

Sin and Sickness

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

“Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’” (John 9:1-3)

One of the things that the Lord has made very clear to us is that all people – all of us – are born into hereditary inclinations to “evils of every kind,” and that our primary responsibility in this world is to subdue and “subjugate” these inclinations so that the Lord can fill us with His love and wisdom. This is the theme of the Lord’s teaching about the blind man.

In effect we are all born blind, that is, spiritually blind, and just as a baby has to learn, gradually, how to interpret the visual images that strike his retina, so as adults we have to learn, also gradually, how to understand the vital truths of spiritual life so that we can enjoy that life with as few disabilities as possible. This is the Lord’s work in us, although, like the blind man in the story, we have an important role to play in following His direction. First, we have to allow Him to touch us, indeed, to anoint our “eyes” with the salve of His own saliva mixed with the clay of our ordinary life, and then we have to “Go, and wash in the pool of Siloam.”

These actions are deeply symbolic, and show us how we can all get the help we need to have a healthy *spiritual* life. Saliva from the Lord’s mouth of course represents the truth of His Word, and the ground (like the good ground in the parable of the sower) represents a receptive mind, especially an affirmative disposition toward His teaching. The resulting “clay” applied to the man’s eyes, then, is the truth applied with affection to the understanding. And the washing at the pool of Siloam is the spiritual cleansing that occurs when we go and do as we are taught.

There are of course *many* stories in the Word that illustrate the direct relationship of sin and sickness. The Israelites in the Old Testament were, it seems, almost routinely afflicted with plagues or diseases because of their disobedience. Think, for example, of the conquest of Canaan when if even only one man sinned against the Lord his whole family or tribe would suffer as a consequence. Or recall later how when one king “did evil in the sight of the Lord” his whole kingdom would be oppressed by some neighboring enemy. It was a repeating pattern, especially in the books of Kings and the Prophets.

Then in the New Testament sickness is often associated with sin so that, for example, when the Lord healed a paralytic man He said, “Son, have confidence; your sins are forgiven you” (Matt. 9:2, Luke 5:23) and when He healed the woman with “an issue of blood” He said, “Daughter, have confidence; your faith has made you well” (Luke 8:48).

Finally, in the Heavenly Doctrines we are clearly taught that all sickness, indeed any natural disorder, is a result of some corresponding spiritual disorder. It can’t be otherwise since everything in the natural world exists as a result of some spiritual cause, and nothing good can be the spiritual cause of something bad. HOWEVER, it does NOT follow that an individual is spiritually responsible for any particular physical sickness or injury: naturally responsible maybe, as when

smokers come down with cancer, heavy drinkers develop liver disease, or someone builds his house in a flood plain, but even then the spiritual causes may be tied to many other things for which we are NOT personally responsible: for example, bad advice, genetic weaknesses, and neglect or criminal intent by OTHER people. Of course some illnesses can be more or less directly tied to some personal, spiritual stress. But others may be the result of a bad spiritual environment for which we bear no responsibility at all, as for example when a person discovers his whole community has been built on top of a toxic waste dump. Even so, once we understand what's going on, then we *are* accountable for deciding what to do about it.

This is dramatically illustrated in the Lord's answer to a question He was asked about some Jews in Galilee who had been martyred by Pilate. As we read in Luke 13 He replied,

“Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

Here it is plainly implied that all men (and women) are sinners, and yet only some suffer disasters like these. So the fact that they suffer in that way doesn't make them worse than others. Still, the point is that all sin brings suffering – sooner or later – so we had better take notice and do something about it.

But there's more to this than a simple allegory. The whole region of Galilee in the spiritual sense corresponds to a relatively Gentile state, that is, a state of good without much truth to inform and guide it. That people in this state would have their own blood “mingled with their sacrifices” illustrates how our own good intentions can be misled and abused by false principles if we aren't careful. As for the eighteen killed by a falling tower in Siloam, this was in Jerusalem which represents the doctrine of the church, but a tower in the negative sense suggests an attitude of intellectual arrogance or conceit, and you know, “Pride goes before a fall.” Even the eighteen is significant, being a multiple of 3 and 6, which represents a state full of temptation. So the message in both these references is to the dangers of temptations in the will and in the understanding, warning us all to be vigilant.

The Difference between Evil and Sin

Speaking of the will and the understanding we are reminded that these are the two faculties that provide for all human responsibility. Our will, or what we want, is what determines our real character, and our understanding can either guide the will or support it – or both. But when things happen apart from our will, or against our will, generally we are not held accountable. And when we do things without really understanding their impact we are generally excused, at least to some extent, for our ignorance. The bad things we do are still bad, that is, harmful or evil, but our doing them is not sinful if we aren't fully responsible. And we don't sin against the Lord, specifically, if we are unaware that the Lord has told us not to do them.

We can see the difference between evil and sin when we look at the root meaning of the two words in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. “Evil” is a word that essentially means bad, harmful or disorderly. Sin is a word that means guilt, error, failure, or to miss the mark. Yes, you can miss the

mark for a lot of understandable reasons, but the fact that you have a mark to miss means you have some responsibility for your aim. So especially when we know what the Lord expects of us it is incumbent on us to do whatever we can to co-operate with Him – including the acknowledgment that we need His help to get it right. On the other hand if we do something bad inadvertently, or if something harmful or disorderly *happens to us*, we ought to be careful not to make ourselves guilty over it. For one thing that assumes way too much power and authority on our part and could be seen as a form of personal arrogance. But apart from that it puts the blame in the wrong place and so does nothing to improve the situation. In fact it can mask the real problem, making it possible for evil to flourish and do even more harm.

As we noted last week, the real source of all our problems is the hells. To the extent that we recognize this we can stop blaming ourselves *or others*. But it doesn't do any good just to blame the hells. What we need to do is to separate ourselves from them. And that is done by making better decisions, and doing things differently. The reason is that although the hells do in fact inspire us with selfish loves and foolish ideas, their physical effects are limited to the general sphere of disorder in the world. So when we make mistakes, *whether consciously or not*, the spirits from hell are immediately drawn to the disorder those mistakes create, reinforcing the evil and actually causing harmful consequences on the natural plane.

The same is true even in things like natural disasters – hurricanes, floods, fires, earthquakes, draughts, plagues and so on: it may be that such things would occur in the natural order of things whether people interfered or not (just as predatory animals have always existed in the cycles of nature), but their impact on human life is always a direct result of poor human decisions.

The Difference between Natural and Spiritual Effects

That said, there is a critical difference between natural and spiritual disasters, just as there is a critical difference between natural and spiritual illnesses or disabilities. Whereas the Lord in His wisdom has chosen to permit natural evils to affect perfectly innocent people, His protection of our spiritual states transcends anything the material world can do – but it only does so to the extent we rely on Him. Remember, He said, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; *not as the world gives do I give to you*” (John 14:17), and again, “In the world you will have tribulation, but have confidence, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

In fact this is a pretty common theme throughout the Gospels, and the teachings of the New Church fully support the principle. The world WILL challenge us, bad things WILL happen to us and we WILL struggle, but that is the nature of this finite existence: it is not an end in itself; it is the means to the end of eternal life. It's not intended to protect and provide for us forever; in fact it's intended to challenge us to set our priorities so that we are well prepared for life *beyond* time and space – beyond *things*.

To put this in perspective, it is actually phenomenal that more natural disasters do NOT occur on planet Earth. We live in an incredibly fine-tuned environment, just exactly, precisely the right distance between the sun and the rest of the planets, with just exactly, precisely the right amount of gravitational pull to balance the centrifugal forces of the solar system, and just exactly, precisely the right geological and atmospheric elements to sustain life as we know it in a galaxy of elements and forces so complicated that the slightest aberration could result in catastrophic effects. No wonder the impact of human activities in this environment can have such dramatic re-

sults. This delicate “balance of nature” is actually fairly easy to upset now that we have both the machinery and the scientific sophistication to impact very large segments of the environment with very powerful chemicals and feats of engineering. And of course most of this is done with truly altruistic intentions: better, more plentiful food supplies, better access to better quality health care, communication and transportation, more efficient, labor-saving inventions, and so on. But the fact is, the whole system is so intricately woven together that very often we really don’t know how we are upsetting it! So when something goes wrong it’s not necessarily our fault, at least not as to our intentions, but still we have to deal with it.

So the Lord has given us the ability to raise our minds to another level, to appreciate the difference between the delights and satisfactions of natural life and those of spiritual life. When a child is sick or dies, of course we grieve, and not just for her or for ourselves but for the lack of wisdom to prevent that loss. And yet we know that all children who die will go to heaven, since they have no confirmed impediments to receiving either the Lord’s love or His wisdom. And when a fire, a storm, an earthquake or a famine strikes the earth, or when some deranged person commits an atrocity and innocent people suffer, of course we mourn the losses, but at the same time every one of these incidents gives us an opportunity to weigh the value of earthly life against the values of eternal life and consider, too, what greater wisdom and love we need to prevent further suffering. Then the Lord can bring us through the tragedy with a sense of real humility, not to mention vision, purpose, hope *and meaningful work*.

Remember, the teaching is that “...offenses must come, but woe to that man BY whom the offense comes” (Matt. 18:7) – *NOT woe to the man TO whom the offense comes*. So the effect, the impact of any natural disaster is – or should be – to make us think about why we live in this world in the first place, how we can better support one another in our journey *through* it, and what the Lord wants to show us in the process.

In the book, Divine Providence, honors and wealth (and so by implication worldly prosperity in general) are described as either blessings or curses, depending on how they are used. Almost the same thing could be said of worldly tragedies. We read, “Everything that perishes and comes to nothing *is inwardly in itself nothing*. Outwardly, indeed, it is something, and even appears to be much, and to some everything, *as long as it lasts*; but inwardly in itself it is not. It is like a surface with nothing beneath; and like a character on the stage in royal robes until the play is ended. But that which remains to eternity is in itself *something perpetually*, thus *everything*; and it also IS, for it does not cease to be” (DP 217:7).

So we also read, “The Divine Providence looks to eternal things and to temporal things only so far as they agree with eternal things” (DP 214). Further, “The laws of permission are also laws of Divine Providence” (DP 234). Therefore what is permitted is always for the sake of strengthening our spiritual lives.

Can we believe it? Can we see it in ourselves? Let us pray that we do, and that this faith enables us to live and learn well no matter what challenges we face.

Amen.

Lessons: *John 9:1-12*
 Children’s talk on being born blind
 Psalm 139:1-12 and Arcana Caelestia #8478:sel & 8480:3