

## Sermon on My Yoke is Easy and My Burden is Light

Lessons: Isaiah 29:13-16, 18-20; Mark 7:1-9  
Matthew 11:25-30  
Heaven & Hell 528, 533

Rev. J. Hugh Odhner

February 2, 2014

*For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*  
(Matthew 11:30)

The Lord spoke of his yoke being easy and his burden light. In one sense he was comparing the basic requirements for following his commandments to requirements that the Jews had established by their traditions. In another sense he was warning us to avoid adding traditions that we may develop over the course of time in the church to the Lord's spiritual laws and requirements.

Let us begin by comparing the Jewish religious requirements with the Lord's commandments. As we read in the gospel of Mark, the Pharisees criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat bread with unwashed hands. This was not in accord with the traditions of the elders. (Here we might mention other traditions that the Lord and his disciples broke, such as plucking grains of wheat on the Sabbath, healing on the Sabbath, allowing a man to carry his bed on the Sabbath, talking with the Samaritan woman, to name just a few.)

Where did such traditions come from? They began with various laws and commandments given by Moses which can be found in the first five books of the Word. Then over time further requirements and interpretations were added to those laws. By New Testament times there were 613 requirements – 248 new commandments of things that were to be done – and 365 things that were prohibited. Let us take that requirement or tradition for hand-washing as an example.

The roots for that tradition are found in Exodus 30:17-21 and Leviticus 15:11. In Exodus it is said:

<sup>17</sup> *The LORD said to Moses,*

<sup>18</sup> *“You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.*

<sup>20</sup> *When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die.*

<sup>21</sup> *They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.”* (Exodus 30:17-21)

And Leviticus 15 says:

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,*

<sup>2</sup> *“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean.*

<sup>11</sup> *Anyone whom the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.* (Leviticus 15:1-2, 11)

Notice how that first law concerning hand-washing originally applied only to the priests at specific times, while the second applied to coming into contact with someone who may be sick. But by New Testament times the requirements for hand-washing had extended not only to the priests at specific times, and not only to those dealing with the sick, but to everyone any time they ate a meal. And as Mark indicates they needed to wash in a special way. It wasn't enough just to wash the hands, they needed to wash all the way up to the elbows and they needed to do this three times before eating. These were the sorts of traditions of the elders and requirements that had developed in that church by New Testament times.

Now compare this with the basic requirements that the Lord was preaching. He told people to repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 4:11). He told us to practice the two great commandments, to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and the neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:26-31). To love our enemies and to do good (Luke 6:27-36). To live according to the 10 Commandments (Mark 10:17-19). To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). To believe in the Lord (John 3:16). To love one another just as the Lord has loved us (John 13:34; 15:12). Nowhere near the 613 commandments with specific requirements for how and when we need to wash our hands.

When you think about it, most of the commandments the Lord gave us deal with how we are to believe and how we are to show our love for the

Lord, how we are to live our daily lives, and how we are to treat our neighbor – mostly all summed up in the Ten Commandments and the Two Great Commandments. The Lord got back to the essentials of spiritual life.

Now, over time most churches start developing traditions and extra requirements over and above the essential beliefs and requirements. Just as the Jewish church expanded upon the laws of Moses, so the Christian churches later started adding to and reinterpreting the basic teachings of Jesus, until at length they also had largely made the laws of God of no effect by their doctrines and traditions.

And this is a lesson and a warning for us in the New Church. Have we, through our councils and committees and traditions added requirements that are not found in the teachings of the Word? And if so, are such requirements truly in accord with the teachings of the Word? What do we base our practices on in regard to baptism and communion as compared to the teachings of the Word in regard to the sacraments? What about the church practices (or rites) in regard to weddings, confirmations, and church membership? Again, what about the ritual and music of our church worship services? How much is drawn from the teachings of the Word, in comparison with how much is based upon church tradition and the culture we live in? We need to be clear on the distinction between our church traditions – that is, "*That's the way we've done it for years.*" – and the teachings of the Word in regard to those traditions. We need to be on guard lest we, like the Pharisees start making harsh judgments of others based upon our traditions and practices. When we start finding ourselves growing critical over changes, maybe that is an excellent time to go back to the Word to see, more specifically, to examine and study, what the Word has to say on the subject – and whether the Word has anything to say in regard to the subject.

We might say that when the Lord was in the world he taught the basics of spiritual life. He took those 613 commandments and traditions, and reduced them to just a handful, a very essential handful. Similarly in the New Church, it is useful for us to remind ourselves of the essentials. Keeping the essentials of the church in mind helps keep us focused and balanced with regard to changes or challenges to church tradition, that is, to the way we've always done things.

So what are these essentials that we should keep in mind? Well, we could start with the 10 Commandments and the Two Great Commandments. To these we could add the following New Church teachings concerning the essentials of the church and of salvation:

*There are three essentials of the Church: an acknowledgment of the Divinity of the Lord, an acknowledgment of the holiness of the Word, and the life that is called charity. (Divine Providence 259)*

*... it is provided by the Lord that everyone may be saved. It is provided by the Lord that there should be a religion everywhere; and that in every religion there should be the two essentials of salvation, namely, to acknowledge God and to refrain from evil because it is against God. (Divine Providence 328)*

*There are two essentials through which there is conjunction with the Lord and thereby salvation, acknowledgment of the one God, and repentance of life. (Arcana Revealed 9)*

When we consider what is said in these and other passages about the essentials of the church and the essentials of salvation, we notice that they are rather few and not particularly complicated. We don't have to have a degree in theology (or to put it another way, we don't have to be a rocket scientist) in order to understand the basics of salvation. The Lord makes the basics understandable to everyone! Why? Because He wants to save everyone.

Yes, theology can be complicated, especially the finer details of New Church theology. But the basics? They can be understood by all of us. This is why it is said in Heaven and Hell 533: *That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe, is clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts.*

We cannot always stop dishonest, unjust, and other wayward thoughts from popping up in our minds. All of us have had times when we had thoughts of jealousy or revenge and the like. However, we do not have to dwell on those things. Provided we believe in the Lord and in His commandments, it is only necessary for us to tell ourselves that such things ought not to be done because they are opposed to the Lord's commandments. True Christian Religion 535

tells us that those who do this, who simply refrain from doing evils because they are sins, are also practicing repentance.

The Pharisees made the life of religion complicated. They complicated it with all sorts of traditions and detailed interpretations. You could say that they took the basic document having just Ten Commandments and Two Great Commandments and added all sorts of legal fine print, pages and pages of it. It is a tendency that we all are inclined to fall into – – complicating the basics by adding our traditions and cultural biases to them. That is not what the Lord desires. His harshest criticisms were of the Pharisees for what they had done to the law and how they themselves did not live according to it. And he began teaching the basics of salvation so that people could see that the way to heaven was not really so complicated.

The Lord wants us to be with Him in heaven. He doesn't want to put up roadblocks on the way to get there. So the requirements are fairly basic and relatively easy to follow if we choose to go that route.

As the Lord said, *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

**Amen.**

**Prayer:**

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. Amen.  
(Psalm 19:7-8)*

## **LESSONS**

### **Lesson I**

#### **Isaiah 29:13-16, 18-20 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

<sup>14</sup> therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

<sup>15</sup> Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”

<sup>16</sup> You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?

<sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

<sup>19</sup> The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

<sup>20</sup> For the ruthless shall come to nothing and the scoffer cease, and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off . . . .

#### **Mark 7:1-9 (The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine)**

<sup>1</sup> Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.

<sup>3</sup> For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.

<sup>4</sup> *When they come* from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

<sup>5</sup> Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

<sup>6</sup> He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: *This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.*

<sup>7</sup> *And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'*

<sup>8</sup> "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men--the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

<sup>9</sup> He said to them, "*All too* well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

## **Lesson II**

### **Matthew 11:25-30 (The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine)**

<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes.

<sup>26</sup> Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.

<sup>27</sup> All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*.

<sup>28</sup> Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

<sup>29</sup> Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

<sup>30</sup> For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light."

## **Lesson III**

**Heaven and Hell 528.** IT IS NOT SO DIFFICULT TO LIVE THE LIFE THAT LEADS TO HEAVEN AS IS BELIEVED.

There are some who believe that to live the life that leads to heaven, which is called the spiritual life, is difficult, because they have heard that a person must renounce the world, must divest himself of the lusts called the lusts of the body and the flesh, and must live spiritually; and they take this to mean that they must discard worldly things ... that they must walk continually in pious meditation about God, salvation, and eternal life; and must spend their life in prayers and in reading the Word and pious books. ... On the contrary, to receive the life of heaven a person needs to live in the world and engage in the duties and employments there, and by means of a moral and civil life receive spiritual life. In no other way can spiritual life be formed with a person, or his spirit prepared for heaven; for to live an internal life and not at the same time an external life is like dwelling in a house that has no foundation, that gradually sinks or becomes cracked and rent asunder, or totters till it falls.

**Heaven and Hell 533.** That it is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe, is now clear from this, that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a person accustoms himself to think in this way, and from so doing establishes a habit of such thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven; and so far as he is conjoined to heaven the higher regions of his mind are opened; and so far as these are opened he sees whatever is dishonest and unjust, and so far as he sees these evils they can be dispersed, for no evil can be dispersed until it is seen. Into this state a person is able to enter due to his freedom ...so to think. And when he has made a beginning, the Lord performs all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see evils to be evils, but also to refrain from willing them, and finally to turn away from them. This is meant by the Lord's words,

*My yoke is easy and My burden is light.* (Matthew 11:30)

**AMEN.**