

The Light Burden

A sermon by the Rev. Michel Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 4th, 2015

“Come to Me,” the Lord said, “all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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” (Matthew 11:28-30).

This is no doubt one of the most comforting passages in the New Testament. Not only is it elegant in its simplicity but it is loaded with spiritual meaning and implications. Notice, for example, that there is no hint here that we are going to be relieved of all our burdens. We all have responsibilities, most of all those that involve temptations to think and do things that are hurtful to ourselves and others. These can be challenging exercises in self-control, which is one reason to understand that there is no conflict between this and another well-known passage in Matthew where the Lord tells His disciples to...

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. For narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

But now, if you don't remember anything else from this sermon, remember this: the word, difficult, here is a serious mistranslation. It does not occur in the original language. The old King James Bible had the words “strait” and “narrow,” which are accurate, both being words that contrast with “wide” and “broad.” And as we are taught in the book, *Heaven and Hell*, the way to heaven is only narrow because comparatively few people go that way. Think of a path in the woods, or through a field: if a lot of people use that path it becomes wider and easier to see than if just a few use it. (And strait, by the way, does not mean *straight as an arrow*; it is the same word we use for a body of water between surrounding land masses – like the Strait of Gibraltar.)

The point is that we who know the teachings of the Word all carry the burden of responsibility to live according to them, but this burden will be light when we turn to the Lord for help.

Another fairly serious translation error in the teaching about the light burden is the word, gentle. The Lord may indeed be gentle in heart, but that is not what the word in the original language means. Again, the old King James Bible has “meek,” and that is correct, if we just understand what meekness is. Remember, the Lord on many occasions became quite aggressive – verbally and physically – as He confronted the evils of the scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites and... money-changers. But He was *always* meek, even, as it says, when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in what we call His triumphal entry.

No, the word, meek, actually means submissive. But the question is, submissive to what? The context of the teaching in Matthew makes this clear, since it follows the Lord's stern condemnation of the people who had rejected Him, and then a prayer of thanks to His heavenly Father for “delivering all things” to Him. So we see that the only way the Lord could comfort and assure

others was by submitting to the will of His Father, which in the spiritual sense means the Divine good, the good of His own Divine love. And this He did every day of His life, *uncompromisingly* rejecting the evils of the love of self and the world, not to mention the falsities associated with them, *forcefully* defending the innocent from the abuses of the wicked, *powerfully* providing for their salvation.

And of course the Lord asks us to follow His example. So He also said that the meek would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5; see also Ps. 37:11, 37), and we know from the heavenly doctrines that the meek in this case represent those who are in the good of charity (AE 304:44), that is, those who *submit* to that good by rejecting the influences that oppose it.

And so we come to the heart of the matter, as explained in this long sentence from *Heaven & Hell* #359:

“Since a person can live outwardly as others do, can grow rich, keep a plentiful table, dwell in an elegant house and wear fine clothing according to his condition and function, can enjoy delights and gratifications, and engage in worldly affairs for the sake of his occupation and business and for the life both of the mind and body, provided he inwardly acknowledges the Divine and wishes well to the neighbor, it is evident that to enter upon the way to heaven is not as difficult as many believe. *The sole difficulty lies in being able to resist the love of self and the world, and to prevent their becoming dominant;* for this is the source of all evils. That this is not as difficult as is believed is meant by these words of the Lord:

‘Learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls; for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’ ~ Matt. xi. 29, 30.

“The Lord’s yoke is easy and His burden light because a person is led by the Lord and not by self just to the extent that he resists the evils that flow forth from love of self and of the world, *and because **the Lord** then resists these evils with the person and removes them.*”

By the way, the interesting thing about a yoke isn’t just that it may connect two animals together and so lighten the load for both of them, but even if it is a single person yoke the benefit of the thing is that it puts the burden squarely on one’s shoulders so that the weight is centered on the spine, balanced between the right and left sides. Somehow this seems deeply symbolic, perhaps illustrating how our core principles, balanced between love and wisdom, can carry the heaviest loads of responsibility without undue strain.

In any case, the Lord’s yoke is easy for us because He is the one doing the heavy lifting. It sounds trite but it’s true that when we turn our burdens over to Him *and let Him work with us* we can stop suffering for two reasons: first, in acknowledging that we can’t do it alone we’ve given up the false hope that leads to continual failure and frustration, and second, we allow the Lord to work on things we can’t even see within ourselves, so that our whole disposition is changed,

making outward results much easier to achieve. As the doctrines explain in another passage from *Heaven and Hell*,

“That it is not as 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 so to think, and from so doing *establishes a habit* of so 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 because of his freedom, for is not any one able from 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 the 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.’ Matt. xi. 30.

“But it ought to be known that the difficulty of so thinking and of resisting evils increases so far as man from his will *does* evils, for in the same measure he becomes accustomed to them until he no longer sees them, and at length loves them and, from the delight of his love, excuses them, and confirms them by all kinds of fallacies, and declares them to be allowable and good. This is what happens with those who in early youth plunge into evils without restraint, and then at the same time reject Divine things from the heart” (HH 533).

Now then, where should we start? On one hand we all know the New Church motto that “the first of charity is to shun evils as sins against the Lord” (Charity #1), but notice that although this seems to put the whole focus on the evils we are confronting, the truth is that it directs our attention first of all to the Lord. In fact the actual teaching is that “the first of charity is to *look to the Lord* and (then) shun evils because they are sins (against Him).” Focusing on the evil, or perhaps on how bad we are because the evil clings to us, can actually have the effect of reinforcing its power over us, holding us in a pattern of failure and self-criticism. But looking to the Lord, learning from Him, thinking about Him, appreciating His infinite love and wisdom, and then “resting in Him” removes the attention from ourselves and replaces it with truly inspirational ideas and feelings. Surely this is at least part of what the Lord meant when He said “Whoever desires to find his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39 & 16:25).

And of course when we really learn about and focus on the Lord He can reveal His goodness and truth so powerfully that we begin to lose the desire for anything else. In fact we begin to feel the real fear of *offending* that goodness and truth, which makes shunning evils and our own pre-occupations seem (at least for that moment) like no sacrifice at all. Then all we have to do is keep on thinking *in the moment*, how ridiculous the evil is, and it will lose its power over us.

Okay, just thinking about the Lord, all by itself isn't going to make our burdens lighter. That would be a form of salvation by faith alone. We also need to do what He teaches us. But this is where the practice leading to a habit comes in. The more we do what we know we ought to do, the easier it gets – because the Lord uses that practice to change our disposition.

And here's another important point, repeated at least half a dozen times in various books of the Writings:

“If a person believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, he would not appropriate good to himself and account it meritorious, nor would he appropriate evil to himself and account himself responsible for it” (DP 320, HH 302, AC 6206, NJHD 277, etc.).

Effectively what this means is that if we think we're going to change ourselves by our own power we're in for a big disappointment. The power flows into us from the Lord – or, alternatively, from the sphere of evil around us: our responsibility is simply to decide which channel to listen to, and which to tune out. In this context the power of *prayer* is not to suggest that the Lord should change in any way with respect to His infinite love and wisdom toward us, but rather to help us “tune in” and stay tuned in to Him so that we are not carried away in the wrong direction. This is why the Lord encourages us to pray daily, and often (Luke 18:1), not just in a formal worship environment, but throughout the course of the day as we renew our commitment to choose His wisdom and, in the truest sense of the word, *meekly, humbly* submit to it.

There's one final thought that may be especially useful at this beginning of a new year, and that is not to expect too much too quickly. The Lord was very clear with Moses as He prepared the tribes of Israel to conquer the inhabitants of the land of Canaan: “I will not drive them out from before you in one year,” He said, “lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land” (Ex. 23:29-30). The point is that when the inclinations of our own hearts change too quickly we can lose our sense of self, of who we really are (AC 9336). It's a process, and it takes time. We need to be patient with ourselves – and with others – as we work to carry the burden of our responsibility in such a way that we are not overwhelmed.

We need to take one thing at a time, one day at a time, and remember, let the Lord do the heavy lifting. As He said of the Canaanites, “I will not drive them out from before you in one year...” but still, ***“I will drive them out....”***

May the Lord be with you all in this new calendar year, and may He strengthen and provide for His church as each one of us does our part to support that process.

Amen.

Lessons: *Deuteronomy 30:15-20 & Joshua 1:1-9*
 Matthew 7:7-12 & 11:28-30
 Divine Providence #322:1-3