

A LIGHT BURDEN

EASIER WAYS TO SHUN EVILS

by John L. Odhner

"My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"

(Matthew 11:30)



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Original Edition details
 General Church Publication Committee
 Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania 19009

ISBN 0-910557-16-0

First printing 1987 – 500 copies
 Second printing 1989 – 500 copies
 Reprinted by General Church Book Center
 This pamphlet originally ran as a series in *New Church Life* in 1986
 Printed in the United States of America by General Church Press
 Revised 2020 with the author’s permission
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Many people realise that shunning evils or turning away from them plays an important part in our spiritual growth. This is a basic teaching and it is there again and again in Swedenborg. People often wonder why we have to hear so much about shunning evils and ask why can't we focus on more positive things?

But the idea that we need to shun evils is a very inspiring, hopeful and excitingly powerful concept. Maybe we have heard this teaching and paid too much attention to the bare fact that we **ought** to shun evils and not given enough attention to the encouraging instructions on **how** to shun evils.

Hell can make it hard for us

We've all had the horrible feeling that we still get the same bad thoughts and urges even after trying to stop them. This makes us feel guilty. We worry about it, some of us pray about it, yet we still get them. We feel we have been trying ever so hard but then we wonder if we have. We can certainly see the damage which doing evil brings. A voice inside us mocks us: "Shun evils, that's all there is to it. There's no easy way out, you must make yourself and you aren't trying hard enough..."

Hell would love to make the job of us shunning evils as difficult and confusing as possible and then sit back, taunt and accuse us as we struggle to free ourselves from the evils they have chained us to.

One way hell makes things more difficult is by fooling us into thinking it is all *meant* to be difficult, so that we won't look for easier ways to make a change. We sometimes overlook a simple cleansing of the heart, thinking the way to heaven is supposed to be more difficult.

God wants it to be easier

God has no wish to put difficulties in our path to heaven. God wants to make regeneration as easy as possible for us. God's love is so

great and his desire to be close to us is so urgent, that he will go to any length to remove barriers to our spiritual progress.

He is constantly working against those who try to make life more difficult than it already is. But hell is such that it tries all the time to make things more difficult for us. God promises to make the road easier for us if we are prepared to trust going this way forward.

This doesn't mean that getting to heaven is as easy as falling off a log. Getting to heaven (just like getting to hell) will never be so easy that we can get there just like that! We can't get to heaven without going through temptations, trials, combats, struggles, pain, grief and despair. God never offers us an *alternative* to shunning evils, so we should be prepared for a fight.

Yet the purpose of this article is to clear away the feeling that "It's *too* difficult. It *can't* be done." Swedenborg says that the way to heaven is not as difficult as people often suppose (see Heaven and Hell paragraphs 528-535). God is there helping you. You don't have to be superhuman. You don't have to be someone special. God makes the process of shunning evils *so easy that anyone can do it* (TCR 580).

What You Can Do About It

Swedenborg also says that overcoming evil is easier for some people than for others (TCR 561-563). Discussing this might lead us in a dozen directions and leave us wondering if life is really fair and what it means for something to be difficult or easy. Being unable to answer those questions, it's better to focus on the more practical side of the issue by pointing out that if we find the work of regeneration overwhelming, *there are many positive steps we can take to make the process of shunning evils easier for us than it is now.*

Suppose you have been fixing the car and your hands are covered with black grime. You take a dry rag and wipe off your hands, but a lot of the grime remains. That stuff is really hard to get off. You could rub your hands raw with that rag and they would still be dirty.

Fortunately, it is easier if you use a little water. Adding some soap helps too. Better yet, the right kind of solvent or a good hand cleaner designed for this kind of mess, will take the grime off like magic.

Evil is also hard to get rid of. We can work and work at it and still feel we are getting nowhere. Fortunately, God gives us principles designed for this kind of mess. Applying them to our mind and life will make the process much easier. What follows is an outline of some of the factors which make the fight against evil easy or difficult. You will be given many changes you can make or actions you can take to make shunning evils easier than it might otherwise be. They are arranged into five general categories:

Building our relationship with God.

Building up our new will.

Building up our new understanding.

Building up a receptive base in our daily life.

Cutting evils down to size.

You will have heard many of these ideas again and again. Rather than explain each one in detail, the aim is to clarify how these familiar ideas are closely tied to the key process of shunning evils and how they can help you win your spiritual battles. You will probably find that some of the suggestions below are more helpful than others. Not all will apply to your particular stage of life. Take note of the ones which work well for you.

Negatives and Positives

An important teaching in Swedenborg is that the first thing about charity (or loving others because of God) is to shun evils as sins against God, and the second is to do our work and our responsibilities faithfully and honestly. We can paraphrase this as "You must stop doing evil before you can do what is good." Swedenborg says that this is one reason why most of the ten commandments are in a negative form: "Thou shall not!" (TCR 329.)

Often when I am critical or negative it's because I am cross and want to make things *difficult* for someone else. But *God* gives us those negatives in order to *lighten* our burden, rather than to make things more difficult. I found out early in life that having a bad case of poison ivy can make life very difficult. When my parents showed me how to avoid poison ivy, it made life easier. Evil is like that: if you avoid it, life is much easier.

The trouble is that evil is much more habit-forming than poison ivy. When my parents told me not to touch poison ivy, I was eager to comply. Evil, on the other hand, can be hard to resist because part of us sees it as being delightful and good. So, working on our *motivation* to fight evils is an important key to the whole process.

Perhaps the most important theme in this series of articles is that *shunning evils becomes easier when you have a positive goal* and take *positive* action towards that goal. Imagine a person swimming in an ocean of evil, wondering which way to swim in order to reach land. If he simply swims away from his present position he may happen to reach land, or he may swim further out. He knows that he does *not* want to be where he is, yet he doesn't know where it is that he *does* want to be. His chances of reaching shore are much greater if he can see the land and head in that direction.

This brings us to the first (and the most important) group of positive steps you can take to make the fight against evils easier:

I. Building Your Relationship with God

1. Let God Give You Positive Motivation

Sometimes people fail in the battle against evil because while they are trying to get away from negative behaviour or state of mind, they don't know or see clearly the kind of positive behaviour or state they are striving for. Avoiding evil for negative reasons – like being afraid of the consequences to ourselves – is basically selfish.

Selfishness can't overcome selfishness; as the Bible puts it, "Satan cannot cast out Satan". On the other hand, when we shun evils *because God wants us to*, we have an unselfish motivation. When we have an understanding of God's way for us, we can move in a positive direction as we resist evil.

Swedenborg frequently points out that shunning evils won't get anyone to heaven unless the person is also looking to God and acting from a religious motive.

The means of salvation are to do with these two points: first, that evils are to be shunned because they go against the Divine laws of the commandments and second, we are to acknowledge that there is a God. This can be done by anyone ... but still *no one can do the one unless at the same time he does the other* (DP 329; and Life 21, 22).

We can't be purified from evil if we only look and pray to God... *Nor are evils removed by only shunning them*; for in this way the person looks to themselves and in so doing confirms the origin of evil (Charity 204).

Many people from custom and habit learn to shun evils *as detrimental to their honour and their wealth*. But if they do not shun evils *from a religious principle*, because they are sins and against God, then the desires for evil with their delights still remain in them, like dirty water stopped up, (DP 117).

We need to know that we must do these commandments *from religion, because God commands them*; and if we do them from any other consideration whatever, say from civil and moral laws, we stay natural and don't become spiritual (AE 902:3 & 972:2).

If we shun them *from any other motive* than because they are sins, we won't shun them, but only prevent them from being seen by other people (TCR 330).

Everyone who does good *from religion* avoids actual evils (TCR 535, 536, 537).

2. Know God, Understand God

The first step in building any relationship is getting to know a person. The more we know about God, the stronger our relationship with God will be and we will be able to shun evil more easily.

Ignorance [about God] does indeed excuse, but it doesn't take away confirmed falsity, because falsity is joined to evil (DLW 351).

No one has God present with him unless he knows God's quality (Invitation 41).

God flows in with every person, into knowledge about what is Divine (TCR 457:2).

No one can ever be joined with God except through knowledge of God (AC 1616:3).

3. Acknowledge God

Swedenborg often talks about "acknowledging" God. In Latin it is *agnoscere*, which means: "*to know a person or thing well*, as having known it before, to recognize: *agnoscere* is always to do with a subjective knowledge or recognition."

This isn't the only meaning for that word, but it serves to show that acknowledgment is more than a lip-confession that God exists. Take a look at these two translations:

Those who don't *acknowledge* God can't but be in evil and its false ideas.

Those who don't *know* God well can't but be in evil and its false ideas.

Other meanings that might be associated with acknowledgment are *recognition*, *thanks* and *praise*. When a friend gives you a needed word of encouragement, do you recognize God in it? When you pass by a beautiful field of flowers, do you thank God for it? When God replaces your negative thoughts with wholesome ones,

do you praise God for that? How would you paraphrase the word "acknowledgment" in these passages?

The *acknowledgment* of God and the *acknowledgment* that all that is good and true is from God, causes a person to be reformed and regenerated (DP 91).

Acknowledgment and adoration of God's Divine Human is the life of religion (AC 4733).

The *acknowledgment* of God brings about the conjunction of God with us and us with God... and the denial of God separates. The result of conjunction is that God turns a person's face to Himself and then leads him; and the result of separation is that hell turns the person's face to itself and leads him (DP 326).

4. Pray to God

Swedenborg often points out that prayer by itself won't solve all our spiritual problems. Yet prayer certainly can change the impossible into the possible, especially in the fight against evil.

In order to refrain from sins and shun and turn away from them, a person must pray to God for help (AE 803:2).

One is able if he or she implores God's help (DP278, 281:2).

When a person shuns evils as sins they fight against them because these sins go against God and against His Divine laws, and then they pray to God for help and power to resist them. *When they pray for this power, it is never denied* (Charity 204).

5. Listen to God

When praying, remember to listen too. God speaks to us while we are reading the Bible. But God also speaks at other times; in fact, God is always speaking to us.

God speaks with everyone, for whatever someone wills and thinks of as good and true is from God. Everything good and true

inspired by the angels is of God; so then the Lord is continually speaking with us, but quite differently with one person than with another (AC 904).

God's inner speech with a person is his conscience (AC 371, 1308, 1822, 2215). Swedenborg tells us that the battle against evil is carried on by means of this conscience or dictate from God. "God is continually putting evils and falsities to flight and doing this through conscience" (AC 1835:2). This conscience or inner speech from God is the main means which joins God with us.

A genuine conscience can only be formed from the Bible, so it is only through this that God can speak to us. But obviously, it is not only when we are reading the Bible that our conscience is active; the truths through which God works in temptations are ones which have been woven into the fabric of our lives over a long period of time. Often we won't be aware of the source of the inner dictate that comes. Although it is from God, we might feel that it is "implanted in us and flows from the connection of everything" (AC 5121:3). It won't come as a detailed list of instructions, but more as a general feeling of the direction to head in.

To every falsity that hell injects there is an answer from the Divine... But the answer from the Divine flows into what is internal or spiritual... It hardly comes to the perception otherwise than as hope and the consequent consolation (AC 8159:3).

God is constantly telling us things that will make our battles easier.

6. Remember That God Is Fighting for You

Many passages tell us to remember that God is fighting our battles for us, even though we must fight as if we were entirely on our own.

It needs to be carefully remembered that God alone fights... (Life 96).

The time of combat is the time of God's work for us (AC 63).

During a low point of temptation in the midst of despair, a person's inmost level is held by God in combat against anything false... God flows in from within, and fights for the person; which we may also know from this; that when someone is in temptation, he or she inwardly resists (AC 8567).

The important point to make here is that *when we forget* that God has been doing the fighting and that we deserve no credit, then *the battle gets harder*.

Temptations do no good if we don't believe that God has fought and conquered for us (HD 200).

I would go further and say that a person is not saved on account of temptations if he places anything of merit in them; for if he does this, it comes from self-love.

When we conquer during temptation it brings on the belief that all others are more worthy than we are, and that we are hellish rather than heavenly... so, when we come into opposite thoughts to these after a temptation, it's an indication that they have not been overcome... If the thought afterwards can't be reconciled with the thought we had during the temptation it means we either yielded in the temptation, or *we will come again into similar ones, and sometimes into harder ones*, until we have been reduced to such sanity that we believe we have merited nothing (AC2272:3).

When God fights for a person, they conquer in everything (AC 8159:3, 5).

7. Trust God

Another way to lighten our burdens is to trust in God's leading. The New Testament often tells us that impossible things become possible if we will only believe. "All things are possible to one who believes." (Mark 9:23). Swedenborg tells us that the essence of this faith is *trust* (AC 3868, Faith 36, & TCR 344). A favourite passage from

Swedenborg (AC 8478-80) indicates that a person who trusts God will handle trouble more easily than one who doesn't.

People who don't trust God: are always worried about the future, aren't content, grieve when they don't get what they want, have no consolation, feel angry with God, curse themselves, and continually draw evil to themselves.

People who trust the Lord: aren't worried or anxious about the future, are unruffled, content, peaceful, not dejected, don't grieve over losses, aren't made sad by poverty, are always advancing towards a happy state, are in the stream of Providence. continually receive good from God.

God *can* help you and has promised to help you. When you trust that God will help you, you will be in the stream of God's Providence.

8. Look for Evidence of God's Love, Power, and Wisdom

You can find signs of the God's love everywhere. There is no lack of evidence to prove that God is working through everything in this world. Swedenborg often uses the word "confirm," which means "strengthen." You can choose to confirm your belief in God, or confirm yourself against God. Confirming oneself as an atheist makes fighting evil impossible.

People who have confirmed themselves in favour of nature to the virtual separation of Divinity from it regard nothing as sin... After death, when they become spirits, they are bound to hell. (DLW 351).

Looking for evidence of God at work can *strengthen* our relationship with God, which in turn will strengthen us against evil.

Those who believe in a Divine activity in all the details of nature are able to confirm themselves in favour of the Divine by very many things which they see in nature (DLW 351).

Someone who has become spiritual by acknowledging God, and wise by the rejection of his proprium, sees Divine Providence in the

whole world and in each and all of the things belonging to it. If they look at natural things, they see it; if they look at civil matters, they see it; if they look at spiritual things, they see it. They see it in ends, in causes, in effects, in uses, in forms, in things great and small; especially in the salvation of men... From spiritual light in natural light they see these things, and more besides, and the Divine Providence in them (DP 189).

Look for signs of God's love in the Word. Look for signs of God's love in nature. Look for signs of God's love in your own progress. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits!" (Psalm 103:2)

9. Obey God

Of course, the most important way to strengthen your relationship with the Lord is to *keep His commandments*. "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me" (John 14:21). And the first step in keeping God's commandments is to shun evils. Thus we have a full circle. Shunning evils strengthens our love for God, and a stronger love for God helps us shun evils more easily.

Other Ways to Build a Relationship

Our relationships with other people are complex; the relationships have spiritual aspects, emotional aspects, mental, physical, financial, moral and social aspects. Our relationships are affected by the words we speak, the jokes we tell, the clothes we wear, our jobs, education, houses, religion, manners, face, build, political ideas, personality, morals, skills, intelligence, hobbies, interests, recreation and the kinds of family, friends and associates we have.

Think about how people knew God when God was on earth. The disciples *lived* with him. He was part of their everyday lives. It was not just a spiritual relationship, but one that was affected by Jesus'

manners, morals, associates, speech, gestures, actions, clothing, eating, appearance, education, poverty and so on.

Our relationship with God is no less complex, and just as much intertwined in everyday affairs, so there are many different things that can build our relationship with God. Any relationship will deepen as a result of

spending time together,
sharing,
honesty,
openness,
acceptance,
giving.

All these can deepen your relationship with God, as they do with other people.

II. Building Up Your New Will

We have been talking about how the fight against evil can be easier if we take positive steps to strengthen ourselves against evil through building a relationship with God. Now we'll continue, with a focus on the power that love has against evil. In the battle against evil, the new will fights against the old will. The stronger your new will is, the easier the battle can be.

10. Fight Evil with Love

Any task is easy if you love doing it. Any task can be difficult when you don't want to do it. I find it easier to play the piano for an hour than to wash the dishes for 10 minutes. This principle is just as true for shunning evils. Love makes the task easier.

To begin with, the greater our love for God and for others is, the more we will be willing to learn about evil and examine ourselves.

Those who are in heavenly love accept instruction and as soon as they are brought into the evils into which they were born, they see them from truths, because truths make evils manifest (HH 487, emphasis added, here and in following quotes; Charity 181).

As well as helping us recognize evil in ourselves, love is what gives us the power to fight against evil. In fact, it is love in our internal which does the fighting against the evils in our external (Charity 181, 183). *The only way to fight evil is to love:*

The only means of driving away the devil and his crew from the door of the mind *is love* to the Lord and toward the neighbour (AC 364 and 5168:2).

If those who are not in charity were tempted they would yield at once (AC 4274:2).

An example of this is the power of conjugal love. One woman describes the power of conjugal love over the evil of adultery as follows:

For me it is a case of not letting myself dwell on thoughts of someone else. I do that by repeating that I shun an evil as a sin against the Lord by keeping busy, and *by thinking what a good man my husband is*.

Swedenborg also describe this power of conjugal love:

From true conjugal love there is power and protection against the hells (AE 999:2).

At the presence of conjugal love diabolical spirits become furious, insane and mentally impotent and cast themselves into the deep (AE 1002e).

There is no love which labours more intensely, or which opens the interiors of their minds more powerfully and easily than conjugal love, since the soul of each intends it (CL 302).

11. Work to Overcome Your Fears

There is one commandment which is repeated more often than any other in the Old and New Testaments. We need to hear it again and again: "Fear not. Do not be afraid."

One of the many passages which tell us not to fear is Deuteronomy 20, where the priest is told to tell the people, *"Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies; do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; for the Lord your God is He who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to save you."* Then the officers are to say to the people, *"Who among you is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the hearts of his brothers faint like his heart."* Then there was also the time a leader called Gideon sent home over two thirds of his soldiers because they were afraid (Judges 7:3). The victory would come more easily with a few brave and confident men than with many who were scared and full of fear.

Spiritually, the ones who get sent home are those parts in us which can't overcome in temptation because they "fear what is evil, and also cause others to fear them as well" (AE 734:13). A purely materialistic person might fear the punishment of hell, but a spiritual person should not have that fear (AE 696:6,24).

"When there is fear, then those who want to inflict evil are at once at hand" (SD 4744). Fear draws evil spirits like a wounded animal draws wolves. Evil spirits cannot overcome someone who has confidence in the Lord, but they can easily manipulate people who are afraid of what others might think, or who don't do wrong things simply out of fear of retaliation or punishment. In fact, fear of losing money and status is able to make spiritual reformation impossible. "No one can be reformed in a state of fear... because love opens the interiors of the mind, but fear closes them... and makes it impossible for someone to be reformed" (DP 139). So before the battle, eliminate the negative motivations – send home your fears.

12. Be Afraid to Hurt Those You Love

The writer quoted above in section 10 went on to say:

The other thought so strong in me is that as much as I love my children I could never do anything to cause them harm. The gravest hurt I can think of for them would be the destruction of our marriage.

Many fears make the battle against evil harder. However, there is another kind of fear which helps us fight evil: it is the fear that is in all good loving (CL 371). It is a fear *for* another rather than a fear *of* another (SD 6110:55). It is the fear that someone may be hurt. "Holy fear is not so much a fear of hell and damnation as it is of doing or thinking anything against God and against the neighbour" (AC 2826, 4274:2, and AE 696:23). Swedenborg tells us that this fear "is a result of our wonder at and longing for what is Divine and also a result of our love" (AC 3718).

To be compelled by love and by the fear of its loss, is to compel oneself (DP 136:9).

13. Call on your "Remains"

In the Bible it says that for seven years Joseph kept storing up a fifth of Egypt's grain. And then, when famine followed, the Egyptians were able to survive on stored grain.

We can get through our lean times by drawing on a similar store. Every time we go through a good state, like a time of trust or peace, a time of caring for others, a time of enlightenment from the Bible, a memory of that state *remains* with us. These "remains" of earlier states are the starting point for our regeneration AC 5335:2, 2636:2, 5899) and the source of our nourishment during spiritual famines (AC 5297:3). God and also the angels draw out these states from the deeper parts of our minds and use them to counter the attacks of hell against us (AC 737, 1050, 268, 530:2, 3335:3).

Let your mind drift back to a childhood time when you felt your complete trust in your parents' strength. Or maybe there was a time when you felt real pity for someone who was suffering. There may

have been a time when you felt a great sense of purpose in life. Maybe you can draw on memories of being very much in love. Or you might turn to a favourite spiritual passage. God uses these memories to stir up similar states now, giving us the resolve to fight against evil.

14. Develop a Sense of Inner Peace and Confidence

The fiercest hurricane has a centre of complete calm. Swedenborg says he once heard a rushing noise of a great mob of spirits round him, who were complaining that everything was going to total destruction. But in the centre of it all he heard the soft music of angels singing. He learned that this was symbolic of how "the Lord rules the fragmented and confused things which are on the outside from what is peaceful in the centre, by which the surrounding disorderly things are brought back into order" (AC 5396).

We can't fight confusion with confusion. Inner peace is a key to withstanding the assaults of hell.

Peace has in it a confidence in the Lord. *A state of peace takes away all evil*, especially self-confidence (AC 8455).

During temptation a person is inmostly in a state of peace, for *unless this were with him inmostly, he would not fight...* and moreover, *this is the reason why he overcomes* (AC 3696:2 and end of 1726).

15. Hope

Of all hell's horrible methods of destroying our good loves (AC 1820) the cruelest is when they take away hope. The point of despair is inevitably the focus, the climax, the height and the depth of the battle (AC 1787, 6144, 5369, 7147, 7166, 8567). It is the inmost or highest degree of spiritual pain (AC 8313, and SD 1042).

Just as hopelessness is hell's greatest weapon, hope is our greatest defence. God answers every attack of the hells, but that answer comes to us primarily as hope (AC 8159). When a person is

attacked by evil spirits, "God keeps him in *hope and trust, which are the forces by which he resists*" (AC 6097, 11007, 6574:2).

A person's hopes are directly tied to his love. Actually, the reason why God does not give us certain knowledge of the future is that hope is much more powerful than knowledge. Without hope, love will die (DP 178).

Swedenborg gives several examples of the power of hope: "Wives are nourished by hope of friendship, confidence and happiness together" (CL 167). "Hope of becoming an angel infills the love of being useful" (HH 517). "Hope of having children nurses and strengthens conjugal love" (CL 254). And for a person who is sad or struggling with evil, hope can console, encourage, nourish, cheer, revive, calm (AC 7183, 7183, 8165, 3610, 4783, 6577, and CL 78, 216a).

In temptations... good spirits and angels... continually keep the person in hope... He who allows himself to be cheered with hope remains steadfast in an affirmative attitude (AC 2338).

When you are desperate, make use of hope. Hope for the good that God can bring from evil. Hope that God can change you. Hang on to hope.

16. Keep Your Goals Clearly in Sight

A very important factor in the fight against evil is a person's goals or ends. A person's end or goal is his love – it is what he loves above everything else (AC 3066, 1317). It is by means of a person's ends that he is either in heaven or in hell (AC 3670). Consequently, the fight against evil is a fight between ends. Hell especially attacks a person's ends and tries to put them in doubt (AC 1820, 1787).

One of the ways hell can attack a person's ends is by giving priority to the means. The whole effort of hell is to make ends into means and make means into ends. They want us to **love things and use people**, rather than **use things and love people**.

They would also love to distract us from our good goals by discouraging us with our imperfect results. We may not be very successful in many things we do and it may look like we are not getting very far with fighting our evils. Angels on the other hand "especially avert evil ends and inspire good ones" (AC 5354); and they excuse a person's evil if his goal has been good (AC 7122:2, 3796:4, 6559, 1079, 1088). It is primarily through our ends that God works with us and leads us (AC 3570:2, 3565). God pays little attention to whether we are "successful" at shunning evils, or whether our love is perfectly pure. He mostly cares whether our *goal* or *intention* is shunning evils and loving others (CL 71).

One of the ways we can strengthen ourselves against the attacks of hell is to visualize our goals, to "keep our eyes on good as the end" (AC 5949). "An intelligent person is one who keeps goals in view" (AC 5094:4, 3796:3).

The more clearly we can see in our minds the outcome we are seeking, the more hope we will have, and the more our reason and love will be stirred to strive for the goal:

It is reason's greatest delight mentally to envisage the effect from love, not after it is attained, but before it is, not in the present but in the future. So we have hope, which rises and declines in the reason as he sees or anticipates the outcome (DP 178).

17. Enjoy the Love in Your Life

One of the subtlest ways evil spirits make life more difficult for us is by baiting us with selfish delights and destroying our good delights. "They fire up selfish desires by means of delights which they snatch from the person's delight in something else" (AC 1820). The greatest delight of evil spirits is to take away the heavenly delights of others (HH 400).

It is much harder to live well when we don't enjoy it. Perhaps if they can't stop people from going to church, they might just get them

to stop enjoying it. If they can't prevent us from working hard, they still might get us to enjoy the pay cheque instead of our use to others. If you are the kind of person who would never have an affair, they might still get you to enjoy the TV soap affairs. Or even if you would never deliberately hurt another, they might still give you a sense of satisfaction when someone who has been rude to you is in some kind of trouble.

The angels are also especially interested in our delights. They "observe where a person's delights turn themselves, and so far as they can in the person's freedom, they moderate and bend them to good" (AC 5992, 4063:4).

Whether you are in a good or bad state is often less significant than whether you are enjoying the state you are in. The battle between good and evil is a battle of delights. "While the person is in temptations, *there is a combat between these two kinds of delight*" (AC 3928, 8352, 8452, HH 384, 396, and DP 145).

One example of this battle of delights is in marriage. For many people, the immediate spiritual issue is not whether they will stay married, but whether they will choose to *enjoy* marriage. Note that Swedenborg titled his book *The DELIGHTS of... Conjugal Love...* and *The PLEASURES of... Adulterous Love*. In this book he wrote, "It is the *delights* of the two loves that are so opposite, since love is nothing without its delights" (CL 427).

Because of this opposition, heavenly delight has great power against evil spirits. The influence of heavenly joy makes them feel intense pain and they throw themselves back into hell (HH 400). This means that the more we enjoy what is good, the more easily we can overcome our enjoyment of evil.

In the same degree in which a person perceives delight in some good, and pleasantness in some truths, he feels undelight in the evils of the former life and unpleasantness in its falsities (AC 3701:7, 2657:6).

So we can see that one key to overcoming evil delight is to allow ourselves and even compel ourselves, to *enjoy* the good love which God has given us.

A person compels himself *when he compels his outward thought... to receive the delights* of his affections which are good (DP 145).

18. Take Responsibility for Your Life

Swedenborg uses the term "guilt" in both negative and positive ways. On the one hand, one should believe that evil is from hell and "not appropriate evil to oneself and *make oneself guilty* of it" (DP 320). On the other hand, during repentance we are to "acknowledge our evils, to *make ourselves guilty* and to condemn ourselves on account of them" (HD 160).

Clearly, there is a difference between the depressing, hopeless feelings of guilt that immobilise us emotionally, and the healthy willingness to reject past attitudes and change for the better. I find that when the positive meaning is intended, a better translation of the Latin word for "guilty" is "responsible." Don't *feel guilty* about your evils; do *accept responsibility* for them.

Feelings of guilt are one of the key weapons the hells use to destroy our spiritual life. They love to burden our consciences with things that no one should feel guilty about (AC 5386, 5724, SD 1240-1242). Furthermore, by bringing to mind our past evils, they bring our good intentions into doubt and discourage us from our efforts to care about others. The angels fight these feelings by drawing out the best in us – all our previous states of caring, love and understanding which remain stored within us (AC 737). It will be easier for the angels as well as ourselves if we can get rid of all that useless guilt.

A key concept here is freedom. Your spiritual love will not grow as a result of outside pressure, but only as a result of your own inner choices. These are choices which you can make more easily when you

accept the idea that you are responsible for the way your own life turns out.

19. Make an Effort

I have been telling you that the fight against evil will be easier if your love is greater and your new will stronger. However, there will be times when the struggle is difficult even for the best of people. The fight against evil in ourselves is a fight for our lives (see AC 8403:2). And the stronger our love is, the more fiercely hell attacks it (AC 1820). God gives us all the power we need to overcome; God just asks us to be willing to *use* that power to our best ability (AC 8307:2).

Love takes effort. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Your will is like your muscles, which get stronger with every effort you make. Likewise, a person's heavenly self is formed in the effort of his thought (AC 1937:2).

The first part of charity is to shun evils, and the second is to do what is good (Life 22, AC 8179:2, & BE 52). Love, courage, tenderness, trust, peace, purpose, delight, vision, responsibility, effort – these can give you new will-power; that is, give power to your new will. Each of them can strengthen your love and make the task of spiritual growth easier, not as *substitutes* for shunning evil, but as *helps*

III. Building Up Your New Understanding

I used to retype an article at least three or four times before submitting it for publication. Now with a computer, I can correct typos, move paragraphs, rearrange sentences, print out fresh copies and even transmit it to the typesetter without ever retyping it. Writing is much easier because I have more powerful tools. Washing machines, ballpoint pens, airplanes, power drills and can openers are all tools that have made our lives much easier. There are many powerful tools that can make our spiritual lives easier as well. These tools are truths.

Up to now we have been looking at how life can be easier if we strengthen our relationship with the Lord and strengthen our love. The love which the Lord gives us is a great source of power against evil. Yet that power can only be exercised by means of suitable 'tools'. This part is about the tools (truths, thoughts) which make fighting evil easier.

20. Think about God

Of course your ability to fight evil will increase if you turn your thoughts towards God. In fact all the truths of the new understanding focus on this. Know Him, understand Him, acknowledge Him, listen to Him, remember that God fights for you. Think of His power and His love, His mercy and wisdom.

21. Think about Heaven

One of the most powerful defences against evil is to think about eternal life. (I have added emphasis to some of the numbers quoted.)

No evils can be removed except by the true use of freedom of choice in spiritual things, and this is done *by directing the mind to reflection upon the state of life after death* (TCR 498, DP 73:6, 7).

In order to be lifted up from sensual spirits, we must *think about eternal life* (AC 6201).

Everyone fights against evil who believe that hell and heaven exist and that heaven is eternal happiness and that hell is eternal unhappiness and who believe that those who do evil come into hell and those who do good come into heaven (Life 94).

When the inner sight or thought is turned toward the world and rests there, the thought in consequence becomes worldly but *when it is turned heavenward it becomes heavenly* (HH 532).

We can think of heaven as our proper goal (SD 2854) and also as the source of all the good we do.

22. Think about Hell

For many people the thought of hell brings on either disbelief or fear; and many people simply don't think about it.

In contrast, the section on hell in *Heaven and Hell* has some hopeful and beautiful teachings in it:

God rules the hells (HH 536).

In heaven there is all power, and none in hell (HH 539).

No one is cast into hell by God (HH 545).

God never turns away His face from man (HH 545).

God is good itself, love itself and mercy itself (HH 545).

One of the ways evil spirits discourage a person is that they "make him believe that he himself does bad things and so is bad, and yet at the very moment they infuse and compel this belief, they accuse and condemn (AC 761; AC 5036, 6097). It is comforting and very important to know that our evil thoughts and feelings have their source outside of ourselves, in hell.

If we only believed as is really true, that all good is from God and all evil from hell, we would neither make the good in us a matter of merit nor would evil be imputed to us; for we would then look to God in all the good we think and do and all the evil that flows in would be cast down to hell from which it comes (HH 302:2, DP 320, AC 6324, 904, AE 1141:2, AR 224:10).

23. Strengthen your Ideals

We must know evil to fight it and we must know good to know evil:

Man merely believes that evil exists, but what its quality is he does not know, and this for the sole reason that he does not know what good is (AC 4818).

Who can know what is evil and false unless he knows what is good and true? Or who knows what is unchaste, dishonest, indecent and ugly unless he knows what is chaste, honest, decent and beautiful? Or who can discern foolishness but someone who is wise? Or know what wisdom is? Or who can rightly perceive discordant sounds but one who by learning and culture has absorbed harmonious music? (CL 424, 425)

The stronger your ideals, the more clearly you can picture the kind of person you wish to become, the more easily you can identify and overcome the things which stand in your way, even if your ideals seem unattainable at the present.

He who does not affirm and acknowledge the good and truth which are of faith and charity cannot come into any combat of temptation, because there is nothing within to combat back against evil and falsity (AC 3928 and 8963).

24. Learn what evil is

A doctor cannot cure a disease that he does not understand. A mechanic can't fix a car until he knows what is broken. Knowledge is equally necessary for our spiritual life. "No one can be regenerated except through knowledges of faith, which are truths" (AC 2063:3, 3502:2). "No one can ever fight against evils and falsities until he knows what evil and falsity are" (AC 1661:2, AE 356:3).

25. Think about shunning evil.

Thinking about shunning an evil isn't a substitute for actually desisting, but it is a good first step.

Anyone who thinks in his heart that there is a God, that God is the God of heaven and earth, that the Word is from Him, and is therefore holy, that there is a heaven and a hell, and that there is a life after death, is able to shun these evils [those listed in the Ten Commandments] (AE 936).

Another passage makes taking the first step sound even easier:

When anything gets in the way that the person knows is dishonest and unfair and is something his spirit moves toward, it is simply a matter of thinking that he should not do it because it is against the Divine precepts. If a person gets used to thinking this way, and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven. Who cannot think this way because of his freedom? (HH 533).

26. Think good thoughts about your neighbour

God wants us to think well of others. "Those who have conscience are kept by God in good thoughts about their neighbour, and are withheld from thinking evil" (AC 1919). "Those who are in charity scarcely see the evils of another, but observe all his goods and truths and put a good interpretation on what is evil" (AC 1079).

This of course does not eliminate the need for civil and moral judgment on those who do evil. But it does mean giving people the benefit of the doubt and being especially careful of assigning false motives to others. Thinking positively about other people is a key to victory over evil. "The temptations in which a person overcomes are attended with the belief that all others are more worthy than they are" (AC 2273).

27. Use the Bible

The Bible is like a tool chest containing many powerful concepts.

The combats are carried on by means of truths of faith which come from the Bible. The person must fight against evils and falsities from these; if he fights from anything else, he does not conquer, because the Lord is not in anything else (AC8962).

Without God, by means of the Bible, there is no salvation (LJ 55:3).

Use of the Bible makes tremendous power available to us:

The power of the Bible in what it says is the *power to open heaven...* and also the *power to fight against falsities and evils*, thus against the hells. A person who is in genuine truths from the meaning of the text of the Bible *can disperse and scatter the whole diabolical crew* and their devices in which they place their power, which are innumerable, and this *in a moment, merely by a look and by an effort of their will* (AE 1086).

The key to receiving this power is in the way we read the Bible. A person can see genuine truths only when he has been enlightened by God. There are several factors which can help to bring enlightenment. One is that the Bible must be studied from a genuine affection for what is true (AC 4368:2, 5432:4, 6047:2, HD 257). This means not simply reading and studying, but reading with questions in mind, seeking answers that apply to life and being willing to have your ideas changed. "Many are affected by the Bible and devote much labour to reading it but still there are few who have as their purpose to be instructed in the truth" (AC 4368:2).

Truth is much easier to learn when we enjoy it (AC 5094, HH 321). When you discover a new truth in the Bible, celebrate! Let yourself be happy with what God teaches.

Comparing passages can also bring enlightenment. In difficult places God enlightens us by giving us understanding from other passages (AC 3436). Another help is prayer: "The Bible should be searched with sincere prayer to God for enlightenment" (AC 5432:4). It also helps to read frequently, a chapter or two a day (AE 803:3). Don't let your mind run dry of the truth.

28. Don't take credit for your good

One way to make things harder on ourselves is to take credit for our efforts, or to think that we deserve special favours because of

the way we have worked or suffered. This belief hides more evils than I would care to list (TCR 439; AC 4174, 4145:2, 3956, TCR 442).

Because of the evils associated with merit, our temptations will become more frequent or more severe if we fail to realize that we deserve nothing (AC 2273).

29. Don't dwell on your failures

Evil spirits love to bring to mind all your past failings, and to make even your successes look like failure. They "call up a person's evil and falsities... whatever he has thought and done from his infancy" (AC 751). "They excite and draw forth all things in a person that have been evilly done and evilly thought and thereby accuse and condemn him" (AC 8159 and 8960).

It is essential that you can be able to clearly identify your evils so that you can overcome them. But mulling them over and brooding about them is playing into the hands of evil spirits, and makes you vulnerable to their greatest weapon – despair.

30. Work to overcome your doubts

Doubt can make the struggle against evil more difficult. We may doubt whether it is possible to change ourselves, or doubt whether we really *want* to make an effort to be responsible. We may doubt whether God cares about us, and even doubt God's existence.

When Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection, Jesus appeared to him and gently said, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27). God does not condemn us on account of our doubts, but he does ask us to overcome them.

Doubt is a limiting factor. It impedes spiritual progress. A person cannot be admitted into wisdom until he is free from doubt (AC 2718). Doubt is a tool of hell, and overcoming it brings us closer to victory. "He who is in temptation is in doubt about the end in view. The end in view is the love, against which the evil spirits and evil genii fight,

and thereby put the end in doubt. And the greater the love is the more do they put it in doubt... Assurance respecting the result precedes the victory and belongs to the victory" (AC 1820). In order to ease our burdens in temptations, "good spirits and angels from the Lord in every possible way dispel this state of doubt" (AC 2338).

31. Send Away Your Worries.

When Peter stepped out of the boat into the water, he found that it held his weight. He was able to walk on water, as long as he kept his eyes on the Lord. When he began instead to worry about the strong wind and the waves, he began to sink (Matt. 14:30). Only by turning back to the Lord could he be saved.

A person in spiritual temptations worries about his evils and his lack of love and trust in the Lord. This anxiety is part of the temptation, and in fact temptation is defined as a "more inward anxiety (AC 6097, 4627:3, HD 187, 188). It is induced by evil spirits who love to torment people (AC 1820); it can cause despair (AC 1787). The fact that this worry is there is a good sign: "If when a person reflects upon the evil he has done he feels any anxiety it is a sign that he will still receive influx through the angels" (AC 5470:2; cf. 7217, 8164). However, simply worrying about our spiritual life will not make things better, and is actually part of the torment from hell. It is not by anxiety but by trust in the Lord that we overcome.

"Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' " (Matt. 6:35). Much of our worry is about our belongings, reputation, health and other worldly things. Of course it is important to carefully provide for ourselves and be concerned about our future, but *worry* and *anxiety* about these things is forbidden and even condemned. People who are not happy with what the Lord has provided for them and who do not trust His leading and who prefer worldly things to heavenly things, are constantly worried about their future. And since they reject the Lord, they have no consolation and

curse themselves (AC 8478). This kind of worry makes life much harder and needs to be sent away.

Once Swedenborg felt a knot in his stomach as a result of worry. He knew it must be from spirits who cause concern about the future. He writes, "I spoke to them, saying that they had better go away, because their sphere, which caused anxiety, did not agree with the spheres of the spirits who were with me" (AC 5179).

32. Keep an Open Mind.

It is better for a person who is controlled by evil spirits to have a closed mind, because he is then in less danger of getting involved in more evils than he already has. But for a person who is in faith it is better to be open-minded. "The less his ideas are determined to one thing" and the more flexible he is, "the better it is. And the less persistent and hard, the more easily he is bent by the Lord to all things which please the Lord and to good" (SD 3024:2).

Frequently people turn truths into heresies by focusing their minds on a single truth to the exclusion of others (see AC 362). Good is not confirmed by a single truth, but by many truths (AC 4197). If we keep our minds open to new truths (AC 5804, 2272:2), we will see the truth more clearly, and it will be easier for the Lord to regenerate us.

33. Look for Confirmation of the Truth.

In an earlier article in this series I mentioned the importance of confirming or strengthening your belief in God. What was said there applies to all truths – they become stronger when they are backed up by evidence and experience.

Now we must be careful not to think that an idea is true simply because there is evidence to back it up. Falsities can be confirmed as easily as truths can (and just as confirming truths makes things easier, confirming falsities makes things harder (AC 1109, 1295, 2385, 2538). Yet once we see from the Lord that a concept is true, we can strengthen it by evidence and experience. Without confirmation, a

truth is simply a memorized fact which is soon forgotten. Confirmation gives a person a rational understanding of the truth and fixes it in his consciousness (AC 3175:4, 3388, HD 257:3).

All theoretical matters are to be drawn and concluded from experiences, and are also to be confirmed by them (LJ 315).

Truth must be confirmed and illustrated by many things before it is acknowledged (AC 3175:4; cf. 8702, 8772:2).

The stronger the truths are, the more easily the battle can be won. In temptations, although many truths may be called to mind, it is only truths which have been confirmed that have the power to raise up those who are in doubt and despair, to give consolation and relief, and to "govern the interiors of the mind" (AC 5044, AE 558:2). No wonder in trouble we turn back to the familiar passages that are tied to our affections.

34. Put Love in the First Place.

Having the right thoughts can make things easier, but thinking is not the ultimate issue. Evil thoughts may come into your mind without your choosing them, and then the key is how you act on those thoughts. "The things which enter into a person's thought and not through it into the will do not make him unclean;... a person cannot desist from thinking evil, but from doing it" (AC 8910:2).

Thoughts are good tools for making our spiritual life easier. One useful thought to keep in mind is that thinking by itself is useless. "Thought saves no one" (AC 2228:2). Thoughts without a life of love are like tools without workmen. Consequently, a key to spiritual progress is the acknowledgment that love is more important than doctrine or thought. "No one can ever say he is regenerate unless he acknowledges and believes that charity is the primary of his faith" (AC 989). If Christians would make love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the principal of faith, then "from all the differing churches there would be made one church. And all the dissensions that come

forth from doctrine alone would vanish. In fact, all hatred of one against another would be dissipated in a moment, and the Lord's kingdom would come upon the earth" (AC 1799:4).

IV. Building a Receptive Base in Your Natural Man

Most of us would like to see changes in our world. Often this involves material things – new clothes, a better house, another car, or perhaps just a cleaner kitchen or a better working environment. Usually we also desire changes in our relationships with people we might like the boss to control his temper, or that certain friend to be more dependable, or a spouse to get his act together, or the family members to have more reasonable expectations. Finally, we might want to change ourselves – to be more attractive, to acquire a better education, more skills, more confidence, better health. These changes are primarily external ones, involving our environment, *other* people, and the more *outward, visible* aspects of our person.

The most significant changes in our lives are always internal – changes in motivation, or in how we look at ourselves and the world. A real cure for our ailments must go beyond the superficial symptoms to the root of the problem, which affects us inwardly. Consequently, I have focused in previous sections on our new will and understanding and our relationship with the Lord. These inward changes are primary, yet they cannot take place in a vacuum. Our spiritual life can change in a permanent way only if it is reflected in our natural life. The life of religion is not only to have high ideals and good intentions, but also to bring one's outward life into correspondence with those ideals. The task of bringing the natural man into correspondence with the spiritual man can be easier or more difficult, depending on how much the natural man resists. When the natural is receptive, it makes the task easier, just as a midwife eases the labor of childbirth.

When the interior man is undergoing temptations, the natural is then like a midwife; for unless the natural assists, it is impossible for

any birth of interior truth to take place; for when interior truths are born, it is the natural which receives them into its bosom, because it affords the opportunity for them to work their way out. It is always the case with the things of spiritual birth that their reception must be wholly in the natural; and this is the reason why when a person is being regenerated, the natural is first prepared to receive and insofar as this is made receptive, so far interior truths and goods can be brought forth and multiplied (AC 4588).

Below are some ways you might make your natural man more receptive to spiritual things.

35. Fill Your Life with Order.

"The more a person goes against order the more force is required to reform him" (SD 2839). Essentially this order is a matter of keeping the Ten Commandments. It is primarily a matter of how we think and feel, but also involves our most outward conduct.

Divine order... is not completed except with man in his bodily things; namely, his gestures, actions, expressions of face, speech, external sensations and in their delights. These are the extremes of order (AC 3632).

This also involves such things as keeping order and peace in the home, without which the family is torn apart and a man's mental and physical health is ruined (CL 283, 285).

Part of the order that makes it easier is the routines and habits we develop. "When a person frequently does the truth, then it not only recurs from habit, but also from affection" (AC 4884:2).

36. Fill Your Life with Beauty.

Love is beautiful. All the lovely sights in heaven, and all the true beauty in this world are reflections of God's love for us and our love for each other. When this beauty touches us outwardly, it can be the basis

for a change in our mental state, giving us a taste of heaven. Some examples:

a. **Smile.** A long face does not help you get to heaven. "There is no need for a person to walk around somberly, with a sad, mournful face and a bowed head – he can be cheerful and happy" (HH 358). In fact, evil spirits are happy to be with a person who mopes about his evils instead of fighting them.

What is easier for a person in trouble and agony than to utter sighs and groans from his lungs and lips, and also to beat his breast and make himself guilty of all sins, and still not be conscious of any sin in himself? Do the diabolical hordes who then occupy his loves depart along with his sighs? Don't they rather hiss at those things and remain in him as before, as in their own house? (TCR 529).

Whether given or received, a smile can brighten your day. When we look at another person, the beauty we see is not so much the physical characteristics of the face as from the affection which shines from it. Seeing the face of an angel can "affect with charity the very inmost life of the mind" (AC 553). Certain good spirits try to get people to smile, in order to inspire them with peace and joy and drive away disturbing concerns and worries about the future (AC 8113).

b. **Enjoy Music.** Songs from the Word give people who sing or listen "heavenly gladness from the holy and blessed influence" of heaven. They stir a heartfelt gladness which bursts forth from inside a person and spreads even to his fingers and toes with a joyful, holy motion (see AC 8261). Other kinds of music can have a similar effect. For example, by hearing instrumental music, even evil people can be as if carried outside themselves and can feel a kind of heavenly sweetness (SD 2112). When Saul was troubled by an evil spirit, David played his harp, and "Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed" (I Sam. 16:23).

c. **Enjoy the Outdoors.** All of nature is a theater representing the Lord and His kingdom (AC 3000, 3483). In most

ancient times, people would look at a sunrise and think of the Lord's coming; they would look at a mountain and think of His greatness (see AC 920, 1807, 3702). One passage suggests that we can avoid mental dullness and fatigue by going on "walks with the sight of palaces and houses, and trees and flowers, in gardens, woods and fields.. ." (Char. 189, 190).

37. Seek the Reviving Power of Worship.

Often when people have come to church or classes with faces twisted by anger or worry I have seen those faces gradually softened by feelings of peace, caring and resolve.

A person is continually in worship while he is in love and charity; external worship is merely the effect... But a person in the world should be in external worship also; for *internal things are excited by external worship, and by it also external things are kept in holiness so that internal things can inflow; besides the fact that the person this way acquires knowledge; and is also given states of holiness* (AC 1618 – emphasis added).

Also, worship brings together what was said previously about the powers of prayer, of music, of the literal sense of the Word and of remains.

38. Take Care of Yourself Physically.

Your physical condition can influence the difficulty of your spiritual life. For example:

Temptations are most grievous when they are accompanied with bodily pains; and still more so, when those pains are chronic, and no deliverance is granted, even though the Divine mercy is implored; hence results despair, which is the end (HD 196).

Sometimes physical suffering is beyond our control; a freak accident may cause years of pain. If you have some ailment that cannot be cured, you can be sure that the Lord is permitting it for the

sake of your spiritual growth. On the other hand, we can make things more difficult for ourselves by allowing ourselves to get run-down. Most of us can control our physical condition to some extent by the way we eat, sleep, exercise, etc., and this will have an effect on our spiritual state. For example, when I am lacking sleep I become much more irritable and susceptible to hellish spirits. I sometimes fool myself into thinking that I will benefit if I "rise up early," and "sit up late," forgetting that sleep is a gift from the Lord (see Psalm 127:2). In sleep we are especially guarded by the Lord, and then evil spirits can have no power over us (AC 959, 1983), and perhaps it is the only time when the Lord can work on our minds without our interference (SD 427, 3391).

There are many passages which urge us to keep a healthy body for the sake of a healthy mind.

Everyone ought to be concerned for his body;... this must be the first thing, but for the end that there may be a healthy mind in a healthy body (AC 6936).

A person should take every care of his body, to nourish it, to clothe it, to let it enjoy the delights of the world; but all these things are not for the sake of the body, but in order that the soul in a sound body may act correspondently and rightly, and may have the body as an organ perfectly obedient to it (AC 5949:2).

When the body is sick, the mind also is sick, by removal from the world, if not otherwise... It is therefore vain to think that anyone can do the work of repentance or receive any faith during sickness; for there is no action in that repentance and no charity in that faith (DP 142).

On this subject the Writings especially point to the importance of a good diet. "Nourishment has for its end that there be a sound mind in a sound body. If a man deprives his body of its nourishment, he also deprives himself of the state which is the end" (AC 3951:3). If a person indulges his taste without regard for the *use* of the food, "the body is sickly, at the least it is languid inwardly, consequently so is the

mind... From this comes dullness in matters of thought and judgment, and quickness in those of the body and the world" (HH 462).

While we should keep in mind that being physically healthy can make it easier for us spiritually, we obviously should not become so absorbed by matters of physical health that our spiritual health is neglected. "However people are infected physically," the angels "rate it as nothing relatively to the soul" (AC 2380).

39. Get Help from Others.

Each person's salvation ultimately depends on his own free choices. In this sense, religion is a private affair, between each individual and God. However this wonderful truth becomes twisted when we use it as an excuse not to get help when we need it. For there is another wonderful truth: we cannot get to heaven without the help of other people. We are led and taught by the Lord alone, yet He does this always through the work of angels and other people (DP 154, 174).

Our fight against evil is portrayed by the fight of the sons of Israel against the Amalekites. While Joshua led the army in battle, Moses stood upon a hill and raised his arms to the Lord. As long as his hands were raised, the Israelites would prevail. When Moses could no longer hold up his hands, Aaron and Hur helped him sit upon a rock and stood on either side holding up his hands. Moses represents the truths which come directly from the Lord as enlightenment. This inner truth must be supported by truth which comes indirectly through teaching by others and study (AC 8603, 8611, 9424).

The Writings encourage people to get help examining themselves:

It is impossible for those who are in the love of self to know what their ruling love is... and yet if they were willing they might know it from others who are wise, and who see what they themselves do not see (HH 487).

Another passage suggests that talking to a minister about your evils can lighten your burden, while encouraging self-examination:

It does no harm for one burdened in conscience to enumerate his sins before a minister of the church in order to lighten his burden and obtain absolution, because he is thereby initiated into a habit of examining himself, and reflecting upon each day's evils (TCR 539).

Even in the highest heaven angels need help in questions about daily living. "About these matters the less wise consult the more wise, and these consult the Lord and receive answers" (HH 214).

40. Get into a Support Group or Social Network.

One way of getting help from others is to get into a support network. The power of the AA group to help alcoholics is well-known. The church can provide similar support for our spiritual life. In the early Christian Church their "social interaction consisted also in giving consolation to each other under the distresses of the church," and "the liberation of the imprisoned thoughts" (TCR 434). Even angels cannot function without the emotional support of their society (AE 1147:2).

41. Express Your Good Feelings and Beliefs.

There is tremendous power in "ultimates" (AC 9835:2, 10044:3, DLW 217, AE 726); speech and gestures are ultimates of thought and affection. Sometimes negative emotions are expressed more readily than positive ones: complaining, criticism, depression, anger, cynicism. What about joy, affirmation, caring, peace? The affections which are expressed will be strengthened.

Positive affections are not always happy. Grief is an aspect of love. Jesus wept. It is said that the Lord expresses His intense grief about the evil in the world by "crying with a loud voice, as a lion roars" (AC 471). We too need to weep, as an expression of love. One reason why the Lord asks people about their state (even though He already knows) is so that "people may have consolation from being able to express their feelings, which often proves a relief" (AC 2693).

One way to express a positive affection is to make a commitment before witnesses. An example of this is the marriage covenant, which "holds the partners' minds within bounds" and "averts transgressions" (CL 307). In a similar way, a commitment before a spouse or friend to fight a particular evil may strengthen your resolve and elicit support.

42. Get Involved in Useful Tasks.

When Hezekiah was "sick unto death," he was cured by laying a lump of figs over the infection (Isa. 38). This seems like a strange remedy until we know that figs are a symbol of good works or usefulness. A simple effort to get busy and accomplish something useful can often bring us out of a spiritual low.

Shunning evil enables us to be genuinely useful, and usefulness in turn enables us to shun evil.

If a person is to accept heaven's life, he must at all costs live in the world, involved in its functions, and dealings... This is the only way a spiritual life can be formed in a person (HH 528).

While a person is in some study and business, that is, in some use, his mind is limited and circumscribed as by a circle... From this as from a house he sees the various evil desires as outside himself, and from sanity of reason within, banishes them (CL 249).

No one knows the blessed delights of conjugal love save he who rejects the horrid delights of adultery; and no one can reject these save he who is wise from the Lord; and no one is wise from the Lord unless he performs uses from the love of uses (CL 137).

43. Take Time Off.

Repeatedly the Word emphasizes that we will be judged by our works (Life 2), and that charity itself is to do the work of one's office or occupation sincerely, faithfully, and fairly (Life 114, TCR 422). Some people miss the point and think they can earn their way to heaven if

they only work hard enough. After death, they make long lists of their good deeds, not realizing that it is not the quantity of works but the thought and feeling within the works that counts. They keep trying to work their way to heaven, and "when they are in their labor, and are asked whether they are not fatigued, they reply that they have not yet done enough labor to be able to merit heaven" (AC 1110). "To bear a burden means to do works for the sake of meriting" (AC 6392:2).

A similar attitude can be with people who feel they have to prove themselves to others through their work (SD 6075), or who, like Martha, are too busy serving to listen to the Lord (SD 1573, 1574). Too much concern with worldly business can make it hard for a person to be enlightened (F. 30, SS 59e, AC 6313, 6315, 9094), and can be like weights which drag him down and make him vulnerable to evil spirits (AC 6210, 6315).

The need for a day off is important enough to be included as one of the Ten Commandments and although this should not be strictly applied by a Christian (Matt. 12), even Jesus frequently took time away from His active ministry (Matt. 14:23, Mark 6:46, 1:35, Luke 5:16, etc.).

There is an affection in every employment, and it strains the mind and keeps it intent upon its work and study. This if it is not relaxed, becomes dull, and its desire flags (Char. 190).

44. Don't Let Evil Habits Get Started.

Anyone who is addicted to drugs, alcohol or nicotine can tell you that it is much more difficult to quit than it is not to start in the first place. Evils are also addictive.

The case with evils is like that with downright thefts, which when committed of set purpose two or three times cannot be desisted from; for they continually cling to the person's thought (AC 6203).

Evil enters into the will by being kept in the thought; by consent; and *especially by act and consequent delight* (AC 6204).

The difficulty... resisting what is evil increases as a person does evil things intentionally (HH 533).

The fight is not severe except in the case of those who have given free rein to their selfish desires, and have indulged them of set purpose (Life 97).

45. Enjoy the God-given Pleasures of This World.

A person can enjoy fine food and clothing, go to the movies, become wealthy, enjoy the world's pleasures and this will be no barrier to his entering heaven, provided he does not center his life in those things and worships God and cares for his fellow man (HH 358, 359). The object of the battle between inward delights and outward delights is not to *eliminate* worldly pleasures, but to *subordinate* them and *properly enjoy* them.

Evil is not mastered by the renunciation of the delights of the body; sometimes another evil is thus raised up, namely, merit on account of the renunciation (AC 1947:3).

People who do this make things harder for themselves not only in this life but also after death (see HH 360).

An example of the importance of external delights is in marriage. Angels claim that if physical pleasure is lacking "the love fails and grows cold." "Unless there were ultimate delights," they say, "there would not be any delights of conjugal love" (CL 44:8).

So far we have primarily focused on ways to fight evil by building up the positive aspects of our lives. You may be able to think of more ways to do this. The next section will focus more directly on the negative, evil things in our lives, and on how to cut those evils down to size.

V. Cutting Evils Down to Size

When the Children of Israel were on the verge of entering the land of Canaan, their scouts came back with tales of the giants in the land. "We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:28-33). The people were so discouraged that they did not want to even try to conquer the evil giants in the land.

Of course, this is just what the hells would like to do to us. They want to discourage us with the size, number and strength of our evils, with the complexity and ambiguity of the task, and with our own weak, ineffective efforts.

Years later Goliath challenged the Children of Israel. The whole army was afraid and helpless because they did not know how to handle such a huge enemy. But David, with the Lord on his side, cut the enemy down to size, bringing hope, then victory.

The fight against evil can be easier if we have ways of cutting the giants down to size.

46. Keep It Simple.

Once a young man came to the Lord asking, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?"

"Keep the commandments," He replied.

Apparently the young man felt this was too childish for someone as accomplished as himself. He said, "I have been keeping them ever since I was a child. What am I lacking?" It's as if he were looking for some more challenging task by which he could prove how worthy he was (Matt. 19:16, Mark 10:17).

When Naaman came to Elisha seeking a miraculous cure for his leprosy, he was expecting something dramatic, unusual, amazing, but he was simply told, "Go wash in the Jordan seven times and you will be clean." Naaman was furious at being given such an ordinary answer, until one of his servants said, "If the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash and be clean'?" (2 Kings 5:9-14)

The Lord asks us not to do something great or complex, but simply to "wash and be clean," to repent. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Is our religion difficult? People say that the New Church beliefs are complex, hard to explain. Some say that being a New Church person is more difficult than being a Catholic or Protestant because the New Church places more responsibility on the individual. I wonder whether these people have overlooked the simplicity of the New Church.

How does the Protestant religion compare with the New Church? "In the Protestant world... repentance is a very difficult task... chiefly because of their belief that repentance and charity contribute nothing to salvation, but faith alone" (TCR 561). Faith alone is difficult to learn and retain in the memory (BE 58). The religion of faith alone is too hard.

Nor would it be easier to be a Catholic. "It is not difficult in the heavenly doctrine, as it was in. Babylon destroyed" (SD 5793). The pious, secluded life of a monk may seem peaceful, but don't be fooled. "The life of charity . . . is not difficult. But a life of piety separate from a life of charity is difficult; and as much as this life is believed to lead toward heaven, so much it leads away from heaven" (HH 535).

When Swedenborg was asked to explain his religion, his answers were brief (ISB 20). Usually he mentions two essentials: 1) Acknowledge the Lord, and 2) Obey the commandments (AR 9, 485ff, DP 326). Sometimes he put the same ideas in other words: 1) Love the Lord above all things, and 2) Love your neighbor as yourself (see AR 903, 915, AC 1121).

There may be times when life seems complex and we may wonder, what is the good thing for me to do? Should I go along with what this person wants of me? or should I make my demands clear? Should I trust them to do what they say they will? or should I take care

of things myself? Should I talk to this person about what I am feeling? or is this something I must work out on my own? Why does the Lord make life so difficult? In fact, He doesn't. We make it difficult when we overlook the simple answers the Lord gives.

When a person shuns evils as sins he daily learns what a good work is and the affection for doing good grows with him... So stop asking yourself, "What are the good works that I must do, or what good must I do to receive eternal life?" Only cease from evils because they are sins and look to the Lord, and the Lord will teach and lead you (AE 979).

47. Keep in Mind the Steps of Repentance.

Repentance is a simple step-by-step procedure. One passage lists six steps:

- 1) Know what evils are;
- 2) See them in one's self;
- 4) Acknowledge them before God;
- 5) Take responsibility for them;
- 6) Pray for evils to be removed;
- 7) Begin a new life (HD 160, 161).

If you skip steps (for example, if you do not pray for help) it will be harder to resist the evil. It is easier to overcome evil with this step-by-step process than it is in a vague sort of way to suddenly make yourself good. (A fuller explanation of these steps can be found in DP 114-122, TCR 525-560, AR 224, 531.)

48. Tackle One Evil at a time.

Trying to get rid of all our evils at once by admitting that we are hopeless and begging for the Lord's help does not accomplish anything. "Those who confess themselves guilty of all sins, but do not *search out any one sin* in themselves" lull all their sins to sleep and finally become blind to them (DP 278; cf. TCR 518ff).

Sometimes we may be overwhelmed with the number of evils we see in ourselves. Of course, the hells would like us to give up in discouragement. The Lord's burden is light, however. He asks us to change one area of our lives at a time. If a person "abstains from *any one sin*" which he finds in himself, it is enough to get him on the way to heaven (TCR 530).

We can say that if you keep one commandment you have kept them all, "for as soon as one from purpose or confirmation abstains from any evil because it is a sin, he is held by the Lord in the purpose of abstaining from the rest." If the person then does some evil from ignorance or in a moment of weakness, it does not count, since he did not do it deliberately (CL 529, cf. TCR 523).

49. Talk Yourself Out of

With self-examination, hidden evils are identified and can be overcome before they grow. For some people self-examination is frightening. These people can still fight evils by talking themselves out of doing evils as they pop into their minds.

Since actual repentance... is in the Reformed Christian world exceedingly difficult, ... an easier kind of repentance is here presented, which is that when anyone is giving thought to any evil and intending it, he shall say to himself, "Although I am thinking about this and intending it, I will not do it because it is a sin." By this means the temptation injected from hell is checked, and prevented from entering further (TCR 535; cf. HH 533, AR 531).

It is better to get to work on an active evil you can easily see than it is to delay repentance for fear of what you might find in yourself.

50. Chop Off Its Head.

David killed Goliath by hitting him directly in the head with a stone. All evil is that way – if we can destroy the head, the rest is easy. At the head of all other evils is the selfish desire to control others. This

love will lead a person to think primarily of himself, to make demands and take advantage of others, to get revenge on people who cross him, to be happy only when he gets his own way (DP 216, CL 262). This evil hides itself; it is hard to recognize (TCR 533), but the effort is worth it.

The hardest struggle of all is with the love of dominating from the love of self; he who subdues this easily subdues the other evil loves, for this is their head (DP 146).

To enter upon the way to heaven is not so 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 (HH 358).

It might also be said that adultery is the head of all evil (see CL 356, AE 981:2, 993:3). More specifically, each person has a different dominant love which is the head of all his other loves and controls all his thinking (see HD 54-64, AC 6690:2, HH 477-480, 487). The Writings ask us to focus our repentance on the more grievous evils (TCR 509), such as adultery, love of dominion, and deceit (SD 6053), and especially on our ruling love (HH 487, AC 3796:3, 1909:2).

51. Focus on Today.

Friends who have quit smoking or drinking have told me that the thought of abstaining for a month or a week is discouraging. It helps to have the goal be just to get through one day or even one minute at a time.

We can fight evil the same way. When Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow... Sufficient for the day is its own evil" (Matt. 6:34), He was talking not only about our natural life, but about our spiritual life (AC 9050). We cannot shun evils in the past or future. "Conjecture about what is to come, and the remembrance of the past, are what take away all life's pleasantness and happiness" (SD 2190). The present is the only part of our life we have power to change.

He who leads a life of faith does repentance *daily*... For from himself man is continually falling, but is continually being raised up by the Lord (AC 8391; cf. TCR 539e).

52. Keep the Power of Evil in Perspective.

Good and truth together is everything and evil and falsity is nothing (DP 19), just as warmth and light are something, while cold and darkness are nothing. Cold and darkness exist, but they have no energy in them. Likewise, evil exists (CL 444), but it has no power.

Evil spirits like to think of themselves as very powerful and they like to give us the same impression. But this is actually an illusion. Evil spirits have power over those who are in evil and falsity, "but such power may be compared to the power of a mite against a mite, or of a flea against a flea, of dust against dust, or of chaff against chaff." They can "seem most powerful and mighty; but yet they have no power whatever against truths, and it is so completely none that it is nothing at all." An angel or person who has power from the Lord can scatter a thousand companies of evil spirits, merely by a look and an effort of the will (AE 783:2,4; cf. 1083e).

53. Begin Now.

I find that the easiest time to wash the dishes is right after the meal. If they are left until the next morning, the food gets crusty and hard. Eventually, the task becomes quite unpleasant as the leftover garbage becomes slimy and stinks, and mold and grubs appear.

Evil is the same way: the sooner you face it, the easier it will be. Resisting evil later in life is much more difficult for those who as young adults "plunge into evils without restraint" (HH 533). As soon as you start, the Lord will work with you, lightening your burden.

When a person has made a beginning the Lord brings to life all that is good in 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' (HH 533; cf. Life 97).

The sooner you begin the easier it will be, for "evils increase daily if not removed by actual repentance" (AR 836).

54. Expect Small Improvements.

The miracle of rebirth, like the miracle of birth and growth, comes through an orderly process. Regeneration cannot take place in an instant any more than a person can spring full-grown from the womb immediately after conception (TCR 583-586). We are regenerated "little by little" over most of a lifetime (AC 9336, AE 650:59, 60). Knowing this, we can avoid getting discouraged when progress seems slow and on the other hand we can encourage ourselves with the thought that regular efforts soon bring changes for the better. For most people it is not difficult; resisting evils "just once a week or twice a month" will result in a noticeable change (Life 97). "When one has shunned a sin several times" it will no longer appear (Char. 41).

55. Remember That It Will Get Easier.

One of the best ways to make the task easier is to keep at it. If you take up jogging, you may find that at first it is difficult to run a quarter of a mile. Once it becomes a habit, running five miles may be easy and enjoyable. "It is known that habit is a second nature and that therefore what is easy for one is difficult for another; and this is true of self-examination and confession" (TCR 563). "Actual repentance is easy for those who at times practice it, but is extremely difficult for those who have not practiced it" (TCR 562).

So keep at it! Go through the process regularly, and the Lord will remove the evils down to their very roots, "and always with less resistance and combat and therefore with less effort than in the first attempts" (AE 973).

56. Do Not Judge Yourself by How Difficult Your Struggle Is.

With all I have said about making the battle against evil easier, some people may find that it is very difficult, and wonder whether something is wrong with them. These suggestions will make the battle *easier than it would otherwise be*, and *easy enough that you can overcome*; it still requires "all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength."

If the battle is hard, do not be discouraged. The greater your love is, the more fiercely the hells will attack it. The Lord's struggles were the most difficult of all, and He has overcome all the hells, and is now fighting for you (HD 200, 201).

If the battle is easy, do not take this as a sign that you have done better than others. It is the Lord who has made it easy for you. Thank Him and pray that hell does not lead you into worse temptations.

Comparing your life with others often just results in feelings of blame, resentment or cockiness. The question is, are you going through the process of repentance? If you are, you can know you are on the right path.

57. Remember That Anyone Can Do It.

One of the most clever lies ever devised is that since God alone has goodness and power, a person can and should make no effort to change himself for the better (see TCR 503, 630). In its worst form, it is predestination – the belief that God has chosen (without regard to individual freedom) for some to go to heaven and others to go to hell (TCR 487, DP 330). Although we are unlikely to accept the concept of predestination theologically, we may still feel at times that there is no hope for us personally to be saved.

With the Lord's power, getting to heaven is *easy enough that anyone can do it!* It does not matter who you are or how horrible your past may have been; you *can* be regenerated if you choose.

Every person is made so as to be able [by the Lord's power, if he asks for it] to shun evils as of himself (Life 31e).

A knowledge of how to be saved *is not lacking to anyone*, nor power if he wants to be saved. It follows that *all* are predestined to heaven and *no one* to hell (DP 329).

Since *everyone* in *every* religion knows the evils... that must be shunned, ... this is provided by the Lord as the *universal* means of salvation with *every nation that has any religion* (AE 1180).

Who cannot live a civil and moral life... ? *Everyone*, whether evil or good, lives that life... The spiritual person... can do so *as easily* as the natural man can (HH 580).

Summary

We have considered a number of factors which can make fighting evils easier. Some of these factors will make a life-and-death difference. Others may help a little, and some may not apply to you at all. Then again, you may find some things that are helpful which I have not mentioned. Perhaps as you review this list you might check off the items which would make the biggest difference to your state right now, and plan to work on them.

Build Your Relationship with the Lord

- ☐ 1. Let the Lord give you a positive motivation.
- ☐ 2. Know Him, understand Him.
- ☐ 3. Acknowledge Him.
- ☐ 4. Pray to the Lord.
- ☐ 5. Listen to the Lord.
- ☐ 6. Remember that He is fighting for you.
- ☐ 7. Trust Him.
- ☐ 8. Look for evidence of His love, power, and wisdom.
- ☐ 9. Obey Him.

Build Your New Will

- ☐ 10. Fight evil with love.
- ☐ 11. Work to overcome your fears.
- ☐ 12. Be afraid to hurt those you love.
- ☐ 13. Call on your "remains."
- ☐ 14. Develop a sense of inner peace and confidence.
- ☐ 15. Hope.
- ☐ 16. Keep your goals clearly in sight.
- ☐ 17. Enjoy the love in your life.
- ☐ 18. Take responsibility for your life.
- ☐ 19. Make an effort.

Build Your New Understanding

- ☐ 20. Think about the Lord.
- ☐ 21. Think about heaven.
- ☐ 22. Think about hell.
- ☐ 23. Polish up your ideals.
- ☐ 24. Learn what evil is.
- ☐ 25. Think about shunning evil.
- ☐ 26. Think good thoughts about your neighbor.
- ☐ 27. Use the Word.
- ☐ 28. Do not take credit for your good.
- ☐ 29. Do not dwell on your failures.
- ☐ 30. Work to overcome your doubts.
- ☐ 31. Send away your worries.
- ☐ 32. Keep an open mind.
- ☐ 33. Look for confirmation of the truth.
- ☐ 34. Put love in the first place.

Build a Receptive Base in Your Natural Man

- ☐ 35. Fill your life with order.
- ☐ 36. Fill your life with beauty.
 - a) Smile.
 - b) Enjoy music.
 - c) Enjoy the outdoors.
- ☐ 37. Seek the reviving power of worship.
- ☐ 38. Take care of yourself physically.
- ☐ 39. Get help from others.
- ☐ 40. Get into a support group or social network.
- ☐ 41. Express your good feelings and beliefs.
- ☐ 42. Get involved in useful tasks.
- ☐ 43. Take time off.
- ☐ 44. Don't let evil habits get started.
- ☐ 45. Enjoy the God-given pleasures of this world.

Cut Evils Down to Size

- ☐ 46. Keep it simple.
- ☐ 47. Keep in mind the steps of repentance.
- ☐ 48. Tackle one evil at a time.
- ☐ 49. Talk yourself out of it.
- ☐ 50. Chop off its head.
- ☐ 51. Focus on today.
- ☐ 52. Keep the power of evil in perspective.
- ☐ 53. Begin now.
- ☐ 54. Expect small improvements.
- ☐ 55. Remember that it will get easier.
- ☐ 56. Do not judge yourself by how difficult your struggle

is.

- ☐ 57. Remember that anyone can do it.

There is only one way to get to heaven, and that is to shun evils as sins against the Lord (Life 18ff, 92ff). But there are at least 57 ways to make that task of fighting evil easier than it might otherwise be. If your life is difficult, try some of these to see how well they work. And above all, keep in mind the fact that the Lord loves you and does not want your life to be difficult. He says, "Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28, 30).

Abbreviations

Works by Swedenborg

AC	Arcana Coelestia
AE	Apocalypse Explained
AR	Apocalypse Revealed
BE	A Brief Exposition
Char.	Charity
CL	Conjugal Love
DLW	Divine Love and Wisdom
DP	Divine Providence
F	The Doctrine of Faith
Inv.	Invitation to the New Church
HD	The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines
HH	Heaven and Hell
Life	The Doctrine of Life
LJ	The Last Judgment
SD	Spiritual Diary
SS	The Doctrine Concerning the Sacred Scripture
TCR	True Christian Religion

From the Bible

Ex.	Exodus
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Matt.	Matthew
I Sam.	I Samuel