

March 2021

Frank W. Nelte

MY YOKE IS EASY AND MY BURDEN IS LIGHT

We have all read Matthew 11:30 at some point.

For my yoke *is* **easy**, and my burden is **light**. (Matthew 11:30)

What did Jesus Christ mean? Did He mean that the Christian life would be "easy"? Is Christianity "a light burden"? It seems that **all the other Scriptures** that refer to the Christian life tell us **the opposite** ... that the Christian life will be filled with trials and with difficulties and with persecution. So how are we to understand Matthew 11:30?

Consider the following statements by Jesus Christ.

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. **In the world you shall have tribulation**: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

"Tribulation" is not something we would think of as "easy" or as "light". Similarly:

Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any *man* will come after Me, **let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me**. (Matthew 16:24)

To "deny ourselves" is not that easy; and "taking up our stake", a symbol for an extremely cruel form of punishment, is certainly not "a light burden". Consider also:

And **a man's foes shall be** they of **his own household**. He that loves **father or mother** more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loves **son or daughter** more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Matthew 10:36-37)

The prospect of members of our own families possibly becoming our "foes" is not an easy one to contend with. We certainly must be prepared to put faithfulness to Jesus Christ above any and all family loyalties, but in many cases that may involve much more than "a light burden" for people to live with.

Jesus Christ also said:

Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted Me, **they will also persecute you**; if they have kept My saying, they will keep yours also. (John 15:20)

This is a clear statement that a true Christian has to be prepared for a certain amount of persecution. But persecution is never "easy" or "light".

As an example, let's look at some of the trials the Apostle Paul had to face.

Of the Jews **five times** received I forty *stripes* save one. **Thrice** was I beaten with rods, **once** was I stoned, **thrice** I suffered shipwreck, **a night and a day** I have been in the deep. (2 Corinthians 11:24-25)

That is **a dozen major trials** right here in these two verses; and this is only a partial list of the trials

endured by Paul. These experiences can certainly not be described as "easy" or as "light". No, they are much more accurately described by words like "tribulation", and by the expression "taking up our stake and following Jesus Christ".

The Bible shows that in the past many of God's true servants were put to death, precisely because they were the servants of God. And that record goes back all the way to Abel. This situation of severe persecution is also expressed by the imagery of "**the souls of them that were slain for the word of God**" in Revelation 6:9. There is nothing "easy" or "light" about having to die for our commitment to God.

So once again:

What did Jesus Christ really mean when He said "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light"? Or did Jesus Christ actually say something completely different, and we are simply dealing with one more mistranslation? Let's take a closer look at this verse.

DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

I have checked about 30 different English translations of the Bible, and all of them either use the exact same words as the KJV, or they at least use very similar words which convey the same picture ... that Jesus Christ's yoke is "easy" and that His burden is "light".

I have not come across a single English language translation that in any way presents a different meaning. So let's look at the Greek text for this verse, and then let's also look at the first significant other language into which the Greek text was translated, i.e. the Latin Vulgate.

Here is the transliterated Greek text for Matthew 11:30.

Ho gar zugos mou **chrestos** kai to phortion mou **elaphron** estin. (Matthew 11:30, Greek TR)

And here is the Latin Vulgate text for this verse.

iugum enim meum **suave** est et onus meum **leve** est. (Matthew 11:30, Vulgate)

In Matthew 11:30 "easy" is a translation of the Greek word "chrestos". And "light" is a translation of the Greek word "elaphron". The equivalent Latin words in the Latin Vulgate are "suave" and "leve".

So we have the following situation:

The Greek word "**chrestos**" is translated as "**suave**" into Latin, and as "**easy**" into English. And the Greek word "**elaphron**" is translated as "**leve**" into Latin, and as "**light**" into English.

Before looking at the meanings of these two Greek words themselves, let's first look at the meanings of the two Latin words into which the Greek text was first translated.

The Latin word "**suavis**" (i.e. "suave" in the text) means: **agreeable, pleasant, gratifying, sweet**. We might include "**easy**" in those meanings, because all of these words refer to something that is "easy to accept". "Easy" is a fair translation for the Latin word "suavis".

The Latin word "**levis**" (i.e. "leve" in the text) means: light (i.e. **not heavy**), trivial, fickle, smooth, polished, capricious. So "light" is also an acceptable translation for the Latin word "levis".

What this means in plain language is this:

Our English text "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" is a fairly accurate translation for the Latin Vulgate text of Matthew 11:30. Or to state this in a different way:

Our English translation of Matthew 11:30 can readily be led back to the Latin Vulgate text.

But the Latin Vulgate text is not the criterion for what Jesus Christ was saying in this verse. The criterion for what Jesus Christ actually said is the Greek text, and not the Latin translation of the Greek text. So now let's look at the Greek text for this verse.

MEANING OF THE GREEK WORD "CHRESTOS"

With the understanding that our English translation is a perfectly correct translation of the Latin Vulgate text, let's now look at the meanings of the two **Greek** words in the original text. Do the two Greek words have the same meanings as the Latin words with which they have been translated? Or do their meanings disagree with the meanings of the two Latin words in question.

The Greek word "**chrestos**" is used only seven times in the New Testament. The meanings for "chrestos" given in Greek dictionaries include: good, pleasant, kind, gracious, fit for use, etc. The best way for us to establish the intended meaning of this word in this passage is to look at how "chrestos" is used in other New Testament verses. Here are some of those other verses.

No man also having drunk old *wine* straightway desires new: for he says, The old is **better** ("chrestos"). (Luke 5:39)

The context here tells us that "better" is a better translation than "easy". This statement is a comparison of two different wines, and therefore a comparative statement is called for. It would be incongruous to translate this as "**The old is easy**". That just doesn't make sense.

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the **goodness** ("chrestos") of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)

It would also not make sense in this verse to translate "chrestos" as "easy", because "**the ease of God leads you to repentance**" also doesn't make sense. So "goodness" is a very suitable translation in this verse. Here is another verse where "chrestos" is used.

Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt **good** ("chrestos") manners. (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Again, in this verse "chrestos" cannot mean "easy". It obviously must mean "good". Let's look at one more verse.

If so be you have tasted that the Lord *is* **gracious** ("chrestos"). (1 Peter 2:3)

It would be totally wrong to translate this as "**the Lord is easy**". It obviously means "the Lord is good", and "gracious" is a very suitable alternative rendering.

So here is the point:

Our translation of Matthew 11:30 as "My yoke is **easy**" is a serious mistranslation of the Greek text!

This statement has nothing at all to do with "easy"! And we are able to reach this conclusion simply by looking at the other places where this word "chrestos" is used in the New Testament. None of the other uses of "chrestos" have anything at all to do with "easy".

What Jesus Christ really said in Matthew 11:30 is: "My yoke is **good**". And what this statement means is:

"it is good for us to bear the yoke of Jesus Christ, instead of bearing the yoke that this world seeks to impose on us."

The statement "My yoke is good" is **not** a comparison of easy versus difficult, or of heavy versus light. **It is a comparison of value!**

Christ's yoke is **good**, and the world's yoke is **bad**. Christ's yoke is **very valuable** because it leads to eternal life; and the world's yoke is **utterly worthless** because it leads to death.

This is the comparison Jesus Christ was presenting in the first part of this verse. And it was the Latin Vulgate translation that changed this focus away from "good vs. bad" to "easy vs. difficult". That was a very subtle but perverse shift in focus.

Now let's look at the second Greek word.

MEANING OF THE GREEK WORD "ELAPHRON"

The Greek word "elaphron" is an adjective, which is used only two times in the whole New Testament, the other verse being 2 Corinthians 4:17.

For our **light** ("elaphron) affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory; (2 Corinthians 4:17)

This verse should really make us take notice. Here in this verse Paul supposedly refers to the Christian trials as "light", and then a few chapters later **in the same letter** Paul lists the dozen major trials he himself endured (2 Corinthians 11:24-25 again). Paul obviously did not mean that those major trials he had endured were "light". "Light affliction" is something you wouldn't even bother to remember. You yourself don't remember most of the "light" tests you have faced in your life, because "light trials" don't really make an impression on us.

So Paul's discussion of his own trials in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 should already cause us to question the statement "**our** light affliction" in chapter 4, because these two statements are not really compatible.

Anyway, 2 Corinthians 4:17 presents a similar subject to Matthew 11:30. So the word "elaphron" is used by Jesus Christ to refer to "**a burden**", and by the Apostle Paul to refer to "**affliction**". And both are supposedly "light". But neither verse gives us more insight into the Greek word "elaphron". So let's now take a closer look at this word "elaphron".

This Greek adjective is understood to be related to the biblical Greek verb "**elauno**", a verb that is used five times in the New Testament.

Now we come to something very interesting.

The Greek verb "elauno" is translated into English twice as "**to row**", twice as "**to drive**" and once as "**to**

carry". None of these translations have anything at all to do with "light as opposed to heavy". Here are these five occurrences.

And He saw them toiling in **rowing** ("elauno") ; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night He comes unto them, walking upon the sea, and would have passed by them. (Mark 6:48)

(For He had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For oftentimes it had caught him: and he was kept bound with chains and in fetters; and he brake the bands, and **was driven** ("elauno") of the devil into the wilderness.) (Luke 8:29)

So when they **had rowed** ("elauno") about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the ship: and they were afraid. (John 6:19)

Behold also the ships, which though *they be* so great, and **are driven** ("elauno") of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor chooses. (James 3:4)

These are wells without water, clouds that **are carried** ("elauno") with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. (2 Peter 2:17)

"A tempest" refers to a violent storm. It would be equally correct to say that these clouds "**are driven** by a violent storm", in line with the translations for "elauno" in the other verses listed above.

So in examining all the places where "elauno" is used, what meaning do we get for **the verb "elauno"**?

This Greek verb talks about putting out enormous effort in trying to row a ship in a storm. It refers to a demon-possessed man being "driven" into extreme activity. It refers to ships being driven by fierce winds. And it applies to clouds being helplessly driven in a storm.

Every single use of this verb involves **the use of enormous energy to achieve something**. Can we see that? This verb always, without exception, refers to the opposite of "light". Nothing in these five verses (and they are the only ones where this verb is used!) refers to anything that is "light" or "easy". Every single verse refers to **the opposite of "light"**.

Can we see that?

The Greek verb "elauo" does not have anything at all to do with "light (in weight)", and neither does the adjective "elaphron", which is connected to "elauo", have anything to do with "light".

So here is the thing we should note!

"Light" is a **correct translation for the Latin word "leve"**.

But **"light"** is a serious **mistranslation for the Greek word "elaphron"**.

That is what all the uses of the verb "elauo" clearly show us. And a serious examination of all the uses of "elauo" should have made this equally clear to all the translators of the New Testament. But the translators were influenced by the inappropriate Latin translation instead.

Jesus Christ did not refer to the Christian life as "a **light** burden". And neither did the Apostle Paul refer to the Christian life as "a **light** affliction" in 2 Corinthians 4:17. In both places we are dealing with a mistranslation of the Greek word "elaphron".

So how should we translate "elaphron" in Matthew 11:30?

Here is my amplified translation for this verse:

"For **My yoke is good**, because it is focused on a good result; *and* **My burden is driven** towards (i.e. **it is focused on**) the very specific goal of leading human beings to an immortal existence within the Family of God." (Matthew 11:30, my personal Amplified Version)

(Comment: Later I will have something to say about the word "and" in this verse. But that need not concern us at this stage.)

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 the Apostle Paul in fact **spells out the goal** on which the Christian burden or affliction is focused.

For our "elaphron" affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us **a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**; (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Paul shows what our affliction or burden will produce ... eternal glory in the presence of God. That's the goal our affliction is driving towards. That's the focus.

Getting back to Matthew 11:30:

Let's understand that Jesus Christ made this statement with the intention of **motivating us to put out our maximum effort** so that ultimately we will be granted salvation by God.

Jesus Christ did not make this statement to put us at ease, as the words "easy" and "light" imply. No, He said this to stir us up to put out maximum effort ... like rowing a boat against the wind in a storm. The first part of Christ's statement shows us **the value** that God is offering us (i.e. "**My yoke** is good"); and the second part of Christ's statement is aimed at **stirring us up** into putting out whatever effort may be required to achieve that goal (i.e. "**My burden** forcefully drives you towards that very specific goal").

THE CONTEXT

Let's also look at the context in which Jesus Christ made this statement in verse 30.

In Matthew 11:7-11 Jesus Christ spoke about John the Baptist, who had suffered **persecution**, and who was facing death at the hands of Herod. John was anything but "a reed shaken with the wind" (verse 7). Nothing about John's life was "easy" or "light".

In Matthew 11:12-19 Jesus Christ then spoke about not light but **severe persecution** which He Himself and John the Baptist had to deal with.

Then in Matthew 11:20-24 Christ presented a certain degree of **condemnation** for the cities that had rejected His ministry, and which cities had dismissed the witness they had received from Jesus Christ.

Then in Matthew 11:25-27 Jesus Christ referred to **those who are called by God** to be in God's Church. And in verses 28-30 Jesus Christ then spoke directly to those who have been called by God the Father. And the very first statement about those who are called by God is an acknowledgment of the burden and the stress that this calling brings with it.

Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Who is Jesus Christ speaking to in this verse ... the whole world? No, of course not! After all, Jesus Christ also clearly said: "**no man can come unto Me**, except it were given unto him of My Father" (John 6:65). So in Matthew 11:28 Jesus Christ was saying **to those who have been called** by God the Father, and **to no one else**, "come unto Me".

And it is those who have been called by God who "labor and are heavy laden". These are the people who have made a commitment to God. And as a result they are "heavy laden". This is in full agreement with the Scriptures we looked at earlier (i.e. Matthew 10:36-37; Matthew 16:24; John 15:20; John 16:33; etc.), Scriptures that predict severe persecution and trials and difficulties for the true Christian.

Matthew 11:28 is not addressed to the world. It is addressed to those who come into God's Church. And it is an acknowledgment that they are **already** carrying a heavy load. It doesn't make sense that two verses later Jesus Christ supposedly says that their burden is somehow "light".

Can we see that it doesn't make sense that, if people who are already carrying a heavy load (verse 28) because of having made a commitment to God, when they take Christ's yoke upon themselves (verse 29), then somehow the end result is a lighter yoke (verse 30)? That just doesn't work.

Here is verse 29.

Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. (Matthew 11:29)

Jesus Christ clearly tells us to take "a yoke" upon ourselves. But by definition "**a yoke**" is **always a burden**. When used figuratively, "a yoke" is always a reference to some additional burden. If something is not a burden, then it is also not "a yoke". Very clearly Jesus Christ here tells us to take "His burden" upon ourselves. This is also acknowledged in the second part of this statement.

The point is that Jesus Christ then said: "My yoke is **good**". He did **not** say "My yoke is **easy**". There is nothing in Jesus Christ's statement to suggest "easy".

In this statement Jesus Christ was using words that are more or less synonymous. The words "yoke" and "burden" both refer to the same thing, a burden which we accept to carry, something that will require **a lot of effort** on our part to cope with, and not something that is "light" and no trouble at all.

THE GREEK WORD FOR "AND"

In Matthew 11:30 the two statements are joined by the word "and". Here is the text again:

For My yoke is easy, **and** My burden is light.

The Greek word translated "and" is "**kai**". Now "kai" is a conjunction that is used **over 9,200 times** in the New Testament. It is translated 8,173 times as "and". There is no question that the primary meaning of "kai" is "and". That is certain. But "kai" is also more than 1,000 times translated by words other than "and". So without question "kai" also has some other meanings in addition to "and".

One of the other words with which "kai" is also translated in the New Testament is "**but**". In fact, there are 42 places where "kai" is translated appropriately as "but". We'll look at a few examples shortly.

Now there is nothing grammatical that tells a translator: here you must translate "kai" as "and", and here you must translate "kai" as "but". That decision to translate "kai" as either "and" or as "but" is based totally and exclusively on the translator's understanding of the whole context within which "kai" is used. If the translator understands the context one way, then he will translate "kai" as "and"; and if he understands the context in a different way, then he will translate "kai" with words like: but, also, even, then, likewise, etc.

All these words (i.e. but, also, even, then, likewise) are in certain contexts very appropriate translations into English for the Greek word "kai".

Now for us in English the difference between "and" and "but" is this:

The conjunction "**and**" **joins items** in the same class. Things joined by "and" typically have something in common, and they go together. The conjunction "**but**", on the other hand, **creates a contrast**. In English we expect some kind of contrast, or something that is contrary, when we see the word "but".

Let's look at two places where "kai" is appropriately translated as "but".

Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; **but** ("kai") she could not: (Mark 6:19)

And they sought to lay hold on Him, **but** ("kai") feared the people: for they knew that He had spoken the parable against them: and they left Him, and went their way. (Mark 12:12)

There are many other examples we could look at, which make this same point: sometimes "kai" is used to present a contrast between two statements.

So here is my point:

In Matthew 11:30 Jesus Christ was making a contrast with His two statements. And this contrast becomes clear when we understand the first statement correctly.

Jesus Christ did **not** say: "My yoke is easy, **and** My burden is light".

What Jesus Christ really said was:

"My yoke is **good**, **but** My burden will require your maximum effort to achieve, because My burden drives you towards a specific goal."

In simplified terms, Jesus Christ was saying: what I will put on you is good, **but you will have to work hard**, like trying to row your boat in a strong storm.

So in conclusion:

Our English translation is based completely on the misleading Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek text for Matthew 11:30. Our translation does not give us a faithful rendering of the actual Greek text.

Thus our English text presents a very misleading picture. It all starts with changing Christ's focus of **good vs. bad** to the Latin Vulgate focus of **easy vs. difficult**. The second part of Christ's statement is then mistranslated to further reinforce the wrong easy vs. difficult focus. And those two statements are then seen as complementary, like stating the same point twice in a slightly different way.

A correct rendering of the Greek text acknowledges that true Christianity involves accepting a burden which is good. But that burden will require great effort from us, as it drives us towards the goal of attaining salvation.

This is in agreement with every other statement regarding the Christian calling being one that involves trials and persecution and difficult challenges.

Frank W Nelte