

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 shoulders men's but
G2007 G1909 G3588 G5606 G3588 G444 G3588 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;

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