

The Church as Heaven on Earth?

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, October 1st, 2017

Jesus said, "...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ~ Matthew 18:19.

Of course He was talking to Simon Peter, but we know that His words apply to all of us, since Peter represents our faith in the truths that the Lord teaches us, and those truths are the keys that open the doors of the kingdom of heaven. In particular it is by means of these truths that we can **bind** or restrain the evils that naturally well up in our lives, and by doing so **loose**, or set free the good that is otherwise hindered because of those evils. But it is the last line of the teaching that should get our full attention, that is, "...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The point is that we are given our lives in this world to make the choices that will determine our character and so "qualify" us for heaven or hell. There are all sorts of reasons why this has to be so, but for the moment let's just accept it.

The real challenge, if we're going to "qualify" for heaven, is to know what makes heaven, and what we need to do to be part of it. Of course the Lord in the Gospels had lots to say about that, mainly focused on the Two Great Commandments, but now the doctrines of the New Church shine an even brighter light on the matter. We read, for instance, in the book, *Heaven and Hell*, that "It is the Divine of the Lord that makes heaven:

"The angels taken collectively are called heaven, for they *constitute* heaven; and yet that which *makes* heaven in general and in particular is the Divine that goes forth from the Lord and flows into the angels and is received by them. And as the Divine that goes forth from the Lord is the good of love and the truth of faith, the angels are angels and are heaven in the measure in which they receive good and truth from the Lord" (HH #7).

"Again," we read, "heaven is where the Lord is acknowledged, believed in, and loved" (HH #56). And of course the Lord Himself clearly said that anyone who loves Him will keep His word, that is, His commandments (John 14:23, 14:21 & 15:10). So now we have the conditions that qualify us for life in heaven: not just knowing about Him, not just reading or thinking about Him or even praying to Him, and certainly not just being among others who do these things, but rather loving Him and keeping His commandments.

And again, the point is that if we want to "go" to heaven we need to cultivate this kind of life here, now, in this world – which is why this very challenging statement, also in *Heaven and Hell*, is so very important:

"What has been said of heaven may be said also of the church, for the church is the Lord's heaven on earth" (HH #57).

Wow! Really? This church? Here? A lot of people might dispute that. In fact we've had people *leave* the church precisely because they didn't find it very heavenly! So what can we make of this?

Well, clearly the statement applies to a church (and there can be a huge variety of churches) in an ideal sense. The bottom line is that just as "the kingdom of heaven is within us" (Luke 17:21), so the church essentially is within us – *if or when we fulfill the conditions of membership*, namely, acknowledging the Lord, believing in Him, loving Him *and doing His commandments*.

Still, there can be an organized or composite church that is also a "heaven on earth" if or when its members do the same. It is tempting to say "if or when ALL its members do the same," but this begs the question, "What if, say, 98% of them do this, but 2% don't?" Is it then not a heaven on earth? Or what about if 90% do and 10% don't? How good do we have to be?

Curiously Abraham asked a similar question when the Lord threatened to destroy the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Suppose there are fifty righteous (that is, just people) within the city; would you destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that are in it?" (Gen. 18:24). And of course the Lord said, no, He would not. Then – you know the story – little by little Abraham got the numbers down to a mere 10 out of the whole city who were righteous, and still the Lord said He would not destroy it for their sakes. Well, you know that the Lord did destroy the city, meaning there could not be found even 10 who were acceptable. But the lesson stands that the whole city would have been worth saving *even if only for 10 good people*.

Now granted that a city worth saving is not the same as a heaven on earth, and granted, too, that the numbers in the story about Sodom all represent internal human states, the point is that wherever there is a remnant there is a church, and in that church is at least something of heaven.

The truth is that no one is perfect, and no one ever will be perfect in the normal sense of that word, therefore no group can be perfect, especially when even a small percentage of evil in each one is compounded by the number of individuals making up the group. In fact heaven itself is not pure (Job 15:15), a fact that the heavenly doctrines explain in some detail:

"The truth of this may be sufficiently manifest from the consideration, that there is nothing of good and nothing of truth in man except from the Lord, and that all evil and falsity are man's from what is his Own; and that man, and spirit, and even angel, if left in the least to himself, would rush of himself into hell... This is acknowledged by angels, and he who does not acknowledge it cannot be among angels. It is the Lord's mercy alone that liberates them, and even draws them out of hell and keeps them from rushing there of themselves" (AC 868).

Again, "The angels say that all that is their own is evil and false, both from their heredity and from actual life when they were in the world (n. 1880); and that the evil and falsity is not separated or wiped away from them, they being thus justified, *but that it all remains with them*, and that it is by the Lord that they are withheld from evil and falsity and are kept in good and truth" (AC 4295, cf 6373).

Is it reasonable to think that even angels in moments of weakness would not slip into some active states of their own evil and falsity? To be clear, we know that they DO, in fact they go through

constant variations of greater or lesser enlightenment, and more or less interior love. Even (by one definition) the very best angels, namely those who have died in the innocence of childhood, “when [they] have become adults in heaven, that they may not have the false idea about themselves that the good in them is from themselves and not from the Lord, they are now and then let down into their evils which they inherited, and are left in them until they know, acknowledge and believe the truth of the matter” (HH #342).

All those experiences are allowed by the Lord for comparison and contrast to strengthen them in their awareness that they depend on Him for all their truly heavenly life (HH #155-158).

Given these teachings, do you think that angels are never sad, never disappointed in themselves or others? How could it be otherwise if these alternations of state are real? Yet as the Lord said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). The key here is the recognition of evil for what it is, and the earnest desire to overcome it and return to a better state.

Of course it is also true that the variations in heaven are mild compared to those we experience on earth. There is, for example, no night in heaven, only what are called “evening states,” or states of relative obscurity as to what is true and good. But if we think of heaven as a place where everything (meaning *everyone*) is in a constant state of perfection, well, sadly, none of us would ever qualify, no matter how hard we tried. Besides, even if we did we would quickly lose our perspective on what we really are like without the Lord’s protection. So we are taught that heaven is a state of *being* perfected, little by little to all eternity, because that is what all the angels really want.

Now then, given the teachings, what can we say about ourselves and our little church so often plagued by actions, words or circumstances that we find upsetting? Can it possibly be a “heaven on earth”?

The answer, it seems, depends on what we know, what we expect, and what we are prepared to do about it. So here are some of the things we know by virtue of our church affiliation:

1. We are all born into a tendency to evils of every kind.
2. We are all limited in our understanding of what is true – in life and in the Word.
3. We are all a work in progress and will never be perfect.
4. So we are bound to make mistakes, offend people, and experience pain.

The thing is, the Lord knows all this, just as He knew all the foolish states of the first 12 disciples, including Judas, and yet He calls us ALL to be part of His church, that is, part of His kingdom on earth. So here are some things we know about this:

1. The Lord is infinitely wise, merciful *and patient*.
2. He can teach us and empower us to do what is good if we let Him.
3. He can forgive anything except cynicism and deceit, again, if we let Him.
4. So if we acknowledge Him, believe in Him and love Him we can do His will, “as in heaven, so upon the earth,” that is, specifically, in the church.

Yes, we will make mistakes, and yet we shouldn’t condemn ourselves if we are willing to learn and do better. Just the same, *we ought to expect other people to make mistakes* and learn to be tolerant of them in the hope that they will learn and do better, too. In fact, nobody joins a church

in order to be a spoiler; it's just not worth the hassle. Rather our job in the church *as it is in heaven* is to do the best we can, to BE the best WE can be *for the sake of the others, not only for ourselves* – which is the essential meaning of the Second Commandment.

Of course it helps that in heaven, where there are any number of societies (or communities), each one focused on particular affections, particular ways of thinking, and specific uses, it is easy to relate to others on those common grounds *despite the variations of individual states*. In the same way it is easy for us to relate to others on the common ground of various *natural, recreational* or even *political* interests. But even so, the unifying element in heaven is not the understanding but the will, which is to say the love people have for the Lord and for their neighbors. Here on earth that love may be expressed as respect and appreciation for differing understandings, differing interests, and differing uses within the church, all contributing to the perfection of the whole, as is also discussed at some length in the book, *Heaven and Hell* (cf #57 & 71).

So when we look around at our fellow members of the church and note the disappointment we sometimes feel in them, or even when we look around and realize how much nicer, more knowledgeable or more useful they seem to be than we are, what can we do? A typical response is to take refuge in the idea that the church is really an internal, spiritual, *individual* thing, and that the organization with all its flaws is not the *real church*, but just a shell that may or may not house a living thing. And yes, we can look at it that way, but honestly, how helpful is that? How well does it motivate us to improve ourselves for the sake of all those others who may be thinking the same thing? If we let ourselves believe that the organization doesn't matter, that we can take it or leave it as it suits our own purposes, or even that it's not *healthy* for us to have to come into conflict with all those other, difficult people, well, of course it will never even have a chance to be a heaven on earth because we won't see any need to work together in it.

Lawyers and doctors, even surgeons have this thing they call their "practice." It's a great term because it implies not only continuous learning but more importantly the practical *application* of all that they know. In a similar vein in western Canada some years ago we called our organization "the Calgary New Church Project," reminding ourselves that just like our individual lives it was a work in progress. So this church, here, is a work in progress – as is the whole kingdom of heaven! The fact that it has its flaws and failings is not a reason to be discouraged, but a reason to persevere *with humility and persistent prayer for the Lord's help and guidance*.

As a final thought it may be worth remembering that sometimes what upsets us most in others reminds us of a similar or related thing we struggle with and find discouraging in ourselves. We resent it in others because it reflects a disappointment in ourselves. What can we do? Well, empathy can go a long way, as can the insight we gain for our own work. In any case, the truth is that the Lord's kingdom will never come to us on this earth *or in heaven* until or unless we do OUR part to establish it in mutual support and appreciation of others (see HH #268 & 399).

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 18:20-33
 Children's talk on the Lord's Mercy & Forbearance

Matthew 18:10-22
 Heaven & Hell #155 – 158: selections