How are your New Year’s Resolutions going? Do you have any left? I can tell you that between the Girl Scout cookies and the snowmageddon, my “diet” is completely busted. I know our intentions are good. We make resolutions to improve our lives in different ways. But it is challenging to keep our commitments with so many competing distractions.

Why do we keep making resolutions year after year? Because we want a good life and hope that it will be different this time. That is a noble attitude that we must keep.

But what if I tell you that there is another kind of good life that is more important than how much we weigh or how we look? This good life is a gift. In John 10:10, Jesus said that he came to us so we may have and enjoy life and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows), “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

This good life is about living like Jesus. How is that for a New Year’s Resolution? This year I am going to be more like Jesus!

Nevertheless, despite our faith, we can easily become cynical about having a good life when our dreams come crashing down, our hearts get broken, and any personal fulfillment vanishes as smoke up in the air. Often we dream, plan, and hope for the best, but unexpected events and people get in the way, robbing us (or so we think) of our perfect plans. And we often respond to all that with cynicism, resentment, and perhaps even anger, “I believe in you, God, why would you not give me what I want?!” Our challenge is that we believe that our life is meaningless and unenjoyable unless we get our way. Has this happened to you?

Still, in the middle of our personal crises, we hear the words from Jesus, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

How can both things be true? Jesus promising us the best life, yet not getting everything we want. What is this good life if it does not include everything on our wish list?

The key to understanding and dealing with the tension between our cynicism of the challenges of the struggles we face and what Jesus promises us as the good life is committing to walking alongside him.

Let’s look at Matthew 11:28-30 to hear what Jesus says on this matter,

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus is talking about two main things here: his rest and yoke. The rest Jesus mentions here refers to the healing and redemption from the things that hurt, oppress, and destroy us from within.

When Jesus says, “come to me,” he offers an open invitation to everyone who hears him. This is an invitation aimed at all people to bless them with satisfaction and fulfillment and bring them to a place of belief, trust, and a deeper level of commitment to their faith.

For example, for those without Jesus, it is equivalent to a call to believe in him, repent and confess sin, welcome healing into their lives, and follow Jesus as new disciples. For those who are already believers, it may be a call to follow him as committed disciples. Perhaps it is also a calling for reconciliation and a “coming back” to God to completely turn their lives over to him. Regardless of where we are in our life journey, the invitation to everyone is to be saved and healed, reconciled and renewed.

Then, when we accept the rest of Jesus, things begin to change in our lives. We are no longer at war with God and each other. We no longer fight and destroy each other. We are no longer slaves to sin and brokenness. We no longer are infested by fear, anger, hate, and guilt; all those burdens have been lifted from us; they no longer weigh us down, control us, or define us.

The apostle Paul speaks to this in 2 Corinthians 5:17 by saying, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

So, when we come to Jesus for rest, it is not the kind that you find a couple of weeks in the summer but the relief in life that leads us to experience the fulfilling life Jesus promised to give us. We are talking about rest in our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and spiritual uncertainty. It is a rest that gives us peace and hope by making us whole. When you receive this kind of rest, the nightmares of your past and fears of the present lose their power over you and can’t haunt and constrain you anymore. The rest of Jesus sets you truly free.

Can you picture how different you would look and feel if Jesus took over all your negative feelings and thoughts? How would you wake up every morning without the weight of regret or anger? Well, that is what he is offering when he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” That is the good life, when we have peace and hope in our hearts. Peace in knowing we are loved (forgiven, restored) and hope in knowing that we will be well because he is with us.

Now, this does not just happen because we believe or pray in the right way. Jesus explains the process in these verses. Once we begin to experience the good life, if we want to keep these blessings and grow in them, we need more than belief; we need commitment. As Jesus positions us through our faith in him to begin enjoying our life in the ways God intended for us to do so, what do we do next?

Here is where the “yoke” comes in. Jesus said (paraphrasing), “I will give you rest, but you need me to keep it. Otherwise, you will squander it as everyone else has done when they think they can make it on their own.”

The good life is a yoke; it is commitment and dedication. Many people treat God as a genie and practice prayer as spells “What is the right prayer to get what I want? What are the words I need to say?” But forget that prayer is not a transaction but a relationship. So, when I say the good life is a yoke, I mean walking alongside Jesus every step we take and not only coming to him when we need something.

That is what a yoke means. Yokes are use to link a pair of animals to haul a load together. They are used mainly with oxen for plowing soil (see picture). The yoke is designed to carry and pull the weight of the harness together to help get the work done.

So, in the context of Jesus’ invitation, the yoke is about trusting him, saying: guide my steps, set my direction. The yoke is not about controlling us but for us to not forget that we are not alone. To keep us close. Because if we stay close to Jesus, we can listen to and see him better; we will have a supernatural sense of security and confidence because we know to whom we belong and with whom we are walking.

This is a critical understanding of Jesus’ invitation to come to him for his rest. And this is not only about relief from burdens but a transformation of who we are. Jesus wants us next to him because he knows we can’t become what we can’t see, hear, or understand. But, if we are close, we learn faster from him and become stronger and wiser to live our best life in this world—a good one with purpose.

This raises a challenging question: How can we expect to experience the good life when we wander so far away from him that we can’t even see, hear, or feel him? That is when we get lost and squander the blessings.

Consider the story of the prodigal son and how he decided to leave his father and family. He demanded his inheritance to go live on his terms, just to squander them all. As a result, he lost what he had been given as much as he lost himself.

Like him, we may get tempted to go on our own way away from God and get yoked to all kinds of bad stuff and people that bring us burdens, hurts, and brokenness. We get robbed of the rest of God in our lives because we get yoked to greed, anger, addictions, hate, and even to the wrong people that should not be a part of our lives because instead of contributing to our wellness, they diminish us. (Do you know any of them?)

My friends, it is not the will of God for us to be yoked to what destroys us—except Girl Scout cookies or Street Tacos. For this reason, Jesus wants to set us free from all bondages and break every chain—whether they are chains of the mind, heart, or spirit. That is what Jesus means when he says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

As you can see, Jesus’ yoke is not to oppress us or to become a new burden on us but to instruct and guide us into a life of freedom; to give us strength and confidence by not being alone; and, to carry us when we are weak or lose our way. The yoke is the request Jesus makes of us so he can form in us a new character and mindset, one that is consistent with the kind of blessings he wants to give us. It is then when his power is released into our lives and we experience the good life for real.

All this to say, the rest and yoke of Jesus are the keys to fulfillment, growth, and fruitfulness. We can only experience the fullness of a good life by walking alongside Jesus. The good life gives us peace, hope, and purpose if we come to him and follow his instructions. That is what I mean when I say the good life is a yoke.

Here is the invitation and good news: Surrender to Jesus and commit to walking alongside him, listening to and learning from him, for he said, “learn from me so you can find rest for your souls.”

And the good news is that we don’t have to know everything or even how to pray to have the blessings of the good life Jesus promises; we just have to accept his invitation to follow him with an honest heart, with child-like faith.