

Title: Using Freedom for God's Gracious Will

Subtitle: The yoke Jesus offers promises rest and fulfillment.

For the past few weeks, our lectionary readings have given us a Gospel reality check. They have addressed mistaken notions that our faith will somehow make life easier, free of conflicts and problems. Today's readings continue that theme as the Apostle Paul writes about the inner conflicts we all face as we deal with the residual realities of sin.

Let's be honest: human nature is a battlefield. Philosophers and theologians have wrestled with this truth for centuries. Seneca once asked why we are drawn toward what degrades and destroys us even as we reach for what we know is best. Paul gives voice to that same struggle in Romans 7 when he confesses, ***"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."***¹ He is weary, frustrated, and painfully aware of the contradiction within himself. One part of him delights in God's law, calling it ***"holy and righteous and good."***² Yet there is another part of him (and he is speaking for us all) that rebels, for the law not only exposes our shortcomings but also produces a desire for the very thing it forbids. Consequently, this inner conflict drives him to despair, and he cries out, ***"Who will deliver me from this body of death?"***³ But then he responds, ***"Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"***⁴ Even so, the right answer does not erase the struggle. It simply tells us where the victory will come from.

¹ Romans 7:15

² Romans 7:12

³ Romans 7:24

⁴ Romans 7:25

In the end, conflicts and disagreements can produce something good. For example, I have had people challenge me over things that I have said in the pulpit, and I am a better person for it. Their challenges have made me think more deeply and led to a humbler, gentler approach to various topics.

Conflicts and disagreements also produced something good in the founding of our country. In 1786, the founders of our nation admitted that the Articles of Confederation were not strong enough to hold the states together, and the unity they once enjoyed was falling apart. Therefore, they issued a bold call for a new gathering — not to tweak the old system, but to imagine a new one. For that reason, **1786 marks the birth of the nation's re-founding**, the moment we acknowledged our weakness and sought a better way.

One year later, with the Constitutional Convention of 1787, that call became reality, but not without severe conflict. At one point, the convention delegates were extremely divided. Tempers were rising, and the debates over representation — large states vs. small states — had reached a breaking point. Some feared the Convention might collapse entirely.

At that moment, Benjamin Franklin—81 years old and too weak to speak publicly—submitted his remarks in writing, asking another delegate to read them aloud. What followed was one of the most remarkable and consequential speeches of the entire Convention.

He reminded the delegates that during the Revolution, the Continental Congress had prayed daily for God's guidance—and that those prayers had been answered. Then he asked a piercing question:

“Have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?”

He therefore urged the convention assembly to begin each day with prayer, led by local clergy, asking for God's help in forming a government worthy of the nation's hopes.

Franklin ended with a plea that still sounds like a warning to every generation: *"I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven... be held in this assembly every morning."*

He wasn't trying to impose a particular religion; he was calling the nation back to humility. He saw what was happening in that room — and what still happens in ours—the delegates were trusting in their own brilliant understanding too much. Pride and ego were choking the possibility of unity. Competition was drowning out cooperation. And Franklin knew that without prayer, without a deliberate turning toward the One who judges nations and bends history, they would build a country on the shaky foundation of human wisdom and self-confidence.

Prayer, he insisted, would remind them — and reminds us — that a nation cannot be truly free if it forgets the God from whom true freedom comes. Prayer would re-center them in dependence, soften their hearts toward one another, and open their ears to wisdom not born of ambition but of grace. On this July 4th weekend, his appeal becomes our own: humility before God is not a threat to liberty; it is the only soil in which liberty can survive.

In other words, Franklin was calling for the very virtues Jesus highlights in our Gospel today when he declared, ***"Come unto me, all ye that labor 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."***⁵

⁵ Ibid.

We long for the rest Jesus promises; something in us hungers for it, especially when we feel the weight of our own shortcomings. Yet the moment Jesus speaks of a yoke, many of us instinctively pull back. A yoke pictures restraint, limitation, even the loss of freedom—hardly the image we would choose for ourselves. But given the conflict referred to in our New Testament lesson, the yoke becomes a gift rather than a burden. It is the very thing that steadies us when our personal freedoms are used in self-destructive ways, leaving us exhausted, isolated, or wandering. Jesus' yoke will therefore gently guide us towards the rest we truly seek.

When Jesus chose the image of a yoke, He was describing a relationship of deep companionship—two walking side by side, moving in the same direction, covering the same ground, meeting the same obstacles, and keeping the same pace. It is an image of intimacy, guidance, and ultimately, fulfillment.

When viewed correctly, his invitation offers three gifts. **First, connection:** *Be with me.* A yoke is never made for one. It binds two together so that the stronger can steady the weaker. With His yoke upon us, Christ comes alongside us with the strength to shoulder what we cannot carry alone.

Second, direction: A yoke moves two forward together. To be yoked to Jesus means we cannot wander off on our own anymore. Yet in that holy constraint, we discover real freedom—the freedom of moving onward and upward toward the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Third, character: Our translation, which describes Jesus' yoke as “easy” can be misleading. The Greek word actually describes something well-fitted, kind, useful, and good. His yoke does not chafe or bruise; it suits who we are and who we are becoming.

At first, a yoke may not sound like something positive. It can feel like a cross. Yet when I am tired, worn out, and burned out on religion, the offer still stands: “Come unto me.” And when I take Christ’s yoke upon me—when I choose to walk in step with Him—I find myself more joyful, more grounded, and more fulfilled. Under His yoke, life gains meaning and purpose. And so, Jesus assures His listeners, and us, that His “yoke is well-fitting and His burden is light,” because He is “gentle and humble in heart.” Amen.

Therefore, **let’s pray:** *Heavenly Father, thank you for allowing us the privilege of intimacy with your Son. Thank you for the promise of rest and freedom that comes with willingly surrendering ourselves to you. And finally, thank you for our country, and for the many faithful people who in the day of decision ventured much for the liberties we now enjoy. Grant that we may not rest until all the people of this land share the benefits of true freedom, and gladly accept its disciplines. This we ask in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*