

Matthew 23:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

Analysis

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers—the verb *desmeuousin* (δεσμεύουσιν, they bind) describes tying up loads, while *phortia barea kai dysbastakta* (φορτία βαρέα καὶ δυσβάστακτα, burdens heavy and hard-to-carry) emphasizes crushing weight. This imagery contrasts sharply with Jesus's invitation: My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:30).

The Pharisees' legalism multiplied regulations without offering grace for failure. They demanded perfection in minutiae (tithing herbs, Matthew 23:23) while neglecting mercy. The phrase they will not move them with one of their fingers exposes not just exempting themselves from their own rules, but refusing even minimal help to those struggling under impossible standards. Legalism always produces this pattern: harsh judgment of others, lenient self-evaluation.

Historical Context

Pharisaic oral law included 613 commandments plus countless interpretative regulations. Examples: Sabbath rules defined what constituted 'work' in absurd detail (how far one could walk, whether healing was permitted). These traditions, meant to 'build a fence around Torah,' became heavier than Torah itself.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What 'heavy burdens' do modern religious communities lay on believers that Scripture does not require?
2. How does legalism paradoxically combine harsh judgment of others with self-justification?
3. Why does Jesus's 'easy yoke' not eliminate moral demands but transform how we carry them?

Interlinear Text

δεσμεύουσιν	γὰρ	φορτία	βαρέα	καὶ	δυσβάστακτα	καὶ	
they bind	For	burdens	heavy	and	grievous to be borne	and	
G1195	G1063	G5413	G926	G2532	G1419	G2532	
ἐπιτιθέασιν	ἐπὶ	τοὺς	ὤμους	τῶν	ἀνθρώπων	τῷ	δὲ
lay	them on	G3588	shoulders	G3588	men's	G3588	but
G2007	G1909		G5606		G444		G1161
δακτύλῳ	αὐτά	οὐ	θέλουσιν	κινῆσαι	αὐτά		
fingers	them	not	they themselves will	move	them		
G1147	G846	G3756	G2309	G2795	G846		

Additional Cross-References

Luke 11:46 (Parallel theme): And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.

Acts 15:10 (Parallel theme): Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Galatians 6:13 (Parallel theme): For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh.

Acts 15:28 (Parallel theme): For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

From KJV Study • kjevstudy.org