

Controlling Our Emotions

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, November 18th, 2018

“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

Something we might not often think about in this passage is that it commands us to love. But how can we compel ourselves to love? Along the same lines, how can we *control our emotions*?

When you cry at a movie, or a wedding, or at the loss of someone or something you love, isn't it true that you feel at least a little *out of control*? When you're nervous or frightened, does it sometimes seem impossible to talk yourself out of it? Then again, if you feel joyful, does that have anything to do with self-compulsion, or does it just seem to well up from within you in response to some outward experience?

Feelings of love, fear, anger, hate, pride, shame, joy and sadness, to name just a few emotions, can affect any one of us at any time. In fact, the person who is – or seems to be – unaffected by emotions in the normal course of life is generally considered to be... well, a bit odd, if not seriously handicapped. And when we purposefully *suppress* our emotions psychologists and therapists generally say we do ourselves harm. But everyone knows that we can't let our emotions run completely free, since many of them can be destructive – to ourselves and others!

So again, how should we or can we control our emotions? How freely should we express them? And how can we live so that we receive and cultivate the best possible emotions from the Lord?

“What IS emotion, anyway?” One dictionary definition is, “a strong mental or instinctive *feeling* such as love or fear.” Another is, “*an affective* (as distinct from cognitive) *state of consciousness* in which joy, sorrow, fear, hate or the like is experienced.” But when the doctrines for the New Church discuss these same mental states they call them *affections* (AC 3909, 4137, 4326, etc.) and they note that “affection is nothing else than love, *but it is an extension branching out of it... varied according to the circumstances and according to the states – and the changes of those states* – through which a person is passing” (AC 3938:8).

In a way the word, *feelings*, expresses pretty well what the Writings mean by affections, since they are the result of our awareness or sensation of spiritual states that flow into us and AFFECT us every day. In fact the Latin word we translate as affection literally comes from a word that means influence. So we *feel* these states and are *affected* by them *as if they were our own* when in fact they are *influences* coming from outside of ourselves.

What's the point? Well, let's think about it. If the loves that *affect* us flow into us from sources outside of us “according to the circumstances” of our lives, then it follows that we can to some extent control that influx by what we *think* and *do*. If it weren't so we'd be no different from animals, acting entirely on instinct. Or we might fall into the trap of thinking that to act accord-

ing to our conscience *when we don't really feel like it* would be foolish and hypocritical. We might think it's OK to use foul language or abuse people because, after all, this might be an "honest" expression of our "true" feelings. Or we might think it's perfectly OK to break a promise because our *feelings* about it have changed. These are the root causes of all sorts of evils, from murder to adultery, theft and lies, not to mention disrespect for the Lord.

Being able to control our feelings is one of the defining characteristics of our humanity. And by this we don't mean suppressing them, we mean changing them. It's important to be able to recognize and ***acknowledge*** our feelings so that we can deal with them appropriately. More about this in a minute, but for now consider these illustrations:

You greet someone at work for the first time and she totally ignores you. You try again, but she seems oblivious. Before long you've drawn the conclusion she's a snob and you start feeling very negative toward her. But then you find out she's deaf, or that she's pre-occupied with a horrible family tragedy. Suddenly all your feelings about this woman change; you start to feel sorry for her, and maybe a little ashamed of yourself. Or you're out in the car, minding your own business, and some clown honks his horn at you, follows too closely, flashes his lights and finally cuts you off on the highway, speeding past, shaking his fist at you. Anger wells up and you accelerate, chasing the guy for several miles until you follow him to the nearest hospital where you discover he has an injured passenger in the car with him, or a woman about to give birth. Suddenly all your feelings about this person change! Why? New information and a new understanding have given you the basis to receive a different sphere of influence from the spiritual world and you are now *affected* by that other influence.

The same thing can happen as a result of our actions. Being with positive people can help us to become more positive, and doing something generous or kind can break the spell of depression or self-pity. One of the things that can work like magic for many people is music, which we can choose either to *match* and *reinforce* our moods or help us *change* or invite new feelings.

There are many other possibilities for improving the emotions that affect us, such as reading inspirational books, watching insightful films or videos, even just getting outside for fresh air and exercise. But let's not forget that the most powerful force for emotional change can be simple exposure to the Lord's Word. Of course, this exposure must be sincere and respectful, but the fact that His Word expresses His Divine love and wisdom means that reading and meditating on it even when we don't fully understand it opens channels for the best kind of influx, and the information we find there literally captures and holds that influx (AC 1461).

There are, of course, many different ways to read and meditate on the Word. For example, we might read fast, even skimming at times, to get an overview, especially of the emotional content, or we might read very slowly, focusing in on just a few verses or even single words in a given text – which has an entirely different effect. We might read for simple story lines or follow a chain of references on a given topic. We might read in the Old Testament or the New Testament, or if we're in the Heavenly Doctrines we might focus especially on understanding. The point is, no matter how we approach it, our exposure to what the Lord Himself has caused to be written is exposure to the most effective means for us to be influenced by HIS love.

“Ask and it will be given to you,” the Lord said, “Seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks

it will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8). This is not a teaching about worldly things but about spiritual things, that is, affections, thoughts, and a new perspective on life.

Again, it is written, “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and ***He shall give you the desires of your heart***” (Psalm 37:3-4). At first glance this appears to be saying that the Lord will give us whatever we want, but in fact it is saying He will give us **WHAT** to want, in other words new loves, new affections, new feelings and desires. To “dwell in the land,” by the way, is not to inhabit a certain place on earth, but to appreciate the goodness and truth of the **church** and live according to it.

Coming back to the two great commandments, then, it is remarkable that the Lord can actually **command** us to love Him. But the reason He can do this is because we do have a choice; we can make a decision – not to change our loves directly (that would be to fight against ourselves!) but to **DO** the things that invite **HIM to change what affects us**, and how we feel. So how does this work? What process does the Lord invite us to follow?

In simplest form it is this – a theme repeated constantly in the Writings for the New Church: shun evils as sins against the Lord, and do what is good for His sake, according to His Word. Breaking it down, though, and to make it more manageable, we find that there are six very specific and straightforward tasks that any of us can do if we put our minds to it. These are listed in the *True Christian Religion* (#530) as the steps of repentance, but that is a word that means a turn-around, or change, and so they apply any time we want to make an emotional change, especially from our natural state of pre-occupation with ourselves to a spiritual state of love toward the Lord and the neighbor.

1. We begin with a personal inventory, thinking about what we find within ourselves and whether we are pleased with what we find or not. We call this self-examination.
2. Then we recognize the things that we know are wrong or inappropriate. We may have some thoughts and feelings that are unfortunate, but for this exercise we only need to focus on the ones that we know are against the Lord’s Commandments. We call these sins.
3. The next step is to take responsibility for those failings. We can’t blame our circumstances, or someone else; we just have to own up. This stuff may be coming from outside influences, but we still have a choice. We can’t help it if birds fly over our heads, but we *can* keep them from building nests in our hair.
4. The fourth step is to confess – not necessarily to a priest or a therapist (although that might possibly help), but to the Lord. There’s something vital about telling the Lord we acknowledge our failings and that we’re ready to have Him help us with whatever we need to live and feel better.
5. Step 5 is to **ASK** Him for that help. This is called prayer. But remember, prayer isn’t just a monologue, it’s a conversation. Imagine talking to someone on the phone and never hearing any response: you wonder, “Can you hear me? Are you still there?” So when we’re finished asking the Lord for help, we need to pause and watch and listen for His response. How can we do that?? – read the Word. You can just about open the Word at random and you will find *something* that speaks to your state.
6. Finally, we’re taught, we just need to do things differently. We need to begin a new outward life: change our environment, develop new habits, make new friends, *whatever it*

takes to get out of the old ruts. A popular definition of insanity is to keep on doing the same things over and over, expecting different results.

This last step is what the Lord was talking about when He said, “If your right hand offends you, cut it off,” or “if your right eye offends you, pluck it out!” These statements of course were not meant literally but metaphorically, being instructions to remove temptations, or get rid of those things that lead us into temptations – things like selfish intentions, and a wrong understanding.

Knowledge, understanding, environment, action, each of these is like a vessel or container that can receive and hold the affections that are flowing into us all the time. *This* vessel holds one kind of influx; *that* one holds another kind – or at any rate the influx conforms to the vessel provided for it. You can’t pour water, Jello or concrete into a sieve and expect it to hold. But if there’s something solid for it to fill, that form will receive whatever conforms to it – good or bad.

Those solid things, those molds or forms specifically are the sense impressions, the knowledge and insight we gain, and the habits we develop through the choices we make from one day to the next. Each one invites a different influx; each one supports a different feeling or affection.

We can illustrate this with radio waves, or any sort of microwave communication. These invisible rays are beaming our way from countless different sources every day, some good, some bad. And we are the receivers. But the beautiful thing is that we can tune our minds and bodies to receive what we choose. We are not helpless victims of whatever comes our way.

Still... Has anybody here had some bad experience? Has anyone done something wrong or foolish? Of course we have; we all have. And those things all leave their impressions, but they need not define who we are. They are not US, they are simply our history. And the good news is that with the Lord’s help the history of bad things can be tucked away out of sight and replaced by better new ideas and experiences that allow us to receive a flood of new and better affections that are streaming towards us every minute from the Lord through heaven and the world of spirits.

As for the good feelings we have, the positive affections or emotions that lift us up from time to time, we should know and understand that these are not US any more than the others are, but that we can accept them *as if they were our own* even as we thank the Lord for them and ask Him to continue to provide them – just exactly to the extent that we do our part to provide FOR them.

“The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (*Psalm 145:9*). So when we co-operate with Him there is nothing He can’t do for us to fill us with His love, His affection, and His pure, generous emotions.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus 19-20*: selections
Children’s Talk: Love on Command??

Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34-35 and 15:9-17
True Christian Religion #475:1 – or – Heaven & Hell #533