

# The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

## Chapter 11: The Yoke of Religion

*At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. 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. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. MATTHEW 11:25-30.*

When I was of the age to receive confirmation and full membership in the Church, I was told to choose a passage from the Bible as the expression of my personal approach to the Biblical message and to the Christian Church. Every confirmer was obliged to do so, and to recite the passage before the congregation. When I chose the words, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden", I was asked with a kind of astonishment and even irony why I had chosen that particular passage. For I was living under happy conditions, and, being only fifteen years old, was without any apparent labor and burden. I could not answer at that time; I felt a little embarrassed, but basically right. And I was right, indeed; every child is right in responding immediately to those words; every adult is right in responding to them in all periods of his life, and under all the conditions of his internal and external history. These words of Jesus are universal, and fit every human being and every human situation. They are simple; they grasp the heart of the primitive as well as that of the profound, disturbing the mind of the wise. Practically every word of Jesus had this character, sharing the difference between Him as the originator and the dependent interpreters, disciples and theologians, saints and preachers. Returning for the first time in my life to the passage of my early choice, I feel just as grasped by it as at that time, but infinitely more embarrassed by its majesty, profundity and inexhaustible meaning. Our task in the face of words like these is obvious: we must point to the ground of their power over our souls; we must explain why, in their emotional force, the force of an ultimate truth is involved; and we must attempt to view our human situation in their light.

Three questions, aroused by the words of Jesus, shall be asked, and the answers implied in His words shall be interpreted. What is the labor and burden from which we can find rest through Him? What is the easy yoke and the light burden which He will put upon us? Why is He and He alone able to give such rest to our souls?

"All ye that labor and are heavy laden. . . .": this is addressed to all men, although not all men feel it in the same way. It is the general human situation to be heavy laden and to labor restlessly under a yoke too hard to be endured. What kind of burden is this? We may think first of the burdens and labors that daily life imposes upon us. But that is not indicated in our text. Jesus does not tell us that He will ease the labors and burdens of life and work. How could He, even if He wanted to? Whether or not we come to Him, the threats of illness or unemployment are not lessened, the weight of our work does not become easier, the fate of being refugee, driven from one country to another, is not changed; the horror of ruins, wounds, and death falling from heaven is not stopped; and the sorrow over the passing of friends or parents or children is not overcome. Jesus cannot and does not promise more pleasure and less pain to those whom He asks to come to Him. On the contrary, sometimes He promises them more pain, more persecution, more threat of death, or the cross, as He calls it. All this is not the burden to which He points.

Nor is it the burden of sin and guilt, as somebody educated in the traditional Christian interpretation of the work of Christ might assume. Nothing like that is indicated in the words of Jesus. Taking upon oneself His easy yoke does not mean taking sin more easily or taking guilt less seriously. He does not tell those who come to Him that their sins are not so important as they seemed to be. He does not give them an easier conscience about their failures and trespasses. On the contrary, He sharpens their conscience to the highest possible degree in practically every one of His words. He condemns sins which the traditional theology of His time did not even consider as sins. This is not the burden to which He points.

The burden He wants to take from us is the burden of religion. It is the yoke of the law, imposed on the people of His time by the religious teachers, the wise and understanding, as He calls them in our words, the Scribes and Pharisees, as they are called usually. Those who labor and are heavy laden are those who are sighing under the yoke of the religious law. And He will give them the power to overcome religion and law; the yoke He gives them is a "new being" above religion. The thing they will learn from him is the victory over the law of the wise and the understanding, and the law of the Scribes and Pharisees.

How does this concern us? Why does this concern all men, in all situations? It concerns us because, with all human beings, we are sighing under the law, under a law which is religion and a religion which is law. This is the depth of the word of Jesus; this is the truth, implied in the emotional power of His words. Man labors and toils, because he is that being which knows about his finitude, about his transitoriness, about the danger of living, and about the tragic character of existence. Fear and anxiety are the heritage of all people, as Paul knew when he looked at the Jews and the Pagans. Restlessness drives man during his whole life, as Augustine knew. A hidden element of despair is in every man's soul, as the great Danish Protestant, Kierkegaard, discovered. There is no religious genius, no keen observer of the abyss of the human soul, nobody capable of listening to the sounds of his heart, who would not witness to this insight into human nature and human existence. Splits and gaps are in every soul: for instance, we know that we are more than dust; and yet we know also that we are going to be dust. We know that we belong to a higher order than that of our animal needs and desires; and yet we know that we shall abuse the higher order in the service of our lower nature. We know that we are only small members of the spiritual world; and yet we know that we shall aspire to the whole, making ourselves the center of the world.

This is man; and because this is man, there is religion and law. The law of religion is the great attempt of man to overcome his anxiety and restlessness and despair, to close the gap within himself, and to reach immortality, spirituality and perfection. So he labors and toils under the religious law in thought and in act.

The religious law demands that he accept ideas and dogmas, that he believe in doctrines and traditions, the acceptance of which is the condition of his salvation from anxiety, despair and death. So he tries to accept them, although they may have become strange or doubtful to him. He labors and toils under the religious demand to believe things he cannot believe. Finally he tries to escape the law of religion. He tries to cast away the heavy yoke of the doctrinal law imposed on him by Church authorities, orthodox teachers, pious

parents, and fixed traditions. He becomes critical and skeptical. He casts away the yoke; but none can live in the emptiness of mere skepticism, and so he returns to the old yoke in a kind of self-torturing fanaticism and tries to impose it on other people, on his children or pupils. He is driven by an unconscious desire for revenge, because of the burden he has taken upon himself. Many families are disrupted by painful tragedies and many minds are broken by this attitude of parents, teachers and priests. Others, unable to stand the emptiness of skepticism, find new yokes outside the Church, new doctrinal laws under which they begin to labor: political ideologies which they propagate with religious fanaticism; scientific theories which they defend with religious dogmatism; and utopian expectations they pronounce as the condition of salvation for the world, forcing whole nations under the yoke of their creeds which are religions, even while they pretend to destroy religion. We are all laboring under the yoke of religion; we all, sometimes, try to throw away old or new doctrines or dogmas, but after a little while we return, again enslaving ourselves and others in their servitude.

The same is true of the practical laws of religion. They demand ritual activities, the participation in religious enterprises, and the study of religious traditions, prayer, sacraments and meditations. They demand moral obedience, inhuman self-control and asceticism, devotion to man and things beyond our possibilities, surrender to ideas and duties beyond our power, unlimited self-negation, and unlimited self-perfection: the religious law demands the perfect in all respects. And our conscience agrees with this demand. But the split in our being is derived from just this: that the perfect, although it is the truth, is beyond us, against us, judging and condemning us. So we try to throw away the ritual and moral demands. We neglect them, we hate them, we criticize them; some of us display a cynical indifference toward the religious and moral law. But since mere cynicism is as impossible as mere skepticism, we return to old or new laws, becoming more fanatic than ever before, and take a yoke of the law upon us, which is more self-defying, more cruel against ourselves, and more willing to coerce other people under the same yoke in the name of the perfect. Jesus Himself becomes for these perfectionists, puritans and moralists a teacher of the religious law putting upon us the heaviest of all burdens, the burden of *His* law. But that is the greatest possible distortion of the mind of Jesus. This distortion can be found in the minds of those who crucified Him because He broke the religious law, not by fleeing from it like the cynical Sadducees, but by overcoming it.

We are all permanently in danger of abusing Jesus by stating that He is the founder of a new religion, and the bringer of another, more refined, and more enslaving law. And so we see in all Christian Churches the toiling and laboring of people who are called Christians, serious Christians, under innumerable laws which they cannot fulfill, from which they flee, to which they return, or which they replace by other laws. This is the yoke from which Jesus wants to liberate us. He is more than a priest or a prophet or a religious genius. These all subject us to religion. He frees us from religion. They all make new religious laws; He overcomes the religious law.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn of me . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." This does not indicate a quantitative difference, a little easier, a little lighter. It indicates a contradiction! The yoke of Jesus is easy in itself, because it is above law, and replaces the toiling and laboring with rest in our souls. The yoke of religion and law presupposes all those splits and gaps in our souls which drive us to the attempt to overcome them. The yoke of Jesus is above those splits and gaps. It has overcome them whenever it appears and is received. It is not a new demand, a new doctrine or new morals, but rather a new reality, a new being and a new power of transforming life. He calls it a yoke, He means that it comes from above and grasps us with saving force; if He calls it easy, He means that it is not a matter of our acting and striving, but rather that it is given before anything we can do. It is being, power, reality, conquering the anxiety and despair, the fear and the restlessness of our existence. It is here, amongst us, in the midst of our personal tragedy, and the tragedy of history. Suddenly, within the hardest struggle, it appears as a victory, not attained by ourselves, but present beyond expectation and struggle. Suddenly we are grasped by a peace which is above reason, that is, above our theoretical seeking for the true, and above our practical striving for the good. The true -- namely, the truth of our life and of our existence -- has grasped us. We know that *now*, in this moment, we

are in the truth, in spite of all our ignorance about ourselves and our world. We have not become wiser and more understanding in any ordinary sense; we are still children in knowledge. But the truth of life is in us, with an illuminating certainty, uniting us with ourselves, giving us great and restful happiness. And the good, the ultimate good, which is not good for something else, but good in itself, has grasped us. We know that now, in this moment, we are in the good, in spite of all our weakness and evil, in spite of the fragmentary and distorted character of our Self and the world. We have not become more moral or more saintly; we still belong to a world which is subject to evil and self-destruction. But the good of life is in us, uniting us with the good of everything, giving us the blessed experience of universal love. If this should happen, and in such a measure, we should reach our eternity, the higher order and spiritual world to which we belong, and from which we are separated in our normal existence. We should be beyond ourselves. The new being would conquer us, although the old being would not disappear.

Where can we feel this new reality? We cannot find it; but it can find us. It tries to find us during our whole life. It is in the world; it carries the world; and it is the cause of the fact that our Self and our world are not yet thrown into utter self-destruction. Although it is hidden under anxiety and despair, under finitude and tragedy, it is in everything, in souls and bodies, because everything derives life from it. The new being means that the old being has not yet destroyed itself completely; that life is still possible; that our souls still gather force to go forward; and that the good and the true are not extinguished. It is present, and it will find us. Let us be found by it. It is stronger than the world, although it is quiet and meek and humble.

That is the meaning of the call of Jesus, "Come unto Me." For in Him this new being is present in such a way that it determines His life. That which is hidden in all things, that which appears to us sometimes in the great elevations of our soul, is the forming power of this life. It is the uniqueness and the mystery of His Being, the embodiment, the full appearance of the New Being. That is the reason that He can say words which no prophet or saint has ever said: that nobody knows God save Him and those who receive their knowledge through Him. These words certainly do not mean that He imposes a new theology or a new religious law upon us. They mean rather that He is the New Being in which everybody can participate, because it is universal and omnipresent. Why can He call Himself meek and lowly in heart after he has said words about His uniqueness, words that, in anyone else's mouth, would be blasphemous arrogance? It is because the New Being that forms Him is not created by Him. He is created by it. It has found Him, as it must find us. And since His Being is not the result of His striving and laboring, and since it is not servitude to the religious law but rather victory over religion and law that makes His uniqueness, He does not impose religion and law, burdens and yokes, upon men.

We would turn down His call with hatred if He called us to the Christian religion or to the Christian doctrines or to the Christian morals. We would not accept His claim to be meek and humble and to give rest to our souls, if He gave us new commands for thinking and acting. Jesus is not the creator of another religion, but the victor over religion; He is not the maker of another law, but the conqueror of law. We, the ministers and teachers of Christianity, do not call you to Christianity but rather to the New Being to which Christianity should be a witness and nothing else, not confusing itself with that New Being. Forget all Christian doctrines; forget your own certainties and your own doubts, when you hear the call of Jesus. Forget all Christian morals, your achievements and your failures, when you come to Him. Nothing is demanded of you, no idea of God, and no goodness in yourselves, not your being religious, not your being Christian, not your being wise, and not your being moral. But what is demanded is only your being open and willing to accept what is given to you, the New Being, the being of love and justice and truth, as it is manifest in Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light.

Let me close, as I began, with a personal word. Believe me, you who are religious and Christian. It would not be worthwhile to teach Christianity, if it were for the sake of Christianity. And believe me, you who are estranged from religion and far away from Christianity, it is not our purpose to make you religious and Christian when we interpret the call of Jesus for our time. We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a

new religion, but because He is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity. We spread His call because it is the call to every man in every period to receive the New Being, that hidden saving power in our existence, which takes from us labor and burden, and gives rest to our souls.

Do not ask in this moment what we shall do or how action shall follow from the New Being, from the rest in our souls. Do not ask; for you do not ask how the good fruits follow from the goodness of a tree. They follow; action follows being, and new action, better action, stronger action, follows new being, better being, stronger being. We and our world would be better, truer, and more just, if there were more rest for souls in our world. Our actions would be more creative, more conquering, conquering the tragedy of our time, if they grew out of a more profound level of our life. For our creative depth is the depth in which we are quiet.

Viewed 395084 times.