

Annual Convention Sermon

BY E. HERMOND WESTMORELAND

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: E. Hermond Westmoreland, former pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston who retired last December, still holds the title, "Minister at Large" from the church he served for 33 years. In addition, he has been "pastoral consultant in residence" at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, for the past six months. A vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1953-54), he has been president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, president of the board of trustees for the SBC Annuity Board, Dallas, and chairman of the trustees for Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, Calif. He has also been a trustee for Southern Seminary, Baylor University, the Institute of Religion in Houston, Houston Baptist College, and Memorial Baptist Hospital, Houston. In 1971 Southern Seminary cited him with the "E. Y. Mullins Denominational Service award," and in 1960 Ouachita Baptist University gave him the "Distinguished Alumnus Award." He has been awarded honorary doctor of divinity degrees by Ouchita and Baylor University. A graduate of Ouachita, he earned the master of theology degree from Southern Seminary. A native of Arkansas, he was pastor of churches in Monticello, Ark., and Leland, Miss., before his call to the Houston church in 1938.

FREEDOM UNDER THE YOKE

TEXT: "Come unto me all ye that labour 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30

We live in a restless world. It has never been more evident than it is now as we near the end of the twentieth century. The cry goes up from the millions of earth, "Oh where may rest be found?" It is the deepest longing of the human heart to be able to find rest, peace and contentment. It is also God's desire for each one of us. How often it is spoken of in his word that we may "enter into his rest." How many of us would exclaim with Augustine, the early Christian father:

"Thou, God hast created us unto thyself;

Hence our heart is restless until it rests in thee."

Jesus stood one day in the midst of toiling, laboring, burdened and restless humanity and issued his most gracious invitation to all mankind. His words are a benediction to tired and weary pilgrims along life's highway.

"Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

His words have come ringing down the ages to meet humanity at its point of deepest need. His invitation has been written into Handel's glorious "Messiah." It has been translated into beautiful sculpture by Thorvaldsen's supreme work, "The Appealing Christ" which stands above the altar of the Church of our Lady in Copenhagen, Denmark. No sublimer words have ever been spoken than these pleading and haunting words uttered by our blessed Saviour. Well does Keim term this passage "the pearl of the sayings of Jesus." Let us consider anew this universal invitation of Christ.

I. The Universal Invitation. "Come unto me."

Let us notice by whom the invitation is extended. The beauty and

the graciousness of the words depend on the sovereign right he had to utter them. We must notice carefully the words of verse 27 which precede the invitation. "All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." Here is the greatest claim Jesus ever made, the claim which is central to our Christian faith. It is the claim that He alone can reveal God to men. If you would see God look at Christ. He came not to reveal that he is like God but rather to reveal what God is like. He is the supreme interpreter of God to men since he came to us from "the bosom of the Father" (Jn. 1:18). It is the same claim of Jn. 14:9 "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Such a claim coming from any other source would have been arrogant and unendurable. No human teacher such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Kant, or Shakespeare would ever have dared to make such a claim. But coming from Jesus they strike a note of deep response. The one thing which he offered was himself. "Come unto me and to me alone" and I will reveal to you the very nature and being of God. Such a revelation will not be found in organizations, in institutions, in dogmas or in creeds. God has revealed himself fully and finally in the person of his Son. In sheer compassion and gracious love he invites: "Come to me, follow me, learn from me, yoke up with me, abide in me, go with me." How personal and individual is his invitation.

It is an invitation to "all" mankind. He sets no limits around that blessed "all". None are excluded. Not merely to a few favored people, not merely to the chosen people of his day but his invitation extends across the ages and speaks to every generation. As Jesus looked at the people of his day he saw those who were actively engaged in labor and toil. At the very moment when he uttered the words he could perhaps see farmers returning from their fields, fishermen cleaning their nets, women returning from the market-place or from the well, shopkeepers, shepherds, a multitude of toiling, struggling humanity. They were not only laboring for a livelihood, but he saw beneath the exterior to the inner struggle, to those who were searching for a better way of life, to those who were desperately seeking for God, to the many who were searching hopelessly for truth and meaning in life and who were finding their efforts futile. They were exhausted by the struggle, staggering beneath life's heavy load, driven to weariness and despair.

But he also witnessed those who were "heavy laden." He was concerned for those who were enduring countless burdens placed upon them. They were a conquered people and the endless burden of taxation and humiliating servitude rested upon them like a galling yoke. They were taxed mercilessly to provide the luxuries of Rome. Their religion also had become preeminently a matter of imposed burdens. There were endless rules and regulations, restraints and rituals, observances and prohibitions which made their lives miserable and wretched. Jesus referred to such impositions when he uttered those scathing words regarding the religious leaders of that day, "they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Mt. 23:4).

Beyond the toiling, burdened multitude of that far off day he saw in vision the multitudes of earth who in every generation would find life harsh and intolerable and who in endless variety, sometimes mixed with tragedy, would listen to his gracious words of invitation. They apply to all who are sad in heart, to all who have burdens to bear, tasks to perform, problems to solve, promises to keep. Wherever humanity is seeking after peace, contentment, joy and rest his words are eternally contemporary.

II. The Gracious Offer. "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me." He wills to share his yoke with us. The yoke was a common Jewish metaphor for discipline or obligation, especially in reference to the service of the law. They spoke of the "yoke of the kingdom" and the "yoke of the law." It was also a word used by the rabbis for schooling. To enter their school one must sub-

mit to the yoke of their instruction. It was a call to commitment. Jesus was familiar with the word. He had made yokes and plows in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. William Barclay suggests that he may well have made the best yokes in all of Galilee, that perhaps the sign which hung above the door of his shop was that of a yoke bearing the inscription, "My yokes fit well." He offers his yoke in exchange for the burdensome yoke of the law under which their spirits were chafing. He proposes to give relief, not by removing the yoke and the burden, but by an exchange of yokes and burdens. As George Buttrick has so well said in the Interpreter's Bible:

"For the burden of the law . . . he offers his law of worship and love; for the yoke of selfish pride . . . he offers the yoke of meek obedience and lowliness of heart; for the load of 'unchartered freedom' . . . he offers his freedom, the freedom of dutiful sons of God the Father; for the burden of sin, he offers the joy of sins forgiven and the power of an endless life."

Jesus took both "yoke" and "cross," symbols that were revolting to many of his hearers, and transformed them into life-giving symbols of service and love. "Take my yoke" he bids us but "take up your cross" he commands us. We cannot bear his cross but we are invited to wear his yoke, the yoke which he offers to us if we will voluntarily receive it.

He offers also the privilege of enrolling in his school. "Learn of me" which may be literally translated "learn from me" is his invitation to discipline under his yoke. The words "disciple" and "discipline" are closely related. He calls for commitment and discipline if we are to be his followers. We are to learn from him as origin and goal of all truth. We are to learn from him through constant communion with him. Life must have its mastery and the nature of that bondage will determine the character and ideals of one's life. We live in a day when the human heart rebels against discipline of any description. Many clamor for the abolition of all laws, all standards of morality, all rules and restraints. Man parrots the word "freedom" every time his so-called liberty is threatened. He wants to live an unfettered life, free from all discipline and restraint free to "do his own thing" regardless of the consequences to himself and to others. His theme song is "don't fence me in." But the undisciplined life is doomed. Man must have a bondage if humanity is to survive. And the closer the bondage the freer life will become. "The care-free life is never free from care" (Buttrick). The only freedom worth having is the freedom which Christ offers. It is freedom under his yoke and under his divine discipline.

"If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). It is the "liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (Gal. 5:1). Well does Paul warn us "Be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

"Make me a captive Lord
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword
And I shall conqueror be."

III. *The Glorious Promise* "I will give you rest."

What is this boon which is first given but which also may be found? The word used by our Lord does not mean idleness, nor slackness, nor exemption from toil. Literally he declares "I will refresh you." It is the rest of faith which may only be found under the yoke. It contains peace, happiness, joy and freedom. It is not the result of a ceaseless quest but the sure and silent issue of a relationship. It means the forgiveness of sin, the removal of the guilt and the power of sin broken. Sin is the cause of all unrest, the poison which has fevered every life, the root of all weariness and weakness which robs life of peace and happiness. It is the rest which the world cannot give and which wealth cannot buy. It is immediate and can only be received by faith in him "on whom the Lord hath laid the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). But he speaks also of the rest which may be found. It is progressive, a continuous revelation, the rest that results from obedience. We find it as though it were a blessed discovery on our part, yet the finding is caused by his giving. It does not exist apart from the giving of himself. It comes quietly and gently, stealing its way into our souls as we go about our daily lives. It is the rest of finding God and following his blessed will.

Other philosophies which are the products of the mind of man declare "follow us and you will find restlessness." We have only to witness the feverish motions of our time, the fierce rush of competition, the disturbing forebodings of anxiety, the constant craving for sensations, the heated and consuming haste of our day to realize that we live in a restless world. "Oh where may rest be found?" is the cry of anguish that goes up from the feverish lips of humanity. Does the modern church provide the answer? If we are honest we must answer that peace and rest are about the last graces to be found in organized religion. Rather we find so often anxiety, uncertainty, bickering, controversy, ceaseless activity and a general air of restlessness which seems to be prevalent among

ministers and laity in our modern day churches. Not in wealth, in honours, in worldly ease; not in culture or literature; not in arts or in science do we find the rest for which our hearts are seeking. There is no rest for the heart of man apart from Jesus Christ. He still invites "Commit your life to me and you will find rest, the rest that comes from a new relationship with God.

Henry Drummond tells of two artists who attempted to paint a picture to illustrate each one's conception of rest. The first chose for his scene a still, lone lake among the far off mountains. The second threw on his canvass a thundering waterfall, with a fragile birch tree bending over the foam; at the fork of a branch, almost wet with the cataract's spray, a robin sat on its nest. The first was only stagnation; the latter was a picture of rest. For in rest there are always two elements—tranquillity and energy; silence and turbulence; creation and destruction; fearlessness and fearfulness. This it was in Christ.

IV. *The Great Paradox*—"My yoke is easy; my burden is light." Jesus anticipated a protest from his hearers as many would be prone to inquire, "Is it not true that the Christian life is a hard life, much more difficult than any other way of life?" His answer sounds paradoxical. How could he describe the demands and claims of his teachings with such descriptive words as "easy" and "light"? History reveals the Christian life as a difficult one. It was not easy for Jesus. He lived life under the yoke. He knew the meaning of the burden. He warned his followers to "count the cost" of discipleship. Wherein is his yoke "easy" and his burden "light"? The word "easy" means literally "kindly," "well-fitting." The word "light" means easy to bear. Many would question such claims. Burdens are placed on us in his school. The Christian life is beset with intellectual burdens. The assumptions of our Christian faith make heavy demands on us. "Who is Christ? What is his relationship to God?" As individuals we are commanded to accept by faith the miracle of the incarnation, the mystery of the atonement, the fact of his resurrection. We are challenged by his teachings that call for repentance and faith; for regeneration and righteousness; for forgiveness and humility. We are confronted with the principle of non-resistance, with the command to love our enemies, with the injunction that we practice charity toward all. If we take Christ seriously how could we possibly find his yoke "easy" and his burden "light"? The world often thinks his yoke galling, his burden irksome and repelling.

Three considerations we must ponder if we are to understand the meaning of his words. First, we must consider the harsh alternative to his way of life. Suppose we reject him and his claims and refuse to live by the truths which he taught and by the principles for which he lived. To follow our own way means that we are forced to accept the kind of a soul which follows such rejection. If we refuse to practice the Christian ideals for life then life may become selfish, covetous, ruthless and mercenary. If we refuse to forgive and practice the principle of love and goodwill toward others, then life may become narrow, provincial and devoid of all compassion. Walking in our own way we find that often we must choose to batter and buffet our way through life until we become calloused and embittered by the battles of life. How many have discovered that "the way of the transgressor is hard"? That in reality it is always hard to do wrong and easy to do that which is right?

Furthermore it is easy to assume the yoke since he places himself in the yoke beside us. He does not impose the burden, he only shares his burden with us. The yoke usually consisted of a cross-piece with two bows or loops. He will be found in the yoke alongside of us bearing the heavier part of the burden. He took the weight of it upon himself before he ever shared it with us. As we share his yoke of fellowship and service we realize the strength and guidance of his Spirit, the blessed "paraclete," the great burden-bearer who stands beside us to help. We become truly "laborers together with God." Our modern hymn writer declares "Jesus took my burden and left me with song." Better still are the words of an ancient teacher who declared, "My burden has become my song." The yoke is not a burden but rather a device placed about the neck and shoulders enabling the wearer to lift a burden. Under his yoke and sharing his burden we say with Bernard of Clairvaux:

"Oh blessed burden that makes all burdens light!

Oh blessed yoke that bears the bearer up."

There is a legend that the birds at first had no wings and that they rebelled when wings were first given them because the wings seemed to be a burden; but when they accepted them, the burden lifted them to the sky. So it is with us when we accept the tasks and duties which Christ places upon us, only to discover that weights become wings; loads become lifts; duty becomes delight; and service becomes song.

And finally, we say with Matthew Henry that his yoke is easy because he lines that yoke with love. Given in love and carried in love such a burden is always light. "All things are light to love"

we are reminded by Augustine and how true that saying is in the experience of Christ's followers today. "For to love God is to keep his commands; and they are not burdensome, because every child of God is victor over the godless world" (I Jn. 5:3 NEB). Who would ever forget the beautiful story of the love affair between Jacob and Rachel? Down in Mesopotamia, where he labored for his uncle Laban, he met her at the well and purposed to make her his wife. After laboring for seven long years to win her as his wife he was deceived by Laban who gave him Leah instead. But Jacob was not to be denied. Fulfilling the further service required he was given the lovely Rachel and the words describing that relationship are meaningful indeed: "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her" (Gen. 29:20)

Let us hear again the conditions that must be met if we are to respond to his gracious invitation and claim his glorious promise. We are to "come" to him for salvation and life; we are to "submit" to him as Saviour and Lord; we are to "follow" him in meaningful discipleship; we are to "learn" from him in closest fellowship; we are to "yoke up" with him in blessed partnership; we are to "abide" in him in vital relationship; we are to "go" with him in his purpose of world redemption.

It was in early December in 1959 when my wife and I went with our Danish friends to view the matchless work of the great sculptor Thorvaldsen in the Church of our Lady in Copenhagen. Snow and ice covered the earth. The day was cold and gray. In the dim light of the great cathedral we walked down the central

aisle, glancing at the statues of the Apostles which stood looking down on us from both sides. We noted that Paul had replaced Judas. We were drawn toward the altar above which stood the towering statue of Christ. It was the artist's crowning achievement. Kneeling at the altar rail so that we might look into the eyes of the appealing Christ, we saw also his hands extended in gracious invitation. We could see the prints where the nails were driven. We could see the scar in his riven side. The words on the base of the statues were emblazoned in letters of gold:

"KOMME TIL MIG"

One did not have to know the Danish language to translate the blessed invitation which in every language and to every soul still pleads with gentle entreaty "Come unto me . . ." Let us come again to humble ourselves at altars far more personal and meaningful, let us put aside our futile boasting and our foolish pride and on bended knees in his presence inquire,

"Lord, what would you have me to do?" (Acts 9:6)

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