

Seven Ways to Benefit from Evil and Disorder in the World

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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"Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matthew 18:7).

Today we begin with a very simple but critical premise: – if God is wise and loving, as we believe He is, then all that He does must be in the interest of what is right and good. If God is understanding and cares, as we believe He does, then anything He withholds or permits must also arise out of His Divine judgment and justice. So there is no need, really, to try to justify the way things work in the world in order to accept them (or God); first we ought to accept them (and God), then we will be in a position to understand and benefit from them.

Still, it is often hard to find the good. It is hard when we are sick or injured, hard when success in work or in relationships eludes us, hard when someone we love is hurt or taken from us, and hard in general when natural disasters, criminal events or civil and social disorder take their toll. It is hard to find the good and so, really, to see God, when evil is forced upon us. But try we must, for it is our heritage to see God, and it is our birthright to feel His presence in Divine good.

When we were small and we played with candle flames we quickly discovered that fire can hurt. So we learned not to play with it, or, if we did play with it, to do so very carefully. Even as children we soon knew enough not to blame the fire for our own carelessness if we got burned, for we became aware that it is the nature of fire to burn. In other words, we learned the law of cause and effect. Later, perhaps, we began to see that this law is constant and that it is one of the Lord's laws by which He governs the universe and holds it in order.

Why, then, when we are older and we build houses in high fire-risk areas, or in flood-plains, or on top of old toxic waste dumps, why should we suppose that God will (or even might) suspend His laws of order by not allowing some disaster to happen? Wouldn't it be better to take responsibility in these areas and be prepared for likely problems? It is the same everywhere, and the fact that we may not know what to expect does not take away the law of consequences in itself.

It is not Necessary to Suffer Spiritually.

So we begin with this critically important principle: just as we are not held spiritually accountable for things that are beyond our conscious knowledge or control, so it is not necessary for us to suffer spiritually for them even though we may suffer great losses naturally. There is a big difference! Suppose two men have identical "accidents:" one becomes bitter and discouraged, gives up and becomes a drain on society; the other digs deep and finds inner strength, accepts a new challenge and becomes an inspiration to many. The teaching of this church is that we are free to choose either response because it is not what happens to us in life that counts but how we respond to it, "not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of the mouth..." (Matthew 15:11).

Jesus referred to this concept in the words of our text: -

"Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matthew 18:7).

Note He did not prophesy woe to the ones who are offended but rather "*to that man by whom the offense comes!*" Of course the victim will be hurt, but that hurt is nothing beside the grief that will come to the offender himself. In fact the "victim," so called, can become the victor in every way if he or she has the right attitude about dealing with the offense against him or her.

Again, the Lord pointedly told people that natural incidents were not necessarily tied to spiritual states when He spoke, in Luke 13, about some Galileans who had been killed along with their sacrifices under the reign of Pilate. He said, "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" (vv 1-5).

The point is, we are not judged by the events and circumstances of our lives, we are judged by what we are inside. So we are also taught, "Evils are permitted for the sake of the end, which is salvation" (DP 249), and "Every evil has its limits, beyond which it is not permitted to go" (AC 1311:2 & 1857, SD 2151).

Life in the World is the Means to a Higher End.

Another vital principle is that salvation comes through a permission of evil when we take note of the evil to learn something about ourselves. And the limits beyond which evil cannot go are set so that we can learn without being spiritually overwhelmed. We read, "The Lord does not take away evil, but withholds man from it . . . and keeps him in good" – *if he is willing* (AC 8364). So as He Himself said, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Through the Lord's help we, too, can "overcome the world."

Now, given the existence of evil, the problems of disorder, the reality of the misfortunes we face, how can we turn them to some good? How can we actually benefit from them?

1. The Use of Evils for Contrast with Good

There are many ways we can put evils and falsities, even personal tragedies to work for us. **First**, we can use them for contrast. Every artist knows that dark scenes and shadows make the bright parts of a picture stand out. Ugliness also makes the beauty of life stand out more noticeably when it appears. So we are made more conscious of the blessings of health when we are confronted with sickness. The Lord referred to this doctrine when He healed the blind man as told in John 9: the disciples asked Him, "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' But Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him'" (vv 2-3). Through the contrast and through His power to overcome the evil of blindness the Lord revealed His mercy in an unforgettable way.

Today, even without such dramatic miracles we can still see the value of looking for good through contrast with evil. Sometimes, sadly, it takes the loss of a loved one for us to realize how very much we did value his or her presence. The tragic aspects of this can't be denied, but then, we know that we are all created for eternal life and so the passing of a loved one can have the effect of confirming us in the teachings about this, keeping us focused on spiritual realities, and motivating us to do what we need to do for our own spiritual growth.

2. Suffering Can Inspire Pity, Mercy and Sensitivity.

Second, seeing evil around us can introduce us to a sense of pity and mercy that is absolutely necessary to human life. It can make us gentler and more sensitive to all the people we meet. Naturally we have to beware of self-pity when we feel hurt or wronged, but seeing anything pitiful, even in ourselves, can help make us aware that unseen evils and difficulties may also be affecting others. Nepal is very far from here, but the misery we see in the wake of the earthquake awakens something precious and vital from the Lord in us.

3. Some Tragedies put us in a Position to Help Others.

It sounds trite, but it's **also** true that if we suffer a loss, break a leg or develop some peculiar disease we can still say to ourselves: "Here, there's something to learn, something to be done in this situation." Maybe somebody in the hospital bed next to us needs our comfort, influence, or positive attitude. On the other hand, maybe we need to be withdrawn from the active sphere of our work so that we can reflect and do something in a quiet state under the limitations imposed on us. Today in Baltimore we may well ask, what's wrong up there, and how can we help?

4. Outward Evils can Help us Recognize Inward Evils.

Again, seeing evil around and outside of us, seeing the dreadful nature of its consequences in external life, we can become aware of corresponding evils within us and their dreadful consequences. For example when we hear of a murder, or maybe even see one, we're shocked, outraged, appalled, maybe even frightened for our own lives. But we can use the experience to our benefit if we will realize that natural murder corresponds to spiritual murder, and spiritual murder is hatred. When we see the implications of that in our lives we've really got something to work on, for we all know anger and the hatred that is hidden in it. The same applies to every evil and disorder around us, for every one represents something we have to deal with in ourselves.

5. Natural Losses can Bring New Perspectives.

A **fifth** and closely related use of outward evil or misfortune in our lives is that if approached in the right way it can lead us to a better perspective on the whole concept of loss and deprivation. Remember, the degree of injury inflicted on anyone as a victim depends entirely on what is important to the person. If my car is stolen and I don't really need a car anyway, that's no great injury to me. If I suffer an accident so that I can never run again and yet I never run anywhere anyway, that's no great injury to me; I carry on just as before. So when we think of the Down's Syndrome child or the child crippled in an accident we're conscious of the limitations he will suffer as he grows older, but that child may not be conscious of those limitations at all. He will simply continue to receive and thrive on the affections and the love and the knowledge that he learns in the sphere of his family and friends. He learns to feel deprived because of the cultural situation into which he grows, but we can do a lot to protect him from that if *we* have the right attitude.

In this context the New Church has a most beautiful and inspirational vision of the real value of spiritual life beyond the natural, so that we need not fear any worldly loss but can with confidence forsake the whole thing: – sell what we have, cut off the hand that offends, take up the cross, whatever is necessary, to follow the Lord, for in the truest perspective of things, spiritual life is all that matters: "it is more profitable that one (or all!) of our members perish than for our whole body

to be cast into hell" (Matt. 5:29), and besides, "What is a man profited (even) if he gains the whole world, (but) loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

6. The Pain of Disorder can Motivate us to Change.

A **sixth** and again closely related application of the awareness of evil and disorder is the motivation it brings to set things right. For example, quite apart from the issues of pity and sensitivity to others, it's really true that none of us likes pain, so the presence of pain not only indicates that something is wrong, it moves us to do whatever is necessary to get rid of it. Let's say one of us has a throbbing headache: it doesn't seem fair, we don't know why, we haven't done anything to "deserve" it, but it's driving us crazy. So we analyze and reflect, examining ourselves and our environment; we do research, go to a doctor, and eventually find out there's a gas leak in our home or some poison in our diet. All of a sudden we discover that the Lord has given us that pain for a good reason, that is, to find the cause and deal with it before it kills us! Many illustrations in the same vein could be given. The point is, although it may be natural and superficial at first, the motivation to correct a disorder "to ease the pain" is genuine and can lead to the next step of real reformation.

7. Overcoming Evils Can be Very Gratifying.

Finally for now, a **seventh use arising out of the presence of evil** in our lives can be seen when we consider the importance of free will in the whole scheme of life. True, it would be a beautiful world without any evil or disorder, without any tragedy or pain, but it would not be our world for then we would not be truly free. "Ah," you might say, "but if we were enlightened and understood the consequences of evil none of us would be foolish enough to choose it! We would be free, but we would all choose good." It's a nice idea but it just doesn't work. We can be told a hundred ways why something is good for us and we will still choose not to do it. Basically, that's the reason people are in hell.

Neither the will nor the understanding can be forced or the one forced would merge into the spirit of the other who leads or dominates him and **he would die** - not as to the flesh of course but as to the spirit, the feeling and conviction that was uniquely his own. Fundamentally this is what all the wars and political upheavals in the world's history have been about: people would rather die physically than spiritually by losing their individuality, identity, initiative, their sense of the ownership of life, their freedom to respond each in his or her own way.

This gift of free will involves not only the possibility of evil but the very great delight and satisfaction of correcting it. We all love challenges, we love to solve problems. In fact where we face no challenges at all we quickly become bored and feel useless. So in permitting evils the Lord not only provides for free will, He also offers the opportunity for each one of us to take responsibilities that lead to real fulfillment in overcoming them. True, there are plenty of challenges centered on positive things, on growth and development of wisdom, understanding and love. And this argument is certainly not meant to justify the presence of evil in the world but to show one of seven spiritual benefits we can gain from it, given the fact that it exists.

Okay, so let's review the seven principles again: -

1. By contrast with evil we learn better to appreciate the good.

2. Human suffering can arouse real pity, mercy and sensitivity toward others, a most necessary quality in natural and especially spiritual life.
3. Some tragedies put us in a position of real use to others – and to ourselves – if we are alert to the opportunities.
4. Outward evils can help us to see corresponding inward evils in ourselves.
5. Natural losses can help us focus on the far greater value of spiritual life by comparison.
6. The pain of evil and disorder can motivate us to change, to reform.
7. It is a source of great delight and personal satisfaction to accept the challenge and take the responsibility to overcome evils in ourselves and in the world generally.

Of course there are some losses we can never fully recover: we can't bring a loved one back from the other world; we can't stop the progress of certain diseases – yet. But whatever the situation we can work to improve the conditions of life for others and for the future. Many of the world's great remedies and inventions have come as a direct result of human response to personal loss and tragedy. Even if we can't solve the problems at hand, it is still true that no one can offer comfort to others better than someone who has experienced the same loss himself.

Finally, remember there are many kinds and many levels of human loss. It is not just the outward tragedy that ought to arouse our concern, but also the more profound losses on the moral plane: the loss of innocence, the loss of virtue, integrity, and the meaning of service to others. On the spiritual plane the world also suffers *the greatest loss of all* in lack of faith in a believable God, in providence, and in the true meaning of the Sacred Scriptures. What can we do about these terrible evils in our lives? How can we turn them to good? – **Just the same as we would any outward evils**, by the application of the same seven principles outlined here for a start. But most of all by the will and effort to pray to the Lord, to hear and really understand His Word as it applies in our lives, and to make whatever changes are necessary to become part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:11-20: Children's talk on the law of consequences

Matthew 18:1-14

Arcana Caelestia 8958-61 and Divine Providence 275:h

Prayers for this service:

(1)

Lord, we come before You in the acknowledgment of our limitations and needs. Of ourselves we do not know what is good for us, and from ourselves we have no idea what is true.

Open our minds this day, therefore, to receive understanding and life from Your Word. Raise our thoughts above the appearances of the world that can be so confusing, discouraging and even false at times, and show us the gentle leading of your hand toward real fulfillment in spiritual things and in the heavenly kingdom.

Lord, strengthen us for the work You have given us to do, and remove the doubts and fears that stand in our way. Amen.

(2)

Heavenly Father, fill us today with Your Holy Spirit and with the certain knowledge that we are all in Your tender care from moment to moment every day.

Help us to see how we may learn from all the experiences of our lives, be they good or evil, and how we may contribute to the welfare of all those around us by going to Your Word, drawing from it the inspiration of a very positive and faithful attitude, and working cheerfully to put the good You have provided into practice in every area of our lives.

Thank You, Lord, for everything as it contributes to our spiritual growth. Amen.