

The yoke of Christ: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

by [Bradley E. Schmeling](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

At a recent wedding, I watched a mother try to lure her little boy onto the dance floor. She invited him to dance to a slow song, and then tried again when a fast song was played. She winked and cajoled; she pretended to be sad dancing alone; she pretended she was dancing while he stood on her feet. But he wouldn't dance. Finally she gave him one last look filled with love and sadness, then turned her attention to a little girl who was eager to join her. They twirled around the dance floor giggling in delight, never even glancing in the direction of her stubborn, grumpy little boy.

"But to what will I compare this generation?" said Jesus. "It is like a child whose mother calls from the dance floor: 'If I dance to a slow song, will you join me? How about if we do the chicken dance?' When John came, you wrote him off because he raged like a demon and asked for too much. And now, when I'm right here, willing to flap my arms and dance like a chicken, you pout and think I'm silly."

Most of us would love to respond to Jesus' invitation, but we're convinced that the world just won't work if we all rush onto the dance floor. After all, we live without any time left for dancing. We listen to and believe things such as "Humility seldom gets you anything," "Self-promotion is the name of the game" and "Never let them see you sweat."

If we're part of the church market, we hear "Grow your congregation," "Increase your offerings," "Develop new programs for every need," and rush to respond. "Preach better, faster, livelier, with more images and more results," the market counsels, "and please—get yourself a phone that can download e-mail!" We dare not stop and breathe, for if we take off the yoke for even an instant, we'll lose momentum, stride and success.

When we in the church hear the gentle call of Jesus to come and play his game, to dance his dance, we quickly translate that call into burden, and the freedom it offers into bondage. But Jesus' invitation to come and take on a different kind of yoke is an offer of rest as well as a profound judgment on the laws of the marketplace. (Later in

Matthew, Jesus will stride into the marketplace of the temple and overturn its tables, making children cheer for joy.)

Of course, we know the limits of this advice. We know that the world cannot sustain ever-expanding luxury. We know that peace cannot be yoked to the sale of arms. We know we can't proclaim equality and then use race and gender to divide. We know that we can't really celebrate liberty at the expense of another's freedom, or believe that winning at all costs is a mission accomplished. And prosperity can never be gospel.

We hear the invitation to come, to step out into new patterns that offer revelations and wisdom that are so often hidden from the wise and the accomplished. We know this gospel. We even believe it. But it's hard to trust it, to put on a new yoke and to set new standards for what it means to be human. We're caught between rest and work, between the yoke of the world and the yoke of Christ. Though I may say yes to Christ's invitation, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can even will what is right, but then I cannot do it."

The lectionary leaves out the section that contains Jesus' judgment on those people and places that have rejected his message, those who've chosen to stick to what they know, to live from the patterns that they inherited. But it's all there in Matthew. Woe to you, Chorazin. Woe to you, Bethsaida. Woe to you, Capernaum. Woe to all cities and nations that should have known better. In the end, the Sodomites will end up with a better future than those who heard the invitation but refused to dance.

As I read all of those reproaches, I start to feel grumpy. Maybe Jesus really isn't inviting me to a dance but just to the same game of winning and losing, heaven and hell. But just then, in Matthew 11:25-27, he gives thanks that God has given all things into his hands. Caught as I am between my theology and my practice, I am grateful to be dependent not on my own nature and my own ability to get it right, but on Christ, who holds me in his arms. Could it be that there's a grace in knowing that we're caught? We're caught by the marketplace, caught by the gap between Sunday and Monday, caught between the law and the gospel, caught by the hands of Jesus. Could it be that the struggle to put on the yoke of Christ is exactly the thing that will force me into his arms?

Like the kids at a wedding, I'm at the edge of the dance floor, this time at the heavenly marriage feast, and I'm holding onto my chair because it's all I know to do. But here he comes, outstretched hand inviting me onto the floor, winking and

laughing, cajoling, silly, even willing to let me stand on his feet so he can teach me how to dance.