AN ESSAY ON CULTURE, AUTHORITY, AND STEWARDSHIP

WHEN RELIGION BECOMES HEAVIER THAN GOD MADE IT

A Reflection on Matthew 23:4, President Thomas S. Monson, and the Lost Discipline of Simplifying

A doctrinal essay.

> *"The Savior's rebuke in Matthew 23 is among the sharpest He ever gave to religious leaders."*

May 14, 2026

Introduction: The Lord's Condemnation of Uncarried Burdens

The Savior's rebuke in Matthew 23 is among the sharpest He ever gave to religious leaders. Speaking of the scribes and Pharisees, He declared:

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. —Matthew 23:4, KJV

The Lord was not condemning obedience. He was not teaching a gospel without sacrifice, covenant, repentance, discipline, or consecration. He Himself had already taught, "Take my yoke upon you," and "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." The question, then, is not whether discipleship has weight. It does. The question is whether the weight being placed upon the Saints is truly Christ's yoke, or whether it is something men have added to it.

The burden condemned in Matthew 23 was religion made heavier than God made it. It was commandment buried beneath tradition. It was covenant life encumbered by performative expectation. It was leadership that imposed, measured, corrected, and judged, while refusing to meaningfully help carry the load.

James E. Talmage described this condition directly, explaining that rabbinism had largely displaced the law through a multitude of rules, exactions, penalties, and traditional observances that encumbered even ordinary life. In other words, the Pharisaic error was not merely hypocrisy in private morality. It was a system of religious weight imposed in the name of God, but not always originating from God.

That distinction matters deeply in modern discipleship.

President Monson's Pastoral Instinct

President Thomas S. Monson seemed to understand something profound about religious burdens. He had a pastoral instinct for the ordinary Saint: the widow, the child, the weary parent, the exhausted leader, the person quietly doing their best.

In his address "The Lord's Way," President Monson taught that the budget allowance program was created to reduce financial burdens on members; that members should not pay fees or be assessed to participate in Church programs; and that priesthood leaders should "reduce and simplify activities whenever possible." He also warned that youth activities had sometimes supplanted the home and family, that costs had escalated, objectives had dimmed, and time commitments for leaders and youth had begun to border on burdensome.

That was not administrative trivia. It was doctrine in practical clothing.

President Monson was not merely saying, “Run more efficient programs.” He was asking leaders to notice the cost of Church culture upon the souls, homes, finances, and time of the Saints. He was asking whether Church activity was serving the family or quietly supplanting it. He was asking whether programs had become ends in themselves. He was asking whether leaders were adding weight where the Lord had not required it.

There was something deeply Christlike in that question: What can we remove?

Not merely, “What more can we ask?” Not merely, “What else can we schedule?” Not merely, “How do we get better participation?” But: “What are the Saints carrying, and is all of it truly from God?”

That question feels increasingly rare.

The Principle Was Not Formally Buried

To be fair, President Monson’s teaching has not vanished from formal Church instruction. The current General Handbook still contains the principle. It teaches that many meetings, activities, and programs are not essential; that individuals and families should consider their own circumstances before participating in nonessential programs; and that members should not be overwhelmed with too many Church responsibilities or asked to make excessive sacrifices to support Church programs or activities.

The Handbook also continues to teach that the budget allowance program eliminates the need to receive budget contributions from members; that leaders should reduce and simplify activities if necessary; and that most activities should be simple and have little or no cost.

So the issue is not that the principle cannot be found. It can.

The deeper concern is that a principle can remain in a handbook while being functionally buried in culture. It can remain printed while being rarely preached. It can be technically available while no longer shaping the instincts of local leadership. It can exist as policy while failing to govern the spirit of administration.

That is often how drift occurs in the Church. Not always by open rebellion against doctrine, but by quiet neglect of it. A principle is not denied; it is merely no longer emphasized. No one says it is false; they simply stop acting as if it is urgent.

And over time, what is not emphasized becomes invisible.

A Principle Retained, but an Emphasis Diminished It would not be accurate to say that President Monson’s burden-reducing principle has been formally abandoned. It has not. The language still remains in the General Handbook. Leaders are still counseled not to overwhelm members with too many Church responsibilities or ask them to make excessive sacrifices to support Church programs and activities. The

Handbook still teaches that activities should generally be simple, low-cost, and should not place undue burdens upon members.

So the concern is not that the principle has disappeared from policy. The concern is that it appears to have diminished as a living leadership instinct.

Under President Monson, “reduce and simplify” carried a distinctly pastoral tone. It was not merely about budgets, calendars, efficiency, or administration. It was about people. It was about the weary parent, the overburdened bishop, the exhausted youth leader, the struggling family, and the ordinary Saint trying to be faithful without being crushed beneath the accumulated weight of Church culture.

President Monson’s question seemed to be: What are the Saints carrying, and does the Lord actually require all of it?

That question feels less commonly asked.

Since President Monson’s passing, the Church has not simply moved in the direction of greater institutional complexity. In fairness, there have been major simplifying reforms: the two-hour Sunday meeting schedule, home-centered Church-supported gospel learning, ministering replacing the more programmatic home and visiting teaching structure, and a youth guide that relies more heavily on principles, agency, and personal revelation rather than extensive lists of rules.

Those changes matter. They should be acknowledged. But structural simplification is not the same as cultural burden-reduction.

A two-hour block can simplify Sunday worship, yet exhausted families may still feel increased pressure to produce a spiritually impressive home. Ministering can be higher and holier, yet conscientious members may carry more anxiety because the expectations feel less defined. A principle-based youth guide can invite agency, yet local cultures may recreate unwritten rules to fill the vacuum. Home-centered gospel living can be inspired, yet it can also become another arena where parents quietly feel they are failing.

So the drift is not necessarily in formal doctrine or written policy. The drift is in emphasis, instinct, and culture.

The center of gravity in recent Church messaging has understandably emphasized the covenant path, gathering Israel, temple worship, personal revelation, home-centered gospel learning, and preparation for the Second Coming. These are powerful and doctrinal themes. But if they are not continually paired with President Monson’s pastoral instinct to reduce unnecessary burdens, they can unintentionally be received at the local level as more urgency, more expectation, more output, and more religious pressure.

That is where Matthew 23:4 becomes relevant again.

A Church can simplify structures while still allowing culture to remain heavy. It can reduce meeting length while increasing emotional and spiritual pressure. It can speak of the covenant path while failing to ask whether local customs, programs, expectations, and leadership habits have made that path feel more burdensome than Christ intended.

President Monson's emphasis was not merely, "Make Church easier." It was closer to this: Do not make the Saints carry what God has not placed upon them.

That principle remains in the Handbook. But it must also remain in the hearts of leaders. Otherwise, simplification becomes an administrative adjustment rather than a spiritual discipline.

A true shepherd does not merely organize the flock more efficiently. He notices when the sheep are weary. He removes what does not need to be carried. He asks what the weight is costing them. And when he finds a burden the Lord did not place there, he does not defend it.

He lifts it.

When Programs Outlive Their Purpose

The Church is not the gospel, though it is divinely appointed to administer it. Programs are not the gospel, though they may serve it. Meetings are not the gospel, though they may teach it. Activities are not the gospel, though they may strengthen fellowship. Callings are not the gospel, though they may become holy offerings.

The danger comes when these servants become masters.

A ward or stake can become very busy and not necessarily more holy. A calendar can be full while souls remain unseen. A leader can measure participation while failing to ask whether the participation is healing, strengthening, or merely exhausting. A family can appear faithful because they are constantly present, while quietly coming apart beneath the weight of expectations no one has paused to question.

That is where Matthew 23:4 becomes painfully relevant.

The Savior did not merely condemn heavy burdens. He condemned the act of binding them. The word suggests fastening, securing, tightening, making something difficult to escape. A religious culture can bind burdens through expectation, guilt, comparison, reputation, fear of disappointing leaders, fear of seeming less faithful, or fear of being judged as weak.

And then the most piercing part follows:

> *but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.*

The Lord's condemnation falls hardest not only on those who add weight, but on those who add weight without helping carry it.

The Modern LDS Equivalent

The modern equivalent of Matthew 23:4 is not temple worship. It is not covenant keeping. It is not repentance, chastity, Sabbath worship, tithing, ministering, or sustaining priesthood keys when those things are taught in truth and administered in love.

The modern equivalent is something more subtle. It is culture treated as doctrine. It is local expectation treated as righteousness. It is busyness treated as consecration. It is visible compliance treated as spiritual maturity. It is saying yes treated as faithfulness, while saying “this is too much” is treated as weakness.

It is the assumption that a good Saint will attend every meeting, accept every calling, support every activity, absorb every inconvenience, remain cheerful under every burden, never question whether the burden is necessary, and never suggest that leaders may be asking more than the Lord requires.

It is youth programs that quietly become expensive. It is activities that grow elaborate because simplicity feels unimpressive. It is leaders who ask families to sacrifice time they themselves have not bothered to protect. It is a Church culture that speaks endlessly of strengthening families while building calendars that consume them.

It is the wounded member being told to forgive before anyone has mourned with him. It is the struggling Saint being told to sustain leaders before anyone has asked whether leadership has become part of the wound. It is the exhausted parent being told to magnify a calling without anyone asking whether the calling has become disproportionate to the season of life. It is the grieving soul being told, “Focus on the Savior,” by those unwilling to sit long enough in the grief to reveal Him.

These are burdens grievous to be borne.

Reduce and Simplify as a Spiritual Discipline

President Monson’s phrase “reduce and simplify” should not be treated as a managerial suggestion. It is a spiritual discipline.

To simplify is to confess that not everything good is required. To reduce is to admit that leaders can ask too much. To simplify is to honor the home as primary. To reduce is to trust that the Lord does not need every program we have built in His name. To simplify is to resist the pride of appearance.

To reduce is to remember that a smaller activity with spiritual power is better than an elaborate one that exhausts the Saints.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught a related principle in “Good, Better, Best,” warning that many good things must be foregone so that better and best things can receive priority, especially those that strengthen faith in Jesus Christ and strengthen families.

That principle ought to govern every ward council, every stake calendar, every youth plan, every auxiliary activity, and every calling extended.

The question should not be merely, “Is this good?” Many things are good. The better question is, “Is this the Lord’s burden, or merely ours?”

The Priesthood Pattern Is to Lift, Not Load

Doctrine and Covenants 121 gives the Lord’s pattern for righteous priesthood influence. Power or influence is not to be maintained by virtue of office, but only through persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge.

That is the opposite of burden-binding leadership.

A righteous leader does not merely ask, “How do I get people to comply?” He asks, “What does love require?”

He does not merely ask, “How do I fill the calendar?” He asks, “What should be removed?”

He does not merely ask, “Why are they not participating?” He asks, “Have we made participation heavier than Christ intended?”

This is where priesthood leadership either becomes deeply Christlike or quietly Pharisaic. A Christlike leader notices weight. A Pharisaic culture normalizes it. A Christlike leader removes unnecessary burdens. A Pharisaic culture praises people for carrying them silently. A Christlike leader asks whether the wounded have been comforted. A Pharisaic culture asks whether the wounded have become disruptive. A Christlike leader moves toward the one. A Pharisaic culture waits for the one to come back appropriately.

The Burden of Being Made Responsible for the Burden

Perhaps the heaviest modern burden is not the meeting, the assignment, the activity, or the calling. It is the spiritual interpretation placed upon the person who can no longer carry it.

When a Saint says, “This is too much,” the response is often not curiosity, but correction.

He is told to have more faith. She is told to sustain better. They are told not to be offended. The family is told the blessings will come if they sacrifice more. The wounded are told to forgive. The exhausted are told to endure.

Some of those principles are true in their proper place. But truth used out of order can become a burden. There is an order to faithful response: name, witness, understand, then counsel. Most people

reverse it: counsel, redirect, spiritualize, then perhaps acknowledge. That reversal is what makes help feel like injury.

Mosiah 18 does not begin covenant life with correction. It begins with bearing burdens, mourning with those that mourn, and comforting those that stand in need of comfort. Only then does it speak of standing as witnesses of God. The witness must include not only public testimony, but the willingness to stand as a witness to another's pain.

That is the opposite of Matthew 23:4. The covenant people of Christ do not bind burdens and walk away. They bear them.

The Question President Monson Left Us

Perhaps this is part of what feels lost.

President Monson's ministry carried the sound of rescue. "To the rescue" was not a slogan only; it reflected an instinct. He seemed to understand that the Church exists not to preserve the machinery of programs, but to bring souls to Christ.

That instinct asks different questions than bureaucracy asks.

Bureaucracy asks, "Was the program completed?" Discipleship asks, "Was the person strengthened?"

Bureaucracy asks, "Did they attend?" Discipleship asks, "Were they seen?"

Bureaucracy asks, "Did leaders execute the plan?" Discipleship asks, "Did the plan serve the Saints?"

Bureaucracy asks, "How do we increase participation?" Discipleship asks, "What burdens are keeping people from Christ?"

President Monson's plea to reduce and simplify was, in that sense, a plea to keep administration subordinate to salvation.

Conclusion: More Rescue, Less Weight

The Church of Jesus Christ must never become a culture where the Saints are praised for carrying burdens the Lord never placed upon them. It must never become a place where programs are protected more carefully than families, where leaders are defended more quickly than the wounded are understood, or where spiritual language is used to make unnecessary weight sound holy.

Christ does give a yoke. But His yoke is not the same as religious clutter. His burden is not the same as cultural expectation. His discipleship is not the same as institutional busyness. His Church must be careful not to confuse the two.

President Monson's counsel remains a needed corrective:

Reduce. Simplify. Rescue. Lift. See. Remove what does not need to be carried.

For the Lord did not condemn the Pharisees because they asked people to come unto God. He condemned them because they made the way heavier than God had made it, and then would not lift a finger to help.

A true shepherd lightens burdens. A Pharisaic culture explains why the burden is yours to carry. And any Church culture that forgets the difference has drifted from the heart of the Master it claims to serve.

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