

My Burden Is Light

A Sermon by Rev. Patrick Rose

"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matt.11:30)

Perhaps one of the most cheerful teachings in the Writings is this: that the path which leads to heaven is far easier than most people imagine. It is, though, a teaching we tend to forget. At times we can feel within ourselves that we are so evil and sinful that we begin to doubt whether we shall ever enter heaven. We compare what the Writings teach with the way we are actually living, and feel that we are failing. We doubt the possibility of our salvation. It seems so difficult to live the life we know we should live, and as a result we are burdened with feelings of despair and guilt.

Now to some extent, despair and guilt are inevitable. Despair, we are taught, is permitted when we are in spiritual temptation, so that we might come to see that by ourselves we can do nothing, and that salvation is of the Lord alone. Guilt is also necessary. If we do not make ourselves guilty of the evils we have committed, we will remain in them. Nevertheless, we would be mistaken to think that the path to heaven is a hard and arduous burden, and that it must be walked in sadness, guilt and depression. The fact is, the Lord loves us. He wants us to go to heaven. Therefore, He makes it easy for us. After all, why would the Lord create us for heaven, and then place obstacles in the path that leads there?

It is a ridiculous fallacy to believe that it must of necessity be difficult for a man to enter heaven. More than this, it is a cruel and hateful falsity, for it implies that the Lord would rather see us suffer to eternity in hell than enjoy everlasting happiness in heaven. Why, then, did such a fallacy arise? Why do so many people fall into believing the notion that heaven is an almost impossible dream?

The answer lies in the nature of human freedom. Heaven is happiness, and happiness, to be happiness, cannot be forced upon a man. It is something which he must freely choose. Therefore it is that the Lord does not create man as an angel. When we are born, we are placed here on earth, outside of heaven, so that we can choose for ourselves whether or not we want to become angels. Before each one of us the Lord sets a path, a simple and direct path, leading straight to heaven. If

we want to walk along it, we can. On the other hand, if we prefer to remain outside of heaven, we can do so. It is up to us. We have complete freedom in the matter. The only thing which will prevent a man from walking easily towards heaven is a desire to remain in evil.

This is the origin of the idea that the path to heaven is difficult. Evil men who want to remain in evil find that it is indeed difficult to walk along this path. In fact, they find it impossible. The obstacle, though, is not in the path which the Lord has set before them. The difficulty is one they have created for themselves. It lies in the fact that they, quite simply, want to remain where they are. This, though, they are loathe to admit. They would rather blame the Lord than admit to the fact that they are insane enough to want to remain in evil. Therefore it is that evil men and evil spirits embrace the idea that to go to heaven is difficult. It is, after all, a useful excuse for remaining in the evil they love.

It is, therefore, a false idea, an idea originating in evil. It is not difficult to go to heaven. For those who truly desire heaven, the path that leads there can be surprisingly easy indeed. All that is required is that man undertake the simple work of repentance.

Now this might sound as if it is easier said than done. Repentance may appear to be a very difficult task. But it is not difficult to repent. Even if we have a tendency to remain in our evils, we can still repent if we so desire. Repentance is, generally, a relatively easy process, and it is intended to be so, for it is the way the Lord leads us to heaven.

When we read what the Writings have to say about repentance, we see that repentance consists of a series of steps, each one of which is relatively simple. Now what are these steps or stages of repentance? There are four of them. We are taught that repentance consists in examining oneself, in recognizing and acknowledging one's sins, in praying to the Lord, and beginning a new life (TCR 528).

It begins with self-examination. This is the first step. Self-examination is not to be confused with a general feeling of being evil. It is indeed easy for a person to weigh himself down with guilt, with the feeling that he is nothing but a miserable sinner. But what does this accomplish? By itself, absolutely nothing! After all, there are many people who can feel terribly guilty about their evil nature, and yet who keep right on doing evil. They have this feeling of guilt, but nothing changes. There is no improvement. All they have accomplished is a feeling of guilt. Self-

examination is not like this. It is not a process by which all we do is discover how sinful and miserable we are. It is, rather, a way in which we come to discover and to see specific evils within ourselves. It is radically different from merely burdening ourselves with guilt. To sit burdened with a general feeling of guilt at how sinful we are, is to sit at the beginning of the path to heaven, and to remain there. On the other hand, to see and recognize within ourselves one or two specific evils is to take the very first step towards heaven.

Then we can make a second step. We have to take responsibility for what we have done. We have to accept that those things we have done are sins against the Lord. We must indeed make ourselves guilty of those evils which we find, but this is to be a specific guilt, a guilt with a purpose. We acknowledge specific things that we have done wrong, with the intention of changing. There are spirits who like to burden our consciences. They love to see us squirm under the burden of guilt. If they had their way, they would inject into us so many scruples that we would begin to feel guilty about everything, even about things that are not sins at all. This is the burden which these troublesome spirits would place upon us. The burden of the Lord is completely different. He asks us to consider the Ten Commandments, and then to look at ourselves. He asks us to find some specific evil within ourselves, and to accept that this evil is a sin against Him. At first all we are asked is to do this with just one or two evils. Finding one or two evils! It doesn't sound difficult at all. It sounds almost too easy. But to see an evil within ourselves, and then to acknowledge that we have sinned in this way, making ourselves responsible for it, is to take two small steps towards heaven. This is the way in which we begin to walk along the path towards heaven. It is by taking one step, then another, and then another, and so on, that we actually begin to walk. It is infinitely better to begin by taking just two small steps, than to sit burdened with guilt, moving nowhere.

The next step, the third step, is to approach the Lord. This is essential. The very reason that repentance is easy is that the Lord helps us. But He will not force His help upon us. We must ask Him for it. And so we must pray. We must talk to Him. This isn't difficult, either. We already know of Him. What we need to do is talk to Him, talk with Him. After we have found an evil within ourselves, and then admitted that what we have thought or done is a sin against Him, we should get down on our knees and pray. We should ask for His mercy, and beseech His help in resisting this evil in the future. We should tell Him that we see that what

we have done is wrong, and that we have sinned against Him. This is all we need to do. There is no need, the Writings say, to list our evils in our prayers. The Lord already knows them; it was He who led us to see them for ourselves. Nor do we have to beg forgiveness. He has already forgiven us. All we must do is acknowledge before Him that we have sinned against Him, and ask Him for His merciful help. To do this, to actually ask the Lord to help us, has tremendous power.

After this, the fourth and last step is to begin a new life. This, more than the other steps of repentance, might sound difficult. To begin a new life, though, does not mean what we may think it to mean. We are not expected to repent and then all of a sudden go forth to live a perfect life. This new life we must live is not a perfect life. It is a better life -- a life that is better in some small way. Because we have seen some evil in ourselves, acknowledged that it is a sin, and asked for the Lord's help, we are in a position to resist this evil in the future.

And this is not difficult. It becomes difficult only when a person has become accustomed to giving free reign to his evils, or else has previously rejected everything of heaven and the church. Then the fight can indeed become severe. Normally, though, resistance to evils is not a hard task. Indeed, it is said that if we only resist those evils to which we are inclined, once every week, or once every two weeks, we will notice a change. We will find that to resist them becomes progressively easier. Our strength of will, given to us by the Lord, grows gradually stronger, until that evil we have discovered within ourselves is put away completely. Eventually we come to detest even the thought of committing this evil. Reaching this point is a gradual process. It takes time. But if a person is sincere in his efforts, and does his best, then this path is a sure path and a progressively easier one. It is as easy as walking. Indeed this is, of course, precisely what it is. It is walking the path to heaven.

This path would be difficult, it is true, if we were expected to walk it alone, or if we were expected to complete the journey overnight. But we are expected to do neither. The Lord does not expect us to repent without His help. This is why we are commanded to ask Him for help. Neither does He expect us to become perfect overnight. He expects us to walk the path to heaven in steps, not to get there suddenly in one big jump. First we must take the four simple steps of repentance. Then, as we begin a new life, we can, step by step, resist the evil we have discovered, until it is, with the Lord's help, fully conquered. Then the

whole process can be repeated. At recurring seasons we can examine ourselves to find one or two additional evils, acknowledge that they are sins, pray to the Lord, and then begin a still better life. If we do this at least once or twice a year, we are indeed on the way to heaven.

Repentance is easy, and it becomes easier and easier the more we do it. Repentance is not a thing we do once. It is, above all, a habit, a habit to be acquired. Once it has become a habit, it comes easily to us. On the other hand, if we never do it, it becomes progressively more difficult and painful to take that first initial step. In this it is like any other task we may undertake. The more frequently we do it, the easier it becomes.

We must make a regular practice of repentance, so that it becomes a part, and indeed an easy part, of our lives. The Lord has made it easy for us to go to heaven. It is a foolish person who ignores this, and tries to make it difficult instead. We have a tendency to burden ourselves with all kinds of imagined difficulties and problems. But with the Lord it is different. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light. He makes it easy for us to go to heaven, and He makes it easy for the simple reason that He loves us, and He wants us to be happy. He wants us to go to heaven.