

FIRST SERMON MANUSCRIPT

"The Hangman's Noose"

(The idea for the visual in this sermon was taken from a sermon by Jerry Simon, the author's late father.)

Introduction

When desire turns to obligation, bondage begins (**As this statement is made slowly, place rope around neck. Throughout the sermon, continue to tug at rope and occasionally take it off and then reposition it around neck for emphasis**). There is such a fine line between wanting to do something and feeling forced to do something. The line can be crossed in just minutes or it can take months or years. So many times in life we seem to start out with great excitement and energy only to end up feeling forced to continue or complete a task. What kinds of things in your life were started with a great desire and ended with great obligation? I remember my first experience mowing the grass.

My brother is three years older than me. As with most events in life, he had the opportunity to experience grass mowing a few years sooner than I did. I remember how fun he made that menial task appear. When I was ten or eleven, I begged my dad to give me a chance to mow the grass. My brother was more than willing to lend his support to my cause and in a matter of a few days, I was given my chance

to mow the lawn. The experience was exhilarating. My brother was happy. My father was happy. I was happy. My happiness, however, was short-lived. After the second or third time of mowing the grass, I no longer was interested in the weekly chore. The problem was, however, that I had proven my ability and my brother was no longer interested in mowing the

lawn. Neither of us were thrilled with mowing the lawn. Desire had turned to obligation and bondage had begun.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to see Garrison, our seventeen-month-old son, have an exciting time. On our way to the high school competition this year in Tulsa, our group stopped at a hotel with an indoor pool. It didn't take the group long to head to the pool, and I decided to take Garrison for a swim. As we approached the pool, Garrison's face lit up. He started pointing at the pool and saying, "lattr, lattr, lattr", his word for water. He repeatedly would come to the edge of the pool and with coaxing jump out to the water where I was waiting to catch him. After several minutes, he walked over to puddles that had gathered on the concrete around the pool and started stomping the water and dancing around. Eventually he started crawling through the water on his hands and knees.

That same boy, after missing a nap, when placed in a similar surrounding for a bath, has been known to throw a

fit to get out of the water. Desire and obligation. What I want, and what I have to do.

Many issues in life reflect the tug between desire and obligation. Our job, a career choice, and taxes--well that could be a desire or obligation--depending if you get a refund or owe. The closer to April 15, the bigger the obligation. For some it may be their marriage. The desires of honeymoon may have slipped to boring obligation.

You know for some people today, their faith has become like mowing the grass or, in Garrison's case, taking a bath. The yoke of bondage and the pressure that they feel have zapped their joy and have brought frustration and depression. This is not a new problem in the Church.

#### Background to the text

Acts 15:1-29 provides excellent insight into the theme of this message. Paul and Barnabas had been sent as missionaries from Antioch and were experiencing many Gentile, or non-Jewish, conversions everywhere they went. On their return to Antioch, men from Judea came and claimed that the Gentile converts must be circumcised in order to be saved. Now I don't know about you, but circumcision for grown men is quite an obligation. I requested after Garrison was born to be present at his circumcision. I even have a video of it. Let's just say it was not a pleasant experience for Garrison or me for that matter.

The men in this passage who stirred up the people apparently belonged to the party of the Pharisees and had continued the traditions and customs of Moses' law after conversion. These men felt they had a legitimate need to protect the laws of Moses. The pharisaic sect had developed after the exile and their purpose and reason for existence was to insure that Israel kept the commandments of God. We have a dilemma. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem for a council meeting to determine the solution for the argument.

#### Personal Burdens

After the assembly had gathered, the group of believers belonging to the party of the Pharisees stood up and presented their case. In verses seven through eleven, Peter added his input to the situation (**read the verses**). Notice that Peter addresses the "brothers"--the ones obviously affected by the forthcoming ruling. I'm just joking. In the Greek, "brothers" includes both male and female--although in the time period, leadership was male-dominated. In the second half of verse ten we have our first problem: personal burdens. The Pharisees had carried the burden of the law, what Peter called a yoke, for their entire lifetime.

The pharisaic system had been set up to insure compliance with the law. The interpretations of the law had a wide

range among the Pharisees in the first century. Jesus, who some believe was in the pharisaic tradition, condemned not the Pharisees as a sect, but the hypocrites within that sect. Pharisees, at certain times, would have to do some creative interpretation to achieve a particular goal. Dr. Mansfield, a professor at ORU, gives the example of the law restricting travel on the Sabbath. In pharisaic interpretation, one restriction was that a person could not cross a stream of water. Another statute stated that a person could always return home on the Sabbath. If a person desired to go somewhere that required crossing a stream, all he or she had to do was to make sure they were on their way to their family home. Thus, in some instances, the Pharisee would say that one statute supersedes another.

In this state of constant obligation to the law, Peter mentioned that no one has been able to bear the yoke that develops. At this point it might be necessary to say that the differentiation we will be making today is not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. The Pharisees in the meeting were merely holding to the customs that they had been taught from birth. Although they had been freed from the curse of the law by their conversion experience, they had held to customs and traditions that caused a continuous yoke. Although we are removed thousands of years from this account, we still find ways to burden ourselves.

At the age of ten, I began to play the trumpet in middle-school band. I remember how excited I was to get the opportunity to practice the trumpet. At home, I would sit and practice for hours at a time. In fact, unlike most parents of aspiring musicians, my parents often asked me not to practice because of all the noise.

I continued to play throughout my teenage years and upon graduation from high school was offered several scholarships to become a music major at Oral Roberts University. With great enthusiasm I signed up for every ensemble in which I could be a member. For two years, everything seemed to be going smoothly. Unexpectedly, however, in my junior year, my attitude toward practicing began to change. I no longer looked forward to rehearsals and performances. My desires began to change from a recreational relaxation to an expected, daily drudgery. I remember sitting and daydreaming about what it would be like not to have the expectations and pressures of performing. Desire had turned to obligation and bondage had begun. If I allowed you the opportunity today, you could probably fill the remainder of the time with stories from your own life similar to mine.

In this same way, many of you today may be holding to personal burdens and obligations in your Christian life that you are unable to bear. I had the opportunity to serve as a

chaplain intern for a year during my seminary experience. For the most part, I visited elderly patients on the cardiology and renal dialysis floors. Over the course of several weeks I developed friendships with certain ones and we began to discuss their spirituality. I was grieved to find that many of the patients were carrying guilt and condemnation over the fact that they were no longer able to attend church regularly. They would say, "I used to be a strong Christian; I went to church every time we had service, but after this illness happened some years ago, I quit being able to attend regularly."

They made the same mistake these pharisaic Christians made in Jerusalem. They focused on the external actions and rituals, instead of their internal relationship with God. If I took away your ability to do anything for God, would you feel an unresolved guilt or burden? Personal burdens can choke at your faith and can cause you to live a defeated Christian life. The desire slowly turns to obligation; then bondage begins.

#### Placed Burdens

When a person feels personal burdens, the next logical progression is to place burdens on someone else. It should come as no surprise that this happened in the life of the early Church. Peter noted in verse ten that this is exactly what the legalists were attempting to do. The men from Judea

started in Antioch by demanding circumcision and ended in Jerusalem by demanding circumcision along with the law of Moses.

Paul was no stranger to the issue of circumcision. In Chapter 16 of Acts, he had Timothy circumcised so that the Jewish people would accept them as they traveled on missions. However, in Galatians it is revealed that Paul strongly demanded that Titus not be circumcised because those around him were demanding his circumcision as a completion of his salvation.

It is a sad fact that we as Christians today continue to place burdens on each other that drive us toward bondage. Issues such as the length of hair and the sinfulness of pants for women are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to burdens that are placed on new converts in some churches.

In Tulsa, I had the opportunity to visit several churches. One church Stephanie and I visited was the Vineyard church. The week before we visited, I had bought a new suit. I decided to wear it that Sunday. I was unfamiliar with the church's feeling toward dress clothes until I walked into the church. Stephanie and I stuck out like a sore thumb. The stares and the looks that we received made it difficult for us to enjoy and participate in the service. That church had reacted against the idea that Sunday morning services required dress clothes. In doing this, however,

they had traded one legalism for another. The Christians in Antioch were relatively new in the faith. The impression of the men from Judea must have left them confused about what was necessary for salvation.

I presently serve as the school principal here at VFCA. A particular concern of mine has been the number of family environments where the external rituals of Christianity are stressed above and beyond the internal relationship with God. A child in this position develops a skewed picture of the Christian faith and when the placed burdens become great enough, rebellion often occurs.

As a teenager, when we lived in Louisiana, our church had a well-known husband and wife ministry team come to visit. During the altar call so many people responded that a line was formed in the fellowship hall. As the two ministers worked their way down the line, they came to a man about three over from where I was in line. As they began to pray with him, they noticed cigarettes in his shirt pocket. Immediately the discussion began about the sinfulness of smoking and the guest speakers even said he had to stop smoking or else miss going to heaven. Smoking will not keep you from heaven. Rejecting Christ, however, will. I am in no way condoning smoking, I am only pointing out how we sometimes place conditions on people that are not helpful. I don't ever remember seeing that man in our church again. Placed burdens.

There are personal burdens and placed burdens. When we get our eyes off of the simplicity of salvation and add to it, a burden begins—a yoke begins that can only choke at the heart. Rule after rule, expectation after expectation, tightens the noose and weighs on the yoke. What can we do to restore our joy and remove this burden? Is there a solution to this problem?

### Perfecting Burdens

In verse eleven, Peter came through with the solution. Through the grace of Christ we have been saved. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus discussed the very issue of a yoke (**read**). At the point when it seems that our faith will be choked and bondage will develop, Christ steps in with His love and offers us His yoke that is easy and light (**As this promise is stated, tear the rope quickly from neck and then pause for a brief moment.**) It is through cultivating a relationship with Christ that we can avoid the pitfalls of personal and placed burdens.

Some may say since Christ is offering a light burden, one can stop any activity that is a burden. Almost like the beer commercial that says "anytime is miller time as long as it feels good." That's not the offer from Christ. Let's look at what Christ expects. From my understanding, He directs us to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbor

as ourselves. If we do that, we won't have to worry about our desires turning to obligations.

For three years of my childhood I lived with my family in Uganda, East Africa as a missionary kid. One of the advantages to living in Africa was that we were allowed to have a pet monkey. His name was Monk-Monk. In Africa, we lived in a remote area. To insure that Monk-Monk would not run away, my dad placed a pole in the front yard and tied Monk-Monk to the pole with a long chain.

Monk-Monk did not like the chain. He ran as far as he could in a direction until the chain would jerk his neck backwards. Then he would run in the opposite direction until the chain ran out of links. After several days of watching Monk-Monk struggle to get free, my parents felt sorry for him and decided to set him free. As soon as the chain was gone, Monk-Monk headed for the bush country. For several days we saw no trace of Monk-Monk. Then, all of a sudden, we saw him coming down the road to our house. He did not look very good. He was skinny and scratched up and looked like he had been through a nightmare. Monk-Monk never left our yard again. He had found the difference between desire and obligation. With the chain, he felt bound and constricted and could not appreciate the benefits of his circumstance. After his experience, no chain was needed to keep him at home. He had found the love and security he needed. Christ has provided the home. Will you return to experience His love?

### Conclusion and Invitation

Improper personal burdens and placed burdens will hinder your relationship with God. Do not focus on the external at the expense of the internal. Today I am specifically mentioning two types of people in my invitation. First, do you feel overwhelmed by your Christian life or perhaps some other area in your life? I would like to pray with you. Second, have you been guilty of placing burdens on others? I would like to pray with you, as well. God can restore "the joy of His salvation". Take His yoke and learn from Him. You can find rest. God's forgiveness is available for those who maybe inadvertently have burdened others with a heavy yoke. Three types of burdens were described today-personal burdens, placed burdens, and perfected burdens. Is your spiritual life as exciting as Garrison's experience in the swimming pool or are you fighting the bath? Do you desire to seek God, or are you involved in spiritual issues out of obligation? We have to be able to identify when the desires are changing and guard, protect, and pray that God will continue to reveal Himself to us. Don't let desire turn to obligation.