

Church Growth, How it Works

Second of Three Sermons by Rev. Michael Gladish

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Jesus said, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.”

- Matthew 10:5-8

In this second of three sermons about church growth we’re going to be looking at the question of how, exactly, to share our faith with people outside the New Church, and more specifically, why we should do so, and what sort of people we should try to address.

In reflecting on the quoted verses, the first thing that might come to mind is that they were addressed to the 12 disciples, and *not* to all of the Lord’s followers. So we might think they only apply to ordained ministers, but even if that were true it is a fact that ministers serve the Lord through the support of their congregations, and so church members are all implicated in one way or another. Besides, it is a general principle that we all have a responsibility to share the blessings we receive from the Lord, and our faith surely is the greatest blessing of all.

It’s also important to note that although this first instruction is quite limited in terms of who should be approached, when the Lord appeared to His disciples after His resurrection He was much more inclusive, telling them to “go and make disciples of *all the nations* (Matt. 28:19), and again to “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mark 16:15).

These two differing instructions are reconciled in the message of Luke 24, where we read,

Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name *to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem...* (vv. 46-47).

So the disciples were told to begin with their own people, and *then* branch out. And that is exactly what they did. But the real question is, how does all this relate to us, *personally, today?* Who are the Gentiles, the Samaritans, the sick, the lepers, the dead and the demon possessed?

Well, as we know, every sentence of the Scriptures involves symbolic meanings, or correspondences that communicate the Lord’s love and wisdom to each one of us in a personal way. So when the Lord spoke to the disciples He is speaking to all of us, and when He talked about Gentiles and Samaritans, the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the sick, the lepers and so on, He’s talking to us about us, and about the spiritual states of people we know.

Let's begin with "the way of the Gentiles" which we are to avoid. Gentiles in the Word were not part of the Jewish religion, but, as the heart of any religion is the will or devotion, like the references to the "nations" around Israel they represent states of the will. These may be affirmative or negative toward the Jewish or Christian Church but for us the simple fact is that they don't know the teachings of the Lord in His Second Coming. So then, the "way" of the Gentiles is a confirmed way of living based on whatever *other* ideas guide them, typically ideas drawn from the world. People like this are not likely to be receptive of New Church teachings, anyway, at least not right away. But the special point for each of us is that we not enter into that worldly way of life ourselves, since it will corrupt our perception of the truth the Lord has given us.

And the Samaritans? Well, they were Gentiles, too, but they specifically represent states of the intellect or understanding – which, again, may be affirmative or negative toward the teachings of the New Church, but either way, they are not of the church. Cities in the Word represent doctrines, that is, general principles that guide one's thinking, so here, "a city of the Samaritans" is a way of thinking based on principles not taught in the Word. And again, people who think that way are not likely to be receptive of New Church teachings, but the special point for us is that we are not to enter into that way of thinking, since it will corrupt our understanding of the Word.

Rather we are to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now we're getting somewhere! Sheep in the Word represent those who are innocent by virtue of their effort to follow the Lord and live right. But their being lost means that they're confused, and so they don't know how to do this. THESE are the people and states of mind that are receptive of new ideas. They know they are lost and they want help. The only question is, how do we find these people, and then, how do we approach them helpfully? After all, we ourselves may not be doing all that well.

The answer emerges in what follows next. Where the Lord says, "As you go, preach..." the word in Greek means to announce, herald or proclaim, and most interestingly, it begins with a prefix that refers to the heart, meaning, to do so from the heart. This doesn't mean we don't need to know what we're talking about, but it does put a premium on speaking with love and conviction. We are not to be "preachy" about telling people what we know, but to be *reassuring*, sharing our own experience that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And, of course, we can only do this if we really believe it.

You may recall, too, that these words first occurred in the New Testament when John the Baptist was preparing the way for the Lord, saying, "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2) and this was repeated by the Lord Himself when He began His ministry (Matt 4:17). So there's a primary focus on right living, that is, shunning evils as sins against the Lord in order to remove the obstacles to His love and wisdom.

And what are those obstacles? The Lord lists them: sickness, leprosy, death and demon possession!" But again, although the first disciples did so, the Lord does not expect us to solve all

these problems literally. In fact, it's much better to see them for what they are spiritually, like this: when a person is sick he or she knows that something is wrong; something in the body has been hurt or infected. Spiritually, what this represents is a spiritual problem, what we sometimes call evil. ***This does not mean that anybody who is sick is evil***, it's just that sickness in the Word ***represents*** evil, so in this passage the Lord is talking to us about evil, that is, helping people heal from things that are evil. And here's an interesting aside: the word for healing in this verse of *Matthew* is the Greek form of our word, therapy.

How, then, can we offer people healing (or therapy) from evils that may be affecting them? Certainly not by force or coercion, and most certainly not by condemning them or even telling them what to do – as if we could know! Rather, speaking from the heart, from our own vulnerability, we can try to make the kingdom of heaven more real for them by encouraging them, by sharing insights that we have found helpful, and most of all, by communicating the sphere of the Lord's own love through our words and actions. Is this “preaching”? Maybe not as we normally think of it, but it is a perfectly legitimate interpretation of the idea – ***declaring helpful truths***.

And what about cleansing lepers? Lepers in the Word represent people who are in states of profanation, that is, mixing holy things with worldly things in an inappropriate way, such as taking the Lord's name in vain, or making fun of stories in the Word. In general it has to do with almost any type of hypocrisy. In other words, it represents a deliberate mash-up of truth and evil, or good and falsity. But what are we supposed to do about ***that***?

Well, again, we are to share that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” To cleanse is to clean up, or clarify, and the goal here is to separate the evil from the truth or the falsity from the good. A good start might be to identify something good in the person and affirm it. Then, when she sees that we are not antagonistic, we could ask for clarification on what seems to us to be wrong – like, “Why do you say that?” or “What do you mean?” Then, when we understand what's going on for that person, we may be able to correct some misunderstanding. Ultimately, of course, it's up to each individual to accept or reject the clarification, the ***cleansing*** that is offered. But to honor the Lord's commandment it would seem that we are obliged to make that offer.

As for raising the dead, what is spiritual death, anyway, but a lack of faith? Our duty toward such people is not to complain about them, criticize them or condemn them, but to help them with better ideas and examples of what real faith is, perhaps sharing something from our own inspirational reading, from recent studies in the Word, or from our own experience of the power of faith in spite of our own doubts or difficulties.

Finally – for now – how can we cast out demons, especially when we have our own demons we are dealing with on a daily basis? Well, think about it. Seeing the suffering of others often is a good way to get in touch with our own suffering, at which point we can empathize. But then what? The teaching comes to mind that if we would only believe – ***as is the case*** – that all good

and truth come from the Lord and all evil and falsity come from the hells, we would not take ownership of good and account it meritorious, nor would we take ownership of evil and account ourselves responsible for it (DP 320). So in the case of someone who believes in the spiritual world, this reminder can be a great help and comfort. But for someone who is not a believer we can still speak of *influences* that affect our thoughts and feelings, and provide encouragement from our own experience of surrounding ourselves with positive people and doing useful work.

In the end, the Lord's instruction to go and preach, to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons, is NOT in any sense beyond our abilities – if we really believe what we say we believe. But we shouldn't expect the whole world to be ready and willing to accept what we have to say. In fact, far from it, as we will see in the final sermon in this series. But we are to "begin in Jerusalem," that is, within the church, among people who have some faith but still need help as represented by the four named afflictions.

The instruction is clear: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go, rather, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Do not buy into the ways of the worldly, and do not think the way they think. But go to the people who are spiritually needy and who know it, and just try to be helpful. Then, after getting some practice and gaining some confidence in the process we can go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, that is to everyone who is willing and able to be created anew (i.e., regenerated) by the Lord.

And what is that gospel, what is the good news of the NEW Christian Church?

- It's all the teaching about the spiritual sense of the Word!
- It's the amazing revelation about the life after death!
- It's the dynamic explanation of how creation itself and Divine Providence really work.
- It's about influx, levels and degrees of life, and the correspondences in all of nature.
- **But most of all it's about the Lord in His glorified Divine Humanity...**

...All of which is intended for one purpose and one purpose only – to provide for greater human happiness and peace, in this world and in the next, in the short time we have here, and to all eternity when we graduate from this preliminary phase of our lives.

And we are given the enormous privilege of contributing to this process, helping ourselves as we help others, being blessed as we help bring the Lord's blessing to them, not by any means in a proud or know-it-all way, but as simple servants sharing what is our duty to share.

Amen.

Lessons: *Jonah*, chapter 3, on preaching to people who need it.
 Matthew 10:1-15
 Selections from the Heavenly Doctrine (see next page)

Selections from the Heavenly Doctrine

“„[B]y disciples [in the Word] are meant all who worship the Lord and live according to the truths of His Word” (*Apocalypse Revealed* #325:3).

“By the Lord's disciples are meant those who are instructed by the Lord in the goods and truths of doctrine; but by apostles they who, after they are instructed, teach them” (*Ibid.* #79).

"The way of the nations" into which they were not to go, signifies falsity from evil; "a city of the Samaritans" into which they were not to enter, signifies the false doctrine of those who reject the Lord; "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" signify those who are in the good of charity and in faith therefrom, "Israel" meaning all such wherever they may be. "A city of the Samaritans" signifies the false doctrine of those who reject the Lord, because the Samaritans did not receive Him” (*Apocalypse Explained* 223:20).

“Those who are outside the church are meant by "an enemy" because they are at variance in respect to the good and truth of faith; for they have not the Word, and therefore they do not know anything about the Lord, nor about Christian faith and charity, which are from the Lord alone. Hence it is that neither their truth of faith, nor their good of charity, is genuine. Therefore in the other life also they do not live together with those who are of the church, but separate from them; for in the other life all are associated together *in accordance with their good* and the truth thence derived; for these are what make spiritual life and conjunction.

“Nevertheless those who are in heaven do not regard as enemies those who are outside the church, but they instruct them, and lead them to Christian good, which moreover is received by those who while in the world have lived together, from their religion, in subordination, in obedience, and in some kind of mutual charity. But in the sense of the letter they are called "enemies" from their spiritual variance, which, as before said, is a variance in respect to the truth of faith and the good of charity” (*Arcana Caelestia* #9255).

And finally,

“...[W]hat is the use of knowing, unless what is known to one be also known to others? Without this, what is knowing but collecting and storing up riches in a casket, and only looking at them occasionally and counting them over, without any thought of use from them? Spiritual avarice is nothing else” (*Interaction of the Soul & Body* #18).
