who is gentle ("Considerate or kindly in disposition; amiable and tender") and humble ("Marked by meekness or modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit; not arrogant or prideful"). Being yoked with this God would be a pleasure. He would be more than willing to do his fair share of the work, and would make the work less stressful by his kindness and tenderness.

His followers are expected to work, and to work hard, under the yoke—but they can count on a yokemate Who will pick up their slack and not make a big deal out of it.

Having a yokemate like God would open up whole new ways of looking at life. Instead of plodding hopelessly through life like a heavily-laden ox, the follower of Jesus can walk through life with a companion whose considerate nature and modest spirit can make even the worst situation endurable.

With enough experience of walking with Jesus, his followers can begin to trust that He is with them and therefore they have nothing to fear: "*If God is for us, who can be against us!*" Romans 8:28-31. And what's more, these followers who are yoked to Jesus will not be so tempted to become arrogant and boastful themselves, saying "Hey! God's my yokemate!" when they see the gentle nature of Jesus, Who's always at their side.

Instead, they can be gentle, as He is; they can find rest for the souls, as they rest with the One who models perfect gentleness and humility.