

First, Do No Harm

A sermon for the New Year by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“It is a universal rule,” we read, “that so far as anyone removes evil, so far an opportunity is given for good to succeed it; and further, so far as evil is hated, so far good is loved, and vice versa” (CL 147). Thus we have the simple formula, “The first of charity is to look to the Lord and *shun evils because they are sins*” (D. Char. 1). The *second* is to do what is good.

There’s a great deal of discussion in the Writings as to why this is so. But the basic principle is that we are all born into hereditary tendencies to evil (that is, the loves of self and the world which are the origin of all evil), and, as the teaching goes, as long as we do not shun these loves we remain in them (or they in us), and as long as we are in them (or they in us) they corrupt any good that we may be fortunate enough to receive.

Note, by the way, that the Latin word for evil is *malus*, which simply means bad or harmful.

Think of it as it was illustrated in the children’s talk: if you have a glass with dirt in it, before you pour clean water into that glass to drink you need to get the dirt out. Otherwise the pure water is polluted. Would you pour milk into a bleach bottle, or keep your bread in a moldy box? No, of course not! – certainly not without thoroughly cleaning and decontaminating those containers. So we need to clear the way for good AND truth to enter into our minds undefiled by the loves of self and the world. It’s not an easy task, of course, and so the Lord gives us plenty of time to work on it, and He even provides various cures for the sicknesses we get from the corruption that lingers in the process – cures like a heightened awareness of our selfishness, a sensible realization of its consequences, and real friends who can inspire us to do better.

But all this is internal stuff, having to do with our understanding and our attitudes. Where the issues come to rest ultimately is in the world of our speech and actions. Words are the verbal expressions of thought and actions are the physical expressions of feelings. (This is true even if the words and actions are hypocritical; it’s just that when they are hypocritical it’s hard to see what they really mean.) But as they are expressions of inner states they reveal things we could not see otherwise, and they impact other people in powerful, internal ways.

So the first of charity takes *form* in the old adage, “First, do no harm.” People typically think of this as the beginning of the Hippocratic Oath, the pledge made by ancient Greek physicians and still used in an update version by doctors today. But in fact its origins are obscure, and probably reside somewhere in the literature of the 1800’s. It IS implied in the Hippocratic Oath, it’s just not so succinctly stated. Anyway, the point is that no one wants a cure that is worse than the disease, and so the principle is that we have to develop a real conscious awareness of how our speech and actions affect others, whether we THINK we intend that effect or not. I know. I am constantly surprised by the impact of what I think are perfectly innocent comments.... On reflection, though, seeing their effect, maybe they’re not so innocent.

“First, do no harm.” It’s a great slogan for the New Year. And it’s something we can ALL work on. Of course we can’t always anticipate whether what we say or do will have a negative impact on someone. There is a place for playful teasing, even irony, though maybe not sarcasm. (The word, sarcasm, comes from Greek where it refers to *tearing flesh!* Ouch. No coincidence: flesh

in the spiritual sense signifies what is good, that is, spiritual good or love. We have to be careful not to tear into someone's sense of what is good – even in jest.)

The teaching in the Writings about shunning evils is extensive and detailed. The Doctrine of Life, for example (one of four small works published as The Four Doctrines), makes this bald assertion: “SO FAR AS ANYONE SHUNS EVILS, SO FAR HE DOES WHAT IS GOOD” (Life #21). But we should note that the word, shun, does not just mean avoid. It is a translation of the Latin word, *fugere*, which means to run or flee away from. And it is a psychological fact that we can't flee away from something if we hang around mentally looking at it or thinking about it. The focus has to be on getting away from it.

So we have the teaching of our third lesson, from Heaven and Hell #533,

“...that when anything presents itself to a person that he knows to be dishonest and unjust, but to which his mind is borne, it is simply necessary for him to think that it ought not to be done because it is opposed to the Divine precepts. If a person accustoms himself so to think, and from so doing establishes a habit of so thinking, he is gradually conjoined to heaven; and so far as he is conjoined to heaven the higher regions of his mind are opened; and so far as these are opened he sees whatever is dishonest and unjust, and so far as he sees these evils they can be dispersed, for no evil can be dispersed until it is seen.”

The word, disperse, here has a variety of meanings having to do with striking, shattering and breaking down. Another way of saying it is that when we shun evils as sins against the Lord those evils are *dispelled* and *banished*. This clears the way for what is good from the Lord to enter in –from the Lord directly, and indirectly through others who are associated with us.

Note the focus on doing: “so far as anyone shuns evils, so far he does what is good.” This puts the work clearly in front of us where we can see it. Don't take pot shots at other people. Don't say anything that makes them look foolish. Don't cuss or use bad language; it only exposes your own weakness. Don't be demanding. Restrain yourself. There's a reason why nine of the Ten Commandments are written in the negative: the truth is, shunning evil is the only way we can BE good – because we aren't good in or of ourselves, we have to GET it from the Lord. Besides, who knows what is best in any situation but the Lord? So clearing the way for Him to flow in is our only hope.

Even the word, religion, implies restraint; it actually means to bind back, that is, to tie your outward behavior back to internal principles through self-control. But the beauty of this work is that it goes much deeper than just actions. The word, charity, in the heavenly doctrines refers to an *internal attitude* of respectfulness and consideration. And the teaching is that “so far as anyone shuns evils as sins and looks to the Lord, *so far he is in charity*” (Faith #23), and he is also “more and more closely conjoined with the Lord” (DP #33).

In other words, changing the way we speak and act, if done out of respect for the Lord, can with practice change the way we FEEL, too.

And here's another amazing concept in the same vein. We tend to think of **uses** or **usefulness** as the physical, material work we do, and sometimes we worry about whether we are being truly useful in this world or not. We also worry about whether we are really doing things for the sake

of the use and for the Lord, or in our own self-interest. But the teaching is that “everyone who believes in the Lord and shuns evils as sins *performs uses from the Lord*” (CL #266:5). That is to say, we ARE useful, and our usefulness IS from the Lord.

This same passage reminds us that we ourselves can’t really discern the quality of our usefulness, *but the Lord can and does*. So if we do what we do for His sake He will inspire the effort.

Again, in *The Doctrine of Life* we read that “So far as anyone shuns evils as sins, *so far he has faith, and is spiritual*” (Life #42). This may seem counterintuitive, since we think of faith as a function of our thought or understanding. But actually it is an acknowledgment rooted in the will as an *affection* for the truth, for, we read, “whatever any one *wills from love*, that he wills to do, wills to think, wills to understand and wills to speak; or what is the same thing, what any one *loves from the will*, this he loves to do, loves to think, loves to understand and loves to speak” (Life #44). By the way, this paints a pretty clear picture of where our smart remarks come from. We think they’re clever, and maybe they are, but who’s at the center of these remarks, and at who’s expense are they made?

As for faith and spirituality, *The Doctrine of Faith* brings the point home explicitly, where Swedenborg writes, “If anyone thinks within himself, or says to another, ‘Who can have that internal acknowledgment of truth which is faith? I cannot,’ I will tell him how he may have it: Shun evils as sins, and approach the Lord, and you will have as much as you desire” (Faith #12). Why? – Because the Lord is *constantly* flowing into us with His love and wisdom, but we block the influx with our selfish and worldly pre-occupations. As soon as we remove these obstacles we’re out of the intellectual woods and, well, “home free.”

Does this mean we set rationality aside and just “believe”? Well, if God were a construct of the human imagination that might be so, but if God is real and is the origin of all the laws of order, then it follows that shunning evils as sins against Him opens our minds to receive such love and wisdom from Him that we actually experience greater freedom and more perfect rationality than we possibly could any other way (see DP #99). In fact, we become truly wise and feel that wisdom as our own because the Lord implants it through our own affection or love (DP #44). Thus “the more nearly a person is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be his own master, and yet the more evidently does he recognize that he is the Lord’s” (DP #42). It’s a perfect formula for human happiness and peace.

But here’s the thing. Even though it’s a relatively simple matter to identify and shun one evil, there’s a perception in the Christian world that this is not sufficient for salvation, and further, that since it’s not sufficient there’s no point in spending time on it. As we read in *Conjugal Love*,

“It is said in the church that no one can fulfil the law, and the less so since he who transgresses against one commandment of the Decalogue, transgresses against all. But this formula of speech is not as it sounds. It must be understood in this way: He who *from purpose or confirmation* acts against one commandment acts against the rest; for to act thus from purpose or confirmation is wholly to deny that the action is a sin, and he who denies sin makes nothing of acting against the other commandments” (CL #528).

And yet... “The same is the case with those who are in good from the Lord. If from will and understanding, or purpose and confirmation, they abstain from one

evil because it is a sin, and still more if they abstain from several, *they abstain from 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. Therefore, if he does evil from ignorance or from some overwhelming lust of the body, it is not imputed to him (spiritually) because he did not propose it to himself and does not confirm it with himself. A person comes into this purpose if once or twice a year he examines himself and repents of the evil which he finds in himself” (CL #529).

All these teachings should be of great comfort to us as we begin another New Year. They make regeneration possible. They make the process do-able. And they make it simple. In summary, “It is not so difficult to live the life of heaven as some believe” (HH #533). We simply have to look to the Lord, learn from Him what NOT to do, ask Him for help to remove the desire for those things, and – with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – shun them because they are offensive to Him. Then as He said, we can love our neighbor as ourselves, which probably means *as if of ourselves*, for *then* we will have real love to give.

So, finally, here is a short list of the many benefits of shunning evils in our lives, that is, of paying attention to the impact of our thoughts, feelings, words and actions so that as much as possible we achieve the first goal of simply doing no harm:

1. To the extent we shun evils we clear the way for influx from the Lord.
2. To the extent we shun evils we do what is good.
3. We gain faith and charity.
4. We become truly rational and wise.
5. We perform uses from the Lord.
6. We feel free, and feel the Lord’s life as our own.
7. And we are held by the Lord in the purpose of abstaining from all evils.

Again, what a great formula for success! We don’t need to worry about trying to get everything right. We don’t need to worry about pleasing everyone around us. We don’t even need to worry about the quality of our spiritual lives. We just need to resolve to honor the Lord by doing our best to cause no harm, and then get on with it. The Lord will look after the rest, and He will fulfill the hopes and dreams of every one of us, if not in this world then in the next.

Amen

Lessons: *Leviticus 26:selections*
Children’s talk on keeping the Commandments: shunning evil

Mark 10:17-11 & Heaven & Hell #533