

How to Read People's Minds
or
How to Judge Motives and Intentions

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.” – Matt 7:15-16.

The title of this sermon is deliberately provocative. In one sense of course it’s impossible to know what’s in another person’s mind. People make mistakes, so even when they mess up and cause a lot of harm it isn’t necessarily because they were intending it: they may have been misinformed or misguided by others, or simply lacking the skill to do a good job. Even so, you can tell a lot about people by how they react when shown the harm they’ve caused. If they argue about it or make a lot of excuses, or especially if they criticize in return, well, then you have a pretty good idea what you’re dealing with, but if they apologize and show remorse, and especially if they indicate a desire to make amends, then you also know – something quite different.

As the Lord said, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree *cannot* bear bad fruit, *nor can a bad tree bear good fruit*” (Matt 7:17-18).

Fruit, as we know, is a universal symbol in the Word for good works. And yes, it’s true that a bad person can do things that are good *for others*, but in no case are these good works actually good for the person doing them. As the Lord also said, “Many will say to Me in [the day of judgment], ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:22-23). Lawlessness! – even though they were teachers of the law!! So the Lord later reinforced the point, saying, “Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works, for they say, and do not do” (Matt. 23:3).

Hypocrisy is of course a serious problem in human life, and not just in cases involving others. We ourselves have to be careful to avoid conflicts of interest that may corrupt what we do with selfish motives. And since we all know how challenging it can be to keep our own motives pure we can certainly understand the challenge of judging others fairly. But the fact is, the Lord consistently tells us that we CAN judge others, and even that we have to do so (John 7:24, HD #85). So how can we apply this teaching in our daily lives?

Well, first of all we have the well-known teaching that our judgments should always be tentative. If, we read, a person is as he appears to be, then we can say he is a good or bad person (CL 523). Still, we have to make these judgments. As it says in the same passage, “Who does not see that were it not lawful for a person to judge as to the moral life of his fellow inhabitants in the world, society would fall! What would society be if there were no public judgments? or if one did not form his own judgment concerning another?” This includes judgments of motives, by the way, as we see in all the differing degrees of guilt assigned by judges in courts of civil law.

The book, *True Christian Religion*, makes this same point in the context of explaining who

qualifies as a real neighbor. We read,

“Common experience shows that good is the neighbor; for a person is loved according to the quality of his *will and understanding*, that is, according to what is good and upright *in him*. A king, prince, general, overseer, consul, magistrate, or judge, of whatever rank, is loved only for *the wisdom of his respective actions and speech*; a prelate, minister, or canon of the Church for his learning, for *the integrity of his life*, and his zeal for the salvation of souls; the general of an army, or any officer under him, for his courage and skill...” and so on (TCR 418).

“Thus [again] the Church is valued for its charity and faith, and not for the ritual which has become associated with it. A minister of the Church is esteemed for his *good will and love*, and at the same time for his *understanding* in spiritual things, and not for his affability and clerical garb” (TCR 660).

These teachings clearly highlight the importance of looking beneath the surface of what is presented outwardly, and trying to come to some conclusion about a person's spiritual state – again, tentatively, but all the same with care and prudence (HD 85). So where do we begin?

Well, of course we begin with what we *can* see, hear and feel. As we read in *Heaven & Hell*,

“It must be understood that in deeds or works the whole person is exhibited, and that his will and thought or his love and faith, which are his interiors, are not complete until they exist in deeds or works, which are his exteriors, for these are the outmosts in which the will and thought terminate, and without such terminations they are interminate, and have as yet no existence, that is, are not yet in the person.... 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 that one wills and loves; and this is thought separate, which vanishes and is dissipated” (HH 475).

One important take-away from this is that if you don't see an *effort* to do the right thing you can be pretty sure the motive isn't there, either. Certainly a person might fake the effort, but when there's *no effort* the message is pretty clear. And by the way, this is a fairly reliable way to judge *ourselves* if we can be really honest about it. If we don't at least *try* to speak kindly or do what is asked; if we're not willing to give up something of ourselves in a moment of someone else's need, then we can be pretty sure our own will and understanding need some work. As we read,

“...effort and will, as an internal act, is accepted by every wise man, because it is accepted by God, exactly as if it were an external act, *provided there is no failure to act when the opportunity arises*” (TCR 387:e)

It's more complicated when good things are done hypocritically, but even so you can tell a lot about the state of a person's mind by *how consistent he is* in regard to the laws of order, and what he has to gain personally from doing that good. The point is made several times in the Writings that...

“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).

So it's a reliable spiritual principle that we should consider the whole range of a person's actions, and not just one or two outstanding cases, when we make our judgments. Inconsistency can reveal a lot about a person's inner state – and not just whether they are good or evil, but whether they are confused or conflicted, and perhaps in need of some special help or encouragement.

Psychics, by the way, are not necessarily tuned in to supernatural auras around people, or to spirits who are with them, but are often just highly sensitive to the body language and other physical cues that tell them whether they're on the right track in telling people what they want to hear. For the truth is we often reveal much more than we realize by our postures and movements.

But what about the things we say – and how we say them? As a matter of interest, the Writings are clear that the two most important human senses are sight and hearing, sight corresponding to understanding and hearing to the will, or in practical matters, obedience. So we read that "the rest of the senses with angels are less exquisite than the senses of seeing and hearing, for the reason that seeing and hearing serve their intelligence and wisdom, and the rest do not..." (HH 462).

What, then, can we learn about people from listening to how they talk? For that matter, what can we learn about *ourselves* from the way *we* talk? As with our actions we might say all sorts of things that are good and true, but not really mean them. Or we might say things that are mean or inconsiderate, not realizing what they reveal about us!

Well, as we just noted, we can begin by noting what people DON'T say. Yes, they might be shy or have difficulty finding the right words, but if they – or lets' say WE – have an opportunity to say something useful or kind, something helpful or friendly, and we don't even try, that can tell us something about our – or their – state of mind. And if they – or we – have an opportunity to say something really critical, arrogant or nasty, or in the vein of "I told you so!" and we don't do it, that, too, reveals something about us on a deeper level.

On the other hand, when people say rude or inconsiderate things, use course language or take the Lord's name in vain, yes, you could say it's all just habitual and thoughtless, but then again, that tells you something about what's going on – or *not* going on – inside their heads. Plus, you can pick up a lot from a person's tone of voice, for as we read in *Divine Love and Wisdom*, it is possible here on earth, and *unavoidable* in heaven to perceive "from the sound of a speaker's voice what his affection is, and from the words what his thought is" (DLW 372), or as it says in another place, to "identify another's state of mind in his facial expressions and in the twinkling of light in his eyes, as well as in his tone of voice and his gestures" (AC 4748:3).

So, we read, at dinners and feasts in the early Christian Church...

"The spiritual sphere which prevailed was one of love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor. This cheered their mind, *softened the tone of their speech*, and spread among them a general feeling of cordiality. [The reason for this more generally is that] from everyone there emanates a spiritual sphere arising from the affection of his love and its related thought, which inwardly affects those in his

company, especially at feasts; *this sphere emanates both from the face and the respiration*" (TCR 433).

We might not notice the effect of this sphere in a conscious way, but it goes without saying that we *feel* its effect, either being energized or at times frankly exhausted by particular encounters with other people. These can be telling signs – and not only about the states of others but about our own states, too.

Of course it goes without saying that both words and the manner of speaking them can be feigned for hypocritical purposes, but generally speaking, sooner or later, the truth comes out, usually when the fear of negative consequences is removed, either in a more private setting or when the standards of engagement change. Likewise when you *think* someone is upset with you it's important to hold that thought respectfully, because it just *might not be true*. All that said, a policy of thoughtful patience is always appropriate, assuming the best but being wary and prepared for disappointment.

After all, we're all flawed characters, born into inclinations to (as the Writings say) "evils of every kind." We're all involved in a long process of giving up the old will and getting a new will from the Lord. Disappointment with others should not come as a surprise. In fact, disappointment with *ourselves* should not come as a big surprise, either, and we should be prepared for it as part of the process of self-examination, that is, the process of reading our own minds.

Let's face it, we all have a natural tendency to think what we think is right – and good. We judge ourselves by a lower standard than others because we assume that what we're saying and doing comes from a place of special knowledge, experience, understanding or insight. But if that were the only standard for judging others we would surely give everyone the same break and assume that they, too, know what they're talking about.

The fact is, however, that we all need to dig deeper than that if we want to know the truth. We need to explore our loves and motives if we really want to read our minds. And how can we do that? – essentially by using the same standards we apply to others: to review, check for consistency with respect to *all* the commandments; check for conflicts of interest; check the tone of voice and body language we use (often unconsciously); check the first response to opportunities (for good or ill); and then, in one standard we can *only* apply to ourselves, check for what truly gives us a feeling of delight. For the delight we feel in any particular situation can reveal more than anything about our real inner states.

Lastly, just as we need to be patient with others, we can learn to be patient with ourselves. Seeing something negative is the first step in addressing it, and feeling badly about it is the second. "Blessed are those who mourn," the Lord said, "for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4). All we really have to do, indeed all we *can* do, is humbly ask the Lord for help, and sincerely, honestly *try* to do better, even if it means giving up something we need or want for ourselves.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew 7:15-23*
 Children's talk on Integrity
 Ezekiel 33:12-20 & Heaven & Hell #471:e and 472

Selections from the third lesson:

“In foretelling the last judgement the Lord recounts nothing but works, teaching that those that have done good works will enter into eternal life, and those that have done evil works will enter into damnation, as in Matthew (25:32-46), and in many other passages that treat of the salvation and condemnation of man. It is clear that works and deeds constitute the outward life of man, and that the quality of his inward life is made evident in them.

“But by deeds and works, what they are inwardly is here meant, and not the way they outwardly appear; for everyone knows that every deed and work goes forth from the man's will and thought; otherwise it would be nothing but a movement like that of a machine or image. Consequently, a deed or work viewed in itself is merely an effect that derives its soul and life from will and thought, even to the extent that it is nothing but will and thought in effect, and thus is will and thought in outward form. From this it follows that a deed or work is in quality such as are the will and thought that produce it. If the thought and will are good the deeds and works are good; but if the thought and will are evil the deeds and works are evil, although in outward form they appear alike. A thousand men may act alike, that is, may do like deeds, so alike in outward form as to be almost undistinguishable, and yet each one regarded in itself be different, because from an unlike will.” ~ *Heaven and Hell* #471:e and 472:1