

## Introduction to the Spiritual World

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” Luke 17:20-21.

This short quotation from the Gospel of Luke should be familiar to all of you. Indeed, you should know it, chapter and verse. (So let’s work on that, and memorize it.)

This teaching, combined with many others in parables from Matthew, chapters 5, 6, 13 and 25, gives tremendous insight into the reality and nature of life after death. So does the story of the rich man and Lazarus, told in Luke 16. But we’ll come back to that in a moment.

Where is the kingdom of God? Jesus said it is “within you.” And what is it like? Jesus said it is “like a man sowing good seed in his field” only to find that it has been laced with tares so that it must be allowed to grow together with the tares until the harvest. It is also “like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field” so that it grew, gradually, into a tree. Again, it is “like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.” Indeed, it is “like treasure hidden in a field,” and so on. The one thing all these parables have in common is that the kingdom of heaven is something that starts small and is hidden, and either grows or comes to light as a person lives in this world.

In other words, although heaven is a rewarding state, it is not a reward that is in any way separated from our life in this world. Rather, it is a state of life that we cultivate while in this world but which only comes to full consciousness and fruition after the death of the physical body. In short, as the Writings for the New Church show, it is the life of love and wisdom that comes from God and that is received gradually according to our co-operation with the truths of His Word.

Thus heaven is a state of mind - but a real state, and one that exists in real relationships with others who are of like mind, whose minds are made up so that they live in unequivocal integrity.

The very first thing Jesus did after He was baptized by John and suffered His temptations in the wilderness was to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). Soon afterwards, in the beatitudes, He said “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and even “those who are persecuted” for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And again, in the middle of the sermon on the mount He begged His disciples not to lay up treasures for themselves on earth, but to lay them up in heaven, “...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” He might just as easily have said, “...for where your heart is, there your treasure will be also!” The point everywhere is that we do not have to WAIT for the reward of heaven, we can - and must - cultivate the life of heaven in our hearts and minds now if we are ever to realize it, in this world or the next.

So in the story of the rich man and Lazarus the Lord spoke about the “great gulf” that separates heaven from hell so that no one can go from one side to the other after death, but in the end of the parable He makes it clear that the attitude that qualifies a person for heaven must be cultivated in this world. The implication clearly is that heaven is a spiritual state, not a place.

With all this in mind, and without even touching on the many other Gospel stories that speak of the resurrection in terms of the quality of life a person leads here in this world, I would like to take the rest of my time this morning to review some of the distinctive teachings of the New Church about what happens to us when we die. Next time - two weeks from now - I'll speak more specifically about heaven, and in four weeks I'll tell you some surprising things about hell.

So, now, seeing that heaven, or the spiritual world, is actually the world of the spirit that is in us and that constitutes our real life in this world as well as the next, what is the big difference between life "here" and life "there"? How does it feel to "go" from here to there? What is the process by which we enter into life after death?

Well, of course, the BIG difference is that when the natural body dies it is cast off and never taken up again. We do have bodies - and all our senses, including the delights of the senses - in the spiritual world, but they are spiritual bodies and therefore spiritual senses, as mentioned in our third lesson today (HH #445 or 461) and as clearly taught in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (15:42-44). Don't forget that in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the Lord also referred to the senses of sight, hearing, taste and touch in both men after they died and entered into eternal life.

What's the difference? Well, in this world the body is made of chemicals and minerals that are relatively fixed and determined by circumstances that may or may not have anything to do with our own decisions or spiritual states. We may be born, for example, with light or dark skin, with brown or blue eyes, with big or small hands, or even with a genetic disorder. In the course of our lives we may suffer illnesses or other misfortunes that have little or nothing to do with our inner loves - we just happen to be in a certain place at a bad time or under bad circumstances caused by the weather, or by some noxious gas, insect, plant, animal or other people, whether nasty or nice.

But in the spiritual world - that is, the world of the spirit - we determine what we will experience and how we will respond to it. We choose either love or hate, wisdom or foolishness, mercy or judgment, peace or resentment; we identify with one or another attitude or thought and then our spiritual bodies conform to that choice.

We get a taste of this in the natural world - but just a taste - as even a homely person can look relatively beautiful if she has a beautiful attitude or smile, and even a person with a handsome face can look ugly if he has an ugly attitude. Again, we understand the concept of selective sight or hearing: people often see what they want or are expecting to see, and we know that victims of trauma can simply block out the memory of certain very vivid experiences. The whole point is that in the end the mind itself is what sees, hears and feels, not the physical body, except to the extent that the physical forces its way into our consciousness. But when the body is gone that is not possible. So in the other life we see - and are seen - exactly according to our disposition and choice.

Why, then, are we given life in this world at all? Why aren't we born directly into the spiritual world apart from the natural? One critical reason is that in the relatively cold, objective framework of the natural world we are given limitations of both time and space that actually help us to define ourselves. First, the unique position each one of us has in time and space gives each of us a unique perspective. Second, our unique experiences give us unique sensibilities from which to think and act; someone who has ridden a horse, for example, has something in his mind that

someone who has never done so can't have, no matter how much he may imagine it. (Many other examples come to mind.) And besides all that, the limitations of time and space force us to make decisions and choose our priorities, for we can't "do it all;" so we have to make up our minds what is most important to us, and get on with that. What a lovely phrase - "make up our minds" - for that is exactly what we do in our lives in this world, thereby preparing for life in the next.

What, then, is it like to go from this world to the next? Well, the Writings say it is simply like going from one place to another (HH 461), for WE don't change, we take ourselves - our perspectives, our sensibilities and our priorities - with us. But here's the good (or bad) news: while we are in the natural world our conscious thought is so pre-occupied with natural things, and with the need to accommodate to others whether we like it or not, that most of us do not even really know ourselves, let alone others, as we are inwardly, as we would be if we could be completely uninhibited and free of pretense. So in the spiritual world after death there is a gradual process of liberating or releasing the true inner spirit from its natural constraints.

Sick people, if they have a healthy attitude, become well. Poor people, if they are generous at heart, come into great wealth. Rich people, if they have been selfish, lose everything (according to the Lord's words), and hypocrites, once it doesn't matter any more, show their true colours.

But this doesn't happen all of a sudden. If it did either we would lose our sense of identity or we would feel exposed, possibly angry or frightened.

So the Writings tell us that the first stage of life after death, after the initial awakening - which is always very peaceful and reassuring - is a state of "exteriors," that is to say, a state of thought and feeling very much along the lines of the outward thoughts and feelings we had in the natural world (HH 491 ff). Because of this, many people when they die have no idea that they really have died! They simply wake up as if from sleep, or as if they've had a "close call" and recovered. But gradually they realize that the external things that preoccupied their mind are no longer important; indeed, they are a hindrance, and so they long for more sincere communication, and fulfilment through the deeper experience of what is really meaningful to them.

At that point they come into the second stage or state of their new life, which is a state of "interiors." In this state there is a growing feeling of freedom as people let go of their inhibitions and begin to say and do what they really think or want to do. And of course, as this takes place there is a "natural" sorting process (HH 511): people who got along well in the natural world based on the outward appearances they put on now seek companionship among those who really think and feel inwardly as they do. So the evil gravitate towards others who are evil and the good to others who are good, each according to his or her own particular loves. It is a situation just as if you could go to a place here on earth where you felt completely safe, where you would fear no consequences of any kind for anything you might say or do, where you could live out your fantasies without shame or embarrassment or other social consequences, in short, where you were truly free.

During this phase of the new life it becomes clear to everyone who are really evil and who are good. The evil then go to hell, for they can't stand the sphere of love and truth; it is obnoxious to them! They have no interest in learning or changing, they simply want what they want and they get right after it, unconcerned about the welfare of others or the importance of the truth (HH 509).

Of course, as their real states are exposed and they begin to gravitate to hell some will claim that they are not being treated fairly, and that they should be going to heaven. But when that happens they are shown in living form - I imagine it is like a video tape replay - the evidence of their evil as recorded in the "book of life" (HH 463). And they accept the judgment against them, which is really only the judgment of the facts which they can no longer hide or deny.

Meanwhile the good, although governed by good "ruling loves," almost all have some bad habits and misunderstandings that need to be cleared up before they can enter fully into the joy and peace of heaven. So they go through a third general state, which is a state of instruction. Here they learn the truth eagerly and enthusiastically, for they have a love and longing for it, and now that they can have confidence in their instructors they respond with delight. Christians and non-Christians alike are led into deeper understanding and more perfect lives, not just by lectures and illustrations but by life experience, which they find totally inspiring. Then, when they are ready, "each one is led by the Lord to his own community" where he or she is "immediately recognized and received with joy" (HH 519).

As I said, next time we meet we will review some of the wonderful revelations that the Lord has given us about the real life of heaven: no wings, no harps, no halos, no floating around on clouds with little or nothing to do.... If you want to get a glimpse of what's in store read the first 20 pages or so of the book, *Conjugal Love*, and you'll be prepared. You might also have a look at the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, and think carefully about verses 21 and 23.

Meanwhile, let's remember this: the more we can do in this life through learning and self-discipline to cultivate a sincere, unrestrained love for what is true and good, the more quickly and easily we can be introduced after the death of the body into eternal life - AND the freer and more fulfilled we will be in this world, too. For the other life is not about reward and punishment in the natural sense but reward and punishment in the spiritual sense, that is, the delight and fulfillment that a good life carries within itself, versus the pain and suffering that an evil life carries within itself.

Furthermore, as the Writings say, "It is not so difficult as some believe to live the life that leads to heaven" (HH 528, 530). For "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. Into this state man is able to enter because of his freedom, for is not any one able from his freedom so to think? And when he has made a beginning, the Lord performs all the good deeds with him, and causes him not only to see the 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. Matt. 11: 30'" (HH 533).

Amen.

Lessons: Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 13: 24-33 & Luke 17:20-21  
Heaven and Hell #445 or 461 (see also #491-520 & 426)