

## Generalizations and Stereotypes in the Word

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish  
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Today our topic is judgement, and specifically the sort of judgement that is based on generalizations we think of today as stereotypes. This is an issue of great concern in our culture and certainly affects the way many people feel about the teachings of the Word *and* our New Church Writings. We begin therefore with one of the Lord's specific teachings:

“Judge not, that you be not judged,” we read. “For with what judgement you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Matthew 7:1-2)

And yet the Word is full of incredible judgements. Pity the poor Philistines, for example, forever labelled in the sacred Scripture as the enemies of God! Even the name has such derogatory overtones that we now refer to anyone who has poor taste or lacks culture as “a Philistine.” Pity the scribes and Pharisees of the New Testament, forever associated with hypocrisy, betrayal and the death of Christ. Or what about the great whore of Babylon: imagine having anything to do with a nation so bitterly condemned in Revelation.

There are others we could list, too, whose names alone are associated with all sorts of evil and who are therefore judged by Scripture *en masse* according to race, religion or ethnic origin: Ammonites, Moabites, Jebusites, Canaanites, Persians, Assyrians and more. Still, the truth is we don't worry much about these judgements – for two main reasons: first, most of the people involved are either long gone or well out of the sphere of our daily lives. They are far away from us, either in history or in fact, so it's easy for us to accept the concept of universal judgement on them. Second and more significantly, we know that all the peoples in the stories of the Word are there as representatives of certain qualities or characteristics and that therefore the condemnation of the people really is intended to be a condemnation of the states they *represent*.

This is very, very important. Even in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham pleaded with God to spare the city for the sake of 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 or even only 10 righteous people there, one wonders how an entire city could be so corrupt that not even 10 good people could be found anywhere. What about the children? But the point is that the story as written isn't intended to condemn men, women **or** children by any description other than that they *represent* something evil in our own lives. So even the numbers, 50, 45 and so on down to 10, represent the presence of some remnant of good, and therefore the Lord assures us that if there is the slightest good remaining with a person that person will not be condemned.

It's important also to note that among nations in the history of the world it is unheard of that any should be as hard on itself as the Jewish people were. It is not the testimony of others that condemns Israel during the time of the exodus or the judges or the kings or the prophets; *they wrote their own history*. Likewise it is not some foreign power that condemns the scribes or the pharisees or the priests or indeed the whole nation during the time of Christ, but it is the testimony of Matthew, a Jew, and others who followed the Lord with a view to restoring Israel to a place of power in the world. Even when Jesus condemned these people He did so from the record of their own Scriptures (e.g., John 8:44, see Gen. 38 and AC 4818); and from His knowledge of their actual characteristics (e.g., John 5:42 & 6:64).

This willingness of the Jewish people to record their own history of disobedience and evil is important because it helps us to understand that the purpose of Divine judgement never is to condemn any group, least of all *others*, categorically. Rather it is to illustrate and confirm the consequences of the specific disorders embodied *in* that group, either by heredity or by choice, either by disposition or by deeds, *for the purpose of our own instruction and reformation.*

But while we are far removed from the life or even the specific heredity of the various peoples condemned in the Word, it is not impossible to imagine how it might have felt to live among them or even to have been one of them as they were condemned. The Gibeonites, for example, seemed a harmless enough people when the children of Israel came to the promised land, so Israel made a covenant with them in spite of the Lord's warnings to the contrary. In fact, one after another the tribes of Israel either neglected or failed to drive out the people of the various nations that inhabited the land of Canaan until even Samson evidently looked around and said to himself, "Why, these Philistine women don't seem so bad to me, in fact, here's one I'd like to marry!"

Now remember, as far as the Gibeonites or Philistines were concerned they had done nothing wrong. They had their own customs, their own languages, their own religions, and presumably they were doing what they thought was right. And if any of them had heard or read that they were condemned in the Jewish religion, why, they simply would have become defensive or even more antagonistic.

So it was, in fact, and so it is today as we are challenged anew by many of the teachings in the doctrines of this New Church concerning various spiritual qualities or characteristics that are represented in the races, laws, customs and religious persuasions of whole nations in the world of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. "Why?" we ask, "Why does the revelation for the New Church appear to be so judgmental, so limiting, so harsh especially in relation to certain racial or religious groups?"

It is risky to give many examples because each one requires careful thought and research to understand. But in general we find that the Writings characterize the English, the French, the Dutch, the Germans, the Italians and others in very broad terms that would almost certainly be called stereotypical today. Many are also disappointed to find that the Writings maintain the theme of the Old and New Testaments in their criticism of the Jews. And readers of the *Apocalypse Revealed* may be shocked at the negative characterizations of major Christian faith groups, according to their creeds and practices as these still exist in the world today.

It's not all bad, of course: the Writings have some very positive things to say about several non-Christian religions, in fact the teaching about the Mohammedans and about heathens or Gentiles in general is far more generous than any in the rest of the Christian world. But the problem still is one of generalization, and once we leave the safety and anonymity of Biblical peoples long since gone, and enter the modern world of revelation that speaks about our friends and neighbors, things get sticky. Then, like Israel confronting the Gibeonites or Samson looking at the Philistines, we too are inclined to question the Divine judgements (or neglect to consider them at all), for the appearance of the situation often is in direct conflict with the teaching about it.

To illustrate, and also to show the value of such teaching, let's take the case of what the Writings say about the Quakers. First of all, talking about Quakers is very different from talking about, say, Philistines. After all, nobody's seen a real Philistine for several thousand years, but we may

very well have Quaker friends. So the Lord challenges us to see the truth in what could be a very personal context. Why? One reason may be that this helps us avoid sweeping judgements of people, keeping us in mind of the fact that there are good Quakers just as there are good New Churchmen, *the real problem is with the belief system.*

Another reason may be that it forces us to choose between our own sensibilities and the Lord's Word. We don't have much of a feeling for the ancient Canaanites and so there's no great personal challenge in accepting what the Lord says about them. But when it comes to our own experience it's not so easy. Can we, will we, accept what the Lord says in spite of appearances to the contrary? That is the test of faith.

Still another reason why the Lord teaches us about contemporary racial and religious groups is to illustrate the various spiritual conditions that are *institutionalized* in modern society. This may sound patronizing but the fact is that everything in the natural world comes from and corresponds to something spiritual, so that it is still true, just as it was in Biblical times, that specific nations and religions represent goods or evils, truths or falsities (DP 251). And when we understand these spiritual conditions then we have some real and objective means to evaluate our own needs as individuals and as a church. Again, the purpose is not to condemn, but to understand.

Bluntly speaking, what the Lord tells us about the Quakers may at first seem to be unfair and insulting. The main criticism is that they believe they are led by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, which in the old days at least made them shake or "quake," when the truth is that they are often led by evil spirits. Secret evils within the organization are also mentioned, and these have never been confirmed or denied by any outward evidence. So what are we to do with these teachings?

The answer is simple, although it may not be easy. The truth is, the teachings aren't really about Quakers at all, the Quaker faith simply illustrates the problem with a persuasion that encourages us to believe that the Holy Spirit will speak directly to us and tell us what to do, no matter how we live. This just isn't true. So the value of the teachings is to expose a falsity and not by any means to label all Quakers as any worse than any other people. In fact, it is very obvious that the "Society of Friends" does a lot of good in the world despite this falsity. And it is worth mentioning, too, that many people undoubtedly belong to that church (or any number of other churches) because of the good it stands for and in spite of its falsity which they may not even believe.

It is the same with the teachings about major Christian faiths, both Catholic and protestant. In these cases, incidentally, we can often see that it is the leadership of the church that the Writings criticize, NOT everyone who is a member of the church. But even then, note the word, leadership, not leaders. It is the idea, the concept, the belief and the love that the Lord criticizes, never the people apart from these things. So our job in response to the teachings is not to discriminate against any members of any religion, but to know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil for ourselves.

That said, the Lord tells us that the problem with the Catholic church is that it gives human beings too much control over the spiritual lives of its members, and specifically that it stresses external works too much in relation to the deeper issues of faith. On the other hand the problem with the Protestant churches is that they stress faith in the atonement so much that it takes away the sense of personal responsibility we need to co-operate with the Lord in daily life. Too much

emphasis on works, too much emphasis on faith without works: both are misleading, and very dangerous distortions. So it is reassuring to read in the Writings (and to know from experience) that the Lord leads many members of both these churches to a heavenly life in spite of the falsities which, again, may not even interest them (see AE #764).

One last example of Divine judgement on a contemporary racial group may serve to illustrate one last important point. That is the characterization of “the Jews” today as being very much like the Jews of old, often focussed on worldly or external things, having difficulty with internal or spiritual things.

Well! Isn't that all of us??

Of course it is! – and the more so because of all the interracial and international marriages in our society. But let's give credit to a people who because of that particular hereditary disposition more than others have been leaders in scholarship, science, the arts, medical research and health care, the law, politics, business and many other natural fields, all to the great benefit of the human race on earth. And at the same time let's be aware of the over-emphasis on natural success that is sometimes illustrated among Jews. The main point in considering a racial type is not to discriminate in any negative sense but to understand the concept of hereditary disposition so that we can recognize the power of that influence in human life and learn, well, two things really: first, that we need to make allowances for all people (including ourselves) on account of heredity, some of which may be very good and some of which may be very bad, *none of which, however, is from choice*. And second, we need to learn how to deal with our own heredity, either working with it or overcoming it so that we can all be “born again” into the image and likeness of God, into a form and attitude suitable for heaven.

In summary, then, the generalizations or the sweeping judgements of the Word in all its forms are really meant for one main purpose. They are an accommodation of the Divine mercy and truth to our natural and worldly states for the sake of illustration, that we may learn and know and understand the deeper issues involved in our own regeneration, that we may avoid the harmful consequences of wrong thinking or undisciplined hereditary loves, and that in banding together as we do, we may secure the future of a New Church based only on the best of what we see around us. In short, it is that we – not others – may be judged, that we may be enlightened, and that we may be regenerated by the Lord – not just for our own sakes but that we, in turn, may be a positive influence in the personal lives and institutions of others.

As we read in the Psalms, “The law of the Lord is perfect, the testimony of the Lord is sure, the statutes of the Lord are right, *the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether* . . . Moreover by them Your servant is warned; and in keeping them there is great reward” (Psalm 19:7-11, parts).

- Amen.

Lessons:     *Exodus* 12: selections Children's talk on the Passover  
              *Matthew* 7:1-6, 15-20  
              *Conjugal Love* #523