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COLLECTION OF SERMONS

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IN THE UNITED STATES,

O F

DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS

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S E R M O N X I X .

THE PLEASANTNESS OF TRUE RELIGION.

B Y

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M A T T. xi. 30.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

WHEN we view the state of religion in particular, and of mankind in general, few things will appear more important than to convince them, that the system of piety and virtue, to which they are called by the voice of inspiration and of reason, is at once full of the richest consolations, and adorns every station and condition of human life. Upon a careful investigation of its discriminating principles, and a critical examination of its native tendency, it will be clearly seen to be wisely calculated by its heavenly author, to make us act like rational beings, to open for us treasures of real happiness in the present, and to crown us with endless honors in the future world.

When cordially embraced, and its duties conscientiously performed, then, and then only, notwithstanding the corrupt opinions of false Philosophy, do we begin to live to any good and noble purposes: and then only do we begin to be truly happy. For no pleasures can equal, in refinement and sublimity, those of pure and undefiled religion.

No mistake, consequently, can be more gross and hurtful, and few more common than to suppose, that in order to be Christians indeed, we must resign all the innocent enjoyments of life, and bid adieu to many of the blessings of society, and practise upon a total sequestration from the world. For certain it is, that glooms and superstition, sadness and austerities constitute no part of that religion, which our blessed Saviour came from Heaven to proclaim to perishing mortals.

He particularly informs us, that his *yoke is easy and his burden light*. He had just before invited, in a most tender and condescending manner, all who saw their guilt, and felt their lost, self-ruined condition by nature, to repair to him for help and salvation. *Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart and ye shall find rest unto your souls.* Ye shall be put in possession of that peace and happiness which the whole human race seek with incessant ardor, but which the great plurality seek too, in a wrong way, and, therefore, never find. To persuade us to re-

pair to him, to embrace his offers, and follow his example, he uses, as a most powerful argument, the easiness and pleasures of his religion—*For my yoke is easy and my burden light.*

What is proposed in the subsequent discourse, in dependance on divine aid, is to make it appear that the religion required of us is an easy and pleasant religion, full of peace and happiness.

That the religion of the gospel is an easy pleasant religion, full of peace, and most friendly to our interest, in a large view, is an important truth, worthy the attention of all of every station and character, and may be illustrated and proved by a great number of arguments from reason and scripture.

In general, virtue has charms sufficient to recommend it to the love and pursuit of all orders of men. Its beauties are such as to have found advocates in every age; who have lavished upon it the pomp of description, and spread around it the flowers of Rhetoric. Most certainly its excellencies are such, as ought to call up the attention and attract the notice of the world:—Its effects in this life are peace, and its rewards in the next surpass all conception. There is a dignity and majesty in it, which ought to create in the mind an awe, and command a reverential respect. A character formed upon the model of the gospel is the most exalted any can wear, far more exalted than the highest worldly honors can give. If any thing can recom-

mend the christian religion to the best and worthiest of the human kind, it must be a consideration of its internal excellence, and tendency to render all, who receive and practice it, both good and happy. What could have a more direct influence to make a thoughtless race consider and attend to the Christian religion, than to hear its author say—*My yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

I. In this metaphorical language, reference is undoubtedly had to the heavy burdens and hard yoke of Jewish rites and ceremonies. The Christian religion in its doctrines, duties, and institutions, is easy, therefore, compared with the dispensation under the law. *The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.* The covenant of the Jews bound them to many servile, expensive and laborious offices. Their rites and ceremonies, their sacrifices and stated journies to Jerusalem, which their males were to perform three times in the year, were, for the most part, of this kind. And those particular and positive laws, which related to their civil state, and were interwoven with their religion, were grievous and encumbering. And, indeed, the whole frame of the Jewish ritual, was as the apostle calls it, *a yoke of bondage, which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear.* In the religion of the gospel, all this load of ceremonies is no more. We have no such yoke of bondage, no such burden of rites laid upon our neck. We have no such lengthy journies to go, in order to attend upon, and enjoy the solemnities of public

worship. We have no victims to bring to the altar; no beasts are to bleed; no costly sacrifices have we to offer; no laborious and fatiguing offices to perform. We are not to come before the Lord with burnt-offerings—with calves of a year old—with thousands of rams, or rivers of oil—easily may we attend upon the service of the sanctuary; and, in every place where the people of God convene for his worship, from upright motives, they have grounds to hope for his favorable presence, divine assistance and approbation. Two ritual institutions only, baptism and the eucharist, are enjoined in the gospel, both of which, instead of having any thing in them dark and burdensome, are so plain, spiritual and significant, as to be very subservient to the power of real religion, and purposes of fervent piety. How different the Christian from the Jewish dispensation! The one is dark and enigmatical, and the other simple and plain. The one abounds with various rites, the nature and design of which are not always readily seen or investigated; the other is all light and liberty. As the splendor of the meridian sun exceeds the feeble and reflected light of the moon, so does the religion of the gospel that of the law, the yoke of Christ that of Moses. It is not only more plain in its principles, and spiritual in its duties, but more rational. The religion of nature hath received its last improvements, and moral obligations are carried to their utmost extent, under the gospel dispensation. Whatever it bids us do, or

requires us not to do, is adapted to our reason and conscience. There is no need of a long train of reasoning to convince us of the fitness, excellence, and tendency of the precepts of our Lord, or the importance of cordially obeying them: Mankind, at large, can immediately discern all this. Every sinner, of course, who will not be reclaimed from his vices, and seek pardon through a Redeemer's atoning blood, is under a double condemnation, that of his own conscience and of God's word; and every pious and upright Christian, under all the wounds of adversity, has these two sources always open for his consolation, the approbation of his conscience, and the promised blessings of the gospel; both of which he enjoys with a fuller satisfaction and to a greater extent, than they could ever be enjoyed under the mystical and ceremonial dispensation of the Jews. That dispensation had no merit in it, but as typical: it was designed in its very frame and make, to be temporary, and for a small part of the human race, and to prefigure and prepare the way for the gospel. It was a shadow of good things to come. A new and living way is consecrated for us.

What a beauty, 'fitness and order are there through the whole of the religion of Jesus; through all its duties—its doctrines—its precepts—its institutions—its joys, and its promises! What a reasonableness and fitness in our duly attending its offers, and conforming our hearts and lives to its laws! How fit and suitable that we should worship,

fear, love and obey HIM, who is the fountain of glory and goodness! How infinitely right that we should receive, admire and trust in the grace of a Mediator! How fit that we should regard our fellow men with the sincerest benevolence; that our hearts should be open to, and feel the principles of justice, compassion and charity; that our transgressions, in all their number and aggravations, should be mourned over, with tears, the flowing tears of pious grief; and that all our evil courses should be utterly relinquished! These, it will be conceded, are some of the most necessary and essential duties of the gospel; and the appeal concerning their reasonableness, may be made to every candid mind. Is there not a most evident fitness in them? Do they not, at first view, recommend themselves to our consciences? Must it not be prejudice or unreasonable opposition to the gospel, that shall object against them? He who turns away from the religion of Christ, acts then most unreasonably, and is guilty of the highest incongruity. Because there is nothing which the Supreme Being requires of us, as duty, or to which the Saviour calls us, but, in its own nature, is fit and reasonable.

II. Further, Christ's yoke may be considered as easy and his burden light, as the system of piety and virtue, to which he invites mankind, is the most heavenly and spiritual.

If ever a gracious God should vouchsafe to favor the world with a revelation of his will, it is na-

tural to suppose, it would inculcate what only is heavenly and divine in its tendency. And we must have the candor to acknowledge, that the supreme aim of Christianity, is to make us, in all respects, such as we should be, pious and holy, benevolent and kind, just and sincere. It hath no other design but to make us happy—to wipe off the flowing tear from the wet cheek—to ease the anguished heart—to pour the oil of consolation into its wounds—to mitigate our woes—to remove our fears—to reconcile us to our fate—to fit us for, and finally receive us to Heaven. The very nature of Christ's religion is to illuminate the darkened mind, purify the disordered affections, raise us above a vain world, and to destroy our worst enemy, our own sinfulness. For he was revealed to destroy the works of the Devil, to subvert the empire of sin and delusion. Such a system as that of the gospel must recommend itself, by its own internal excellence; like the king's daughter, it is all glorious within, beautiful as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, fair as the moon, clear as the sun. Whose heart but must be charmed with its beauties and glories. Its worship, for example, is sublime, pure and heavenly: the heart is the altar, whence sacrifices are stately to be offered to the divine Majesty. The spirituality of gospel worship is particularly foretold by our Lord, in his conference with the Samaritan woman. *But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father seeketh such to*

worship him. God is a spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth. The holy prayers and pure oblations of the heart, in which the essence of gospel worship doth consist, were prefigured by the incense and unblemished sacrifices under the law.

III. The plainness of the most essential doctrines of Christ is justly to be considered, as a further evidence, that his *yoke is easy*. His religion is a plain, as well as reasonable and heavenly religion. In order to be generally useful, it must be easy to be understood. The bulk of mankind have neither leisure nor abilities to attend to a dark and abstruse system of Theology. The gospel is designed for the MANY, not for the learned FEW—for all orders of people; not for men of science and speculation only. And, though some points in it be allowed to be mysterious and hard to be comprehended, yet all the doctrines necessary to our salvation, are plain and level to the weakest capacities. An honest heart is the principal requisite to a right understanding of the most necessary truths. He who sincerely wishes to know and do his duty, is in no hazard of missing the way to eternal life, while he diligently consults the sacred pages, and to an upright enquiry after truth and duty, joins constant prayer. *If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.—He that is of God, heareth God's words: ye, therefore, bear them not, because ye are not of God.—* Who among us but knows the great out-lines of

duty? Even children, that are well educated, know that they ought to love, fear, and pray to their father, who is in Heaven, to receive and acknowledge the Redeemer—to do good to others—and to rule their own evil passions. In short, the practical part of religion is so plain, that none can mistake it, but they who resolve to pervert it. If we take into the account, the discoveries which Christ made concerning a future world, we shall be still more convinced that his *yoke is easy*. He has opened to us the ruin of our nature by the apostacy—the method of our recovery—the way in which we are to be sanctified and pardoned, viz. by the influences of his spirit, and atonement of his blood: He has brought life and immortality to light; the wisest of the Pagan Philosophers but faintly hoped and guessed after another state of being, but to Christians, their Lord has made the most particular discoveries of a future state; given the most affecting descriptions of the happiness of the righteous, and the miseries of the wicked, after death. The rewards and punishments of the other world are exhibited to us, under the most strong and lively images, and the way how to obtain the one, and avoid the other, pointed out to us, in the clearest manner. Let the candid and unbiassed mind, for a moment, impartially survey the very genius and make of the religion of Jesus. It is a most mild and humane, a most benevolent and gentle system, free from fanaticism and superstition, unnatural rigors and useles ceremonies. *The wisdom*

that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and hypocrisy. It is the very genius of this divine Philosophy, to diffuse over the world tenderness and humility, love and peace, harmony and good order, to soften and humanize the soul, to create within us sublime hopes, and to qualify us for perfect felicity. Every social, every friendly, every noble sentiment is encouraged, all surliness, wrath, bitterness, evil-speaking, and evil passions are absolutely prohibited. There is no one law, there is no one precept, or one restriction, in the peaceful system of the gospel, but tends to universal goodness, the highest and best interest of society. What is the spirit of Christ, but a spirit of meekness, of kindness, of candor, of sympathy, of generosity, benevolence and philanthropy? *Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.* All pride, vain-glory, cruelty, revenge, and evil passions are expelled from the human breast, so far as the gospel takes place in it. A merciful and lenient, a forgiving and beneficent religion, is that which we are required to embrace. A benevolent and good, a gracious and forgiving God, would not impose upon men, any other than a religion of good-will, that should raise in us the finest feelings, expand the mind with the brightest hopes, and render us in the end happy. Accordingly, there are in Christianity, no unnecessary austerities or rigorous impositions, no cruel and bloody tenets, no harsh and severe commands. We are only required to be holy and hap-

py. God is not an austere master, as sinners are apt to think him, neither is he pleased with melancholy glooms, or superstitious horrors. Every thing that can contribute to our real good, or is friendly to our best interest, or promotive of the dignity of man, is allowed us. Supremely happy himself, and in the full enjoyment of eternity, God only-requires that we should be, in our measure, like himself, holy and happy. And if we would comply with his offers of mercy and pardon, we should have consolations here neither few nor small; and glory, honor and beatitude hereafter. What one doctrine of Christ is cruel and hard? What one duty, which he enjoins, severe and unfriendly to our best good? All he requires of us is perfectly fit and reasonable; and all things considered, more than any thing else could be, for our happiness. He is, therefore, a good master, his yoke is easy, his religion is made up of goodness and benevolence, and leads to joys inconceivable, and to rivers of immortal pleasure. And did it take place perfectly in our hearts, and in the hearts of all men, we should not need to depart from this world, for Heaven, we should find it here. Indeed all the joys of the celestial paradise, are but the product of the religion of the divine Jesus. This idea will not now be enlarged upon, for I shall soon have occasion to resume it.

IV. Those consolations which Christ hath provided for his followers, in their greatest extremity, the hour of dissolution, must not be passed over.

This is a very common argument, I am sensible, to prove *his yoke is easy and his burden light*, and it is likewise a very convincing one. Death is the scene in which we must all be actors, the great and honorable, as well as the low and unworthy. At that solemn and awful hour, the comforts of the good man may overflow, and he lift up his head with joy, because his redemption draweth nigh. Nothing is more likely to impress the mind with a sense of the worth and glory of religion, than looking forward to the moments of dissolution; and seeing how the Christian may bid adieu to terrestrial things; his peace; his joy; his composure; or his triumph. At the awful solemnities of a dying hour, the review of a life devoted to the best of all Beings, will fill the soul with rational, calm, and satisfying delight. The things of another world appear more solid and real to a dying saint, as he draws near to them, and his faith begins to turn into vision, and his hope into fruition. He now, at the point in which we view him, stands upon the confines of both worlds, in the possession of reason, and discerns, with more clearness, the vanity and emptiness of that from which he is going, and the substantial and durable happiness of that into which he is just about to enter. So that when he walks through the shady valley of death he fears no evil; and his desires are then most lively and vigorous, when he is ready to give up the ghost. The voice of nature, the voice of reason, and the voice of conscience concur, in

saying to the righteous, *that it shall be well with him.* In his last moments, he reviews his past life with pleasure, bids farewell to the world in peace, receives the awful summons with calmness, launches forth into a boundless eternity with triumphant hopes, looks upward to his God with delight, and forward to Heaven with rapture. And, when all is closed upon his view, and the curtains of death are drawn, he enters on a state of perfect rest.

V. It will only be subjoined, that Christ's *yoke is easy and his burden light*, as his religion will terminate in immortal honor. The consequence of receiving and practising his religion, in another world, will be all the bliss of Paradise, joys inconceivable, and raptures on earth unknown. On such a subject, language loses its energy. Pomp of words only debases it. I shall only ask, will then the happiness of Heaven be the result of piety and virtue here? Shall all the followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, at last, sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of God, when all shall come from the east and west, from the north and south, when all the good shall be received to glory, and the wicked burned with unquenchable fire? Will they be welcomed to those realms of eternal day, where they shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever—Where all the soul shall feel, shall be perfect bliss, and all it shall express shall be perfect praise—where all tears shall be wiped away—where perfect love shall fill every heart—and exalt-

ed Hofannas employ every tongue?—Will all this be our portion, if we take Christ's yoke upon us? Doth religion end so gloriously? Certainly then it is our highest interest, it is happiness itself. Well might our Lord say, *my yoke is easy—my burden light.*

A few passages of holy writ will now be added, to finish the argument. From one end of the sacred volume to the other, the idea of the pleasures of a virtuous temper and life is exhibited. The happiness of religion is foretold by the Prophets, promised by Christ, and recorded by the Apostles. By the Prophets it is foretold with as much clearness, and in as strong terms, as either the holiness of Christians, or the glory of their Redeemer.

Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance. In thy name shall they rejoice all the day; and in thy righteousness shall they be exalted: for thou art the glory of their strength, and in thy favor shall their horn be exalted. For the Lord is our defence, and the holy one of Israel is our king.

In what stronger colors than these, could any person be represented, whose whole life was one continued scene of pleasure?

Again, *O how great is thy goodness, O God, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men. Thou shalt hide them in the secret of thy presence from the pride of men, thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues. Light is sown*

for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace; length of days is in her right hand, riches and honor in her left. Great peace have all they that keep thy holy law and nothing shall offend them. His commands are not grievous, and in keeping of them there is great reward. What a beautiful description of the value and worth of religion, under the name of wisdom, have we in the following passage! But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding? Man knoweth not the price thereof; neither is it found in the land of the living. The depth saith it is not in me and the sea saith it is not in me. It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire. The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies. The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it neither shall it be valued with pure gold. What the Prophets foretold, with one voice, the Redeemer hath confirmed by his declarations and promises. Blessed, says he, are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. And he said unto them, verily I say unto you, there is no man

that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake; who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life eternal. And in the text, *my yoke is easy and my burden light.* If you call his religion a yoke, it is an easy one. If you call it a burden, it is a light one.

To prove that religion is the source of the most refined happiness, many testimonies may be collected from the apostles. St. Luke, in the history of the acts of the apostles, once and again speaks of joy in the Holy-Ghost; of the peace and pleasing wonder of those who embraced the gospel.-- Thus the gaoler, we are told, *rejoiced.* The same account we find of the Ethiopian eunuch. As soon as Philip preached Jesus to him, he was baptized, and though his heaven-appointed guide was snatched from him, yet the doctrine taking place in his heart, he went on his way, it is not said, reasoning only, or deeply meditating, or the like, but *rejoicing.* Indeed we have reason to suppose that all, who heard the gospel to purpose, heard it with the same sentiments of joy. They behaved, at first, like persons quite amazed and surprized with the grace of God. And where nothing of habit or improvement could have time as yet to manifest itself, they were raised by the pure joys of the gospel, above this world, and were ready to undergo, for its defence, the greatest of all sufferings. We read also, of *rejoicing always, and of joy unspeakable and full of glory.* St. Paul comparing the Christian

life to the military, calls it *the good fight of faith*. It is, indeed, GOOD, will be found so at death, and in a future state. So much evidence is there from reason and scripture, to prove that Christ's *yoke is easy and his burden light*. If we examine either the principles or the duties—the doctrines or the virtues—the hopes, or the institutions of Christianity, we shall find it to be full of happiness. Did it reign in all hearts, there would be nothing to destroy in all God's holy mountain. Nations would beat their *swords into plough-shears, and their spears into pruning-hooks, and would learn war no more*. The world would be full of the glory of the Lord: earth a state of peace, order and universal good. Such is the nature and tendency of the benevolence of the gospel. O benevolence! thou brightest ray of the Creator's glory! thou heavenly principle! thou sweet bond of union in all holy souls!—May our hearts feel thy divine power, thy sweet consolations!

What remains but to urge all that hear me, to embrace a religion so benevolent and mild, so glorious and full of sacred pleasures? You, in this, are only urged to what is your best good, and highest honor, to what is reasonable and fit in itself. Religion, believe me, doth not consist in wild impulses upon the soul; not in dreams and visions—not in cold and heartless observances—not in mere external conformity to the laws of God—not in rites and names—not in professions and forms, but in righteousness and truth—in meekness and good-

ness—in charity and faith—in purity of heart and piety of life—in a holy principle of action and the purest moral virtue. Against a religion of this kind, who can object? Him, who would wish to banish such a religion from the world, we are obliged to look upon as hostile to human happiness, as a foe to the highest ornament and dignity of society. By a melodious voice doth this religion call upon us all, to yield ourselves up to its government and laws. *Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O ye simple understand wisdom, and ye fools be ye of an understanding heart. Hear for I will speak of excellent things, and the opening of my lips shall be right things.* Where the happiness of people, their present peace and future felicity is concerned, warmth of address is allowable, is necessary. I would ask to be indulged in a short exhortation to sinners, to repair to the son of God, *whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light*, for help and hope. Be persuaded, then, to embrace the offer of pardoning goodness—taste that the Lord is gracious—give up all your objections against piety and virtue, and all your excuses for continuing any longer in unbelief and impenitence. Let not the remembrance of your sins prevent your, immediately, seeking for mercy. What! though your crimes be of the deepest dye and enormous magnitude: though innumerable as the sand on the sea shore, and aggravated by the most uncommon and horrid circumstances, yet there is no room for despair—a fountain is opened for Judah and Jerusalem to

wash in, from sin and uncleanness. Christ's blood cleanseth from all sin. He is a Redeemer most eminently fitted—a Saviour most perfectly qualified to save guilty man, the vilest not excepted.

Behold him suffering—bleeding—expiring on the cross. Pardon for lost sinners is written with pointed steel and streaming blood on his pierced hands and feet. The double flood issuing from his wounded side more than seals the dear-bought blessing. The handwriting against us is nailed to his cross, and blotted out with his precious blood. His open arms invite sinners to accept of salvation; and incircled in them, they will find a safe and delightful retreat—a real and present happiness. O sinner! on the wings of pleasing hope, fly thither. By all that is near—that is dear—that is sacred to thee, fly from eternal death—lay hold on eternal life. *Take, says Christ, my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* Amen.

