

## “Know Yourself:” How and Why

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  
“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.  
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.  
“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.  
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matt. 5:3-8)

Nothing could be more common in the Word than for the Lord to encourage a right attitude, good motives and charitable intentions. The whole Sermon on the Mount is full of such things, and of course these beatitudes in particular. But when a thoughtful person confronts these teachings with any degree of humility he (or she) might well ask, “How can I really know whether I am inwardly alright or not? How can I be sure?”

In this context the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple comes to mind.

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:11-13)

At this our Lord famously said, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).

So... Is it arrogant to think we are saved? Is it necessary to think poorly of ourselves in order to be saved? Let me ask the question another way: How do YOU feel when you’re on a journey and you suddenly realize that you have *no idea* where you are? Don’t you immediately start looking for signs or explanations about that? Don’t you feel a sense of urgency to get your bearings so you aren’t completely lost? Of course you do. Even in a mall or a hospital you look for the map that has the spot or the star that says “You are HERE.”

And so it is with the spiritual life. We NEED to know where we stand, how we’re doing, and what we still have to do (AC 7181). Otherwise we can’t really co-operate with the Lord except in the most external, natural ways. Granted, the evangelical churches have this all worked out. Their position is that no one in or of himself can do anything of any spiritual value; only the Lord can save – which is true! But they go on to suggest that since the Lord offered *Himself* as a *sacrificial atonement* for the sins of the whole human race our salvation depends on only one thing, that we believe He did this for us. So they make no claims about their own goodness, they simply rest in their faith – and faith alone – that all the real work has been done *for* them. There’s just one hitch, and it’s the same question we’re asking today: how can they be sure that their faith is genuine? How can they be sure they aren’t just being given false hope?

In the New Church we have an almost opposite problem. We’re so accustomed to the teaching about our hereditary tendencies to evils of every kind and that we need to co-operate with the Lord to receive His blessing, that it is not uncommon to hear people say they have NO confidence that they can be saved, least of all go to one of the higher heavens. We know that the Lord saves, but we struggle to accept that He can save US. Some are even uncomfortable coming forward for the Holy Supper because of the teachings that we should not come unless we are worthy, and we never really feel worthy.

The Lord’s love and wisdom are somewhere in the middle of all this.

It is true, for example, that none of us can know everything, even about ourselves. Our understanding is so powerfully guided by our will, and our will is so convinced that whatever supports it is good, that we can easily fall into justifications of what we WANT rather than objective perceptions of what is right. In short, we look at life through the lens of our own experience and culture. Still, the Lord does give us clear signs and explanations that can help to pinpoint our spiritual states and provide objective direction if we pay attention.

One of these signs or indicators is our sense of delight. Our loves, we read, become apparent in whatever gives us delight, especially when it is unencumbered by any fear of the loss of reputation, honor, gain or other consequences (DP 278, NJHD 164). So, when we compare what delights us with what we find taught in the Word we can discern to some extent whether our loves are good or bad, heavenly or worldly, and so, whether we are on a path to heaven or not. Consider this wonderful passage in the Arcana, which appears in the midst of a discussion about the good of truth and the truth of good:

“...They who have worldly and earthly things as their end, cannot withdraw their senses from them; and even if they did so, they would perceive what is undelightful; in which case they would be departing and withdrawing from the things they have as their end, that is, which they love. *Let anyone who is of such a nature put himself to the test*, as to whether he desires to know how good adjoins itself to the affections of truth; and how the affections of truth apply themselves to good; and whether knowing this is irksome to him or not; and he will say that such things are of no benefit to him, and that he apprehends nothing about them.

“But if such things are told him as relate to his business in the world, even though they are of the most abstruse character, or if he be told the nature of another man's affections, and how he may thereby join the man to himself by adapting himself both mentally and orally, this he not only apprehends, but also has a perception of the interior things connected with the matter. In like manner he who studies from affection to investigate the abstruse things of the sciences, loves to look and does look into things still more intricate. But when spiritual good and truth are in question, he feels the subject irksome and turns his back on it” (AC 4096:2-3).

The point is, spiritual life is not as difficult to understand as it may seem; it’s just a matter of what we find interesting.

Actually, a case could be made that the whole purpose of revelation is to show us the difference between good and evil *so that we can identify these states in ourselves* and act accordingly, re-

penting of the evils so that we can more fully receive good from the Lord. And it’s not terribly complicated. The primary focus need only be on our ruling or dominant loves. We read,

“Every one may see what kind of life he has, if he will only search out what his end is; not what *all* his ends are – for he has numberless ones, as many as intentions, and almost as many as judgments and conclusions of thoughts, which are only intermediate ends, variously derived from the principle one, or tending to it – *but let him search out the end he prefers to all the rest*, and in respect to which all others are as nothing. If he has for his end himself and the world, let him know that his life is infernal; but if he has for his end the good of the neighbor, the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and especially the Lord Himself, let him know that his life is heavenly” (A 1909:2).

So, then, is it OK to think that we are doing well? We read,

“When a person feels or perceives in himself that he has good thoughts concerning the Lord, and that he has good thoughts concerning the neighbor, and desires to perform kind offices for him, not for the sake of any gain or honor for himself; and when he feels that he has pity for anyone who is in trouble, and still more for one who is in error in respect to the doctrine of faith, then he may know that he ... has internal things in him through which the Lord is working” (AC 1102:3).

Of course we cannot know *the future*, because if we did we would have no real freedom and no real sense of responsibility (DP 179). This means we can never know for sure whether we are going to heaven or not, much less what particular heaven. Why? – because depending on the choices we make from day to day in this world the whole course of our lives could change at any time (DP 202). That’s why our job is not to worry about the future but to make the best decisions we can from day to day (Matt. 6:11, AC 8478, etc.). And making good decisions requires that we know where we are and what the options are *at that point*.

So we are given the faculty of reflection, or self-examination. Unlike animals and birds that operate on just one level of thought, we humans have two levels, so that we can think *about* our thoughts and exercise the self-discipline that can actually change the way we *feel*.

In this connection, harking back to our evangelical friends and the question of true faith, our teachings provide a very simple way of approaching the problem. We read,

“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, see Life 34 & 45).

You see, it’s true: we really can’t do anything good of or from ourselves; it all flows in from the Lord. So what we are tasked to do is simply remove the obstacles, which are the evils of life. This means we have to recognize them, acknowledge them, take responsibility for them, and avoid them at all cost. When a person does this – and makes a habit of doing it – gradually it gets easier and easier so that “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” (HH 533).

This is the same process we can use to gain forgiveness of our sins. As you know the Lord is nothing BUT forgiveness, the problem is that we cannot receive it from Him when our evils stand in the way. So again, our job is to open the way by getting rid of the evils (NJHD 165). And here’s another thing: it takes a heap of discipline and intellectual honesty to do this, but one benchmark we can use to determine our spiritual state is the consideration of *what evil we would do if we thought we could get away with it*. Notice the emphasis on “do.” We read,

“Nothing that a person merely thinks about becomes attached to him. Indeed neither does anything that he *thinks* about willing, unless he at the same time wills it *to the point that he also does it when given the opportunity*. . . . That is what is meant by these words of the Lord: ‘It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of (the heart through) the mouth that defiles a person.’ (Matthew 15:11, 17-19)” (DP 80).

It is equally true that if we think we are charitable and good but we don’t DO the good of charity when the opportunity presents itself... well, you get the picture.

“To think and to will without doing, when there is opportunity, are like a flame, enclosed in a vessel, which goes out; also like seed cast upon the sand, which fails to grow, and so perishes with its power of germination. But to think and will *and from that to do* is like a flame that gives heat and light all around, or like a seed in the ground that grows up into a tree or flower and has existence. Everyone can know that willing and not doing, when there is opportunity, is not willing; also that loving and not doing good, when there is opportunity, is not loving, but mere thought which one wills and loves; and this is thought separate, which vanishes and is dissipated” (HH 475).

Conscientious people often worry about their spiritual states. They say, “Are we really trying as hard as we like to think, or are we just fooling ourselves? Do we really hunger and thirst for righteousness, or do we just want things our own way? Are we really pure in heart, or is it all a self-justifying illusion?” Simply put, “How genuine is our faith?” Sometimes we really wonder.

If these are questions that bother you, consider this. The Lord knows that it is hard for us to make these judgments. He knows, for example, that we can often be confused about our own motives. So He tells us that it is not necessary to go around second-guessing all our intentions; it is not necessary to be absorbed in endless introspection; we are not taught to go around all the time beating ourselves up like the tax collector, calling attention to our sins. There’s a place for that, of course – in prayer and deep reflection – but to do it all the time is not healthy and could even be a form of selfishness. Instead consider this profoundly simple principle: we read,

“... [A]lthough a person does not *sensibly perceive* whether the uses that he performs are for the sake of use or for the sake of self, that is, whether the uses are spiritual or merely natural, *still he can know it by this*, whether or not he considers evils to be sins. If he regards them as sins, and for that reason abstains from doing them, the uses which he does are spiritual” (DLW 426).

In the end self-monitoring is supposed to be easy. And the signs that our sins have been forgiven are also simple and straightforward: is there a delight in worship for the Lord’s sake? Do we care about the neighbor for *his* sake? Do we respect what is good and true simply because they are good and true? Do we avoid and shun feelings of hostility, hatred, revenge, adultery, and other evils? (see NJHD 167). Concerning those who are in good from the Lord we read,

“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 prevailing craving of the body, it is not imputed to him 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 (there)” (CL 529).

“Once or twice a year”! Some passages say three or four times, but still... the point is it’s important not to over-think this. We just need to get on with it and ask the Lord each day to give us our daily bread.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Isaiah* 1:2-4 & 16-20  
              *Matthew* 5:1-16  
              *New Jerusalem & It’s Heavenly Doctrine* 159-161 & 165

The third lesson:

“ Anyone who wishes to be saved must confess his sins and repent.

“Confessing one’s sins is recognizing evils and seeing them in oneself, acknowledging them, considering oneself guilty and condemning oneself on account of them. If this is done before God, that is confessing one’s sins.

“Repentance is, after thus confessing one’s sins and with a humble heart begging for forgiveness, to stop doing them, and to lead a new life in accordance with the commandments of charity and faith.

“To repent with one’s lips but not in one’s life is no repentance. Sins are not forgiven by repentance with the lips, but by repentance in life. A person’s sins are continually being forgiven by the Lord, for He is absolute mercy. But the sins cling to the person, however much he thinks they are forgiven, and the only way to have them removed is to live in accordance with the commandments of true faith. The more he lives thus, the more his sins are removed, and the further they are removed, the more they are forgiven.”

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