

# FAITH *Matters*

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“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

On its face, these words sound ridiculous. A yoke, after all, is a wooden frame that conjoins two draft animals when it's placed around their necks. It's anything but easy and light. Rather, it's a source of constraint.

But maybe that's Jesus' point. Maybe constraint, paradoxically, is a necessary condition for human freedom.

When we think about freedom, we tend to define it in libertarian terms: Freedom is being free *from* something rather than *for* something. Philosophers and theologians refer to this view as “negative freedom.”

And negative freedom isn't all bad! Jews and Christians, for example, celebrate the Israelites' freedom *from* bondage in Egypt. But while negative freedom is a necessary condition for human flourishing, it is not a sufficient one. The Israelites, after all, were then led to Mount Sinai, where Yahweh gave them the Torah, which provided a form of life that gave the Israelites something to be free *for*. That's what we call “positive freedom.”

But notice that positive freedom – freedom *for* something – requires a governing system of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” Indeed, it requires *constraints* that keep us within the bounds of our humanity. And that's important to remember: Proper constraints are conducive to freedom insofar as they conform us to a proper vision of what it means to be human. As the theologian John Webster says, constraint is about “specificity” or a “particular shape.”

Let's consider a musical analogy. If you listen to Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*, you will hear a piece of music that's totally controlled by mathematical precision. Boulez is not interested in the composer's inventiveness or improvisation. He only wants logical consistency. But, of course, without the freedom of improvisation, Boulez's music is very *confining*. His music needs freedom in the negative sense: freedom *from* confinement.

But if you listen to John Cage's *Music of Changes*, you run into the opposite problem. His compositions are totally unfettered from constraints, meaning they lack the requisite organization that makes music *music*. They need freedom in the positive sense: freedom *for* something with specificity and a particular shape.

Like good music, a good life requires a healthy balance of negative and positive freedom. We need freedom from the forces that

hold us in bondage, but we also need freedom *for* our neighbors, institutions, and families.

The year 2020 offered a helpful case study. If my freedom is totally unconstrained, such that I exercise my right not to wear a mask during a deadly pandemic, and I put the welfare of my elderly neighbors in jeopardy, I am undermining my own human nature since humans are essentially *social* creatures that exercise mutual dependence and share common goods.

Remember, constraints keep us within the bounds of our humanity's specificity and particular shape. And since the human shape is *social*, we need constraints on our individual freedom in order to truly be free.

Put differently: We need a yoke that's easy and light.



**PULASKI HEIGHTS**  
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*Guest Speaker:*

**Dr. Angela Gorrell**, Assistant Professor  
of Practical Theology at Baylor's  
George W. Truett Theological Seminary

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