

Hard Sayings in the Word

– or –

Taking the Lord Seriously

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, for March 22nd, 2020

“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” ~ *Matthew* 5:29 (see also *Matthew* 18:8-9)

In the New Church we know that this teaching in all three parallel gospels has a spiritual meaning and is not intended to be taken literally. For that matter, most Christians would agree that this is a kind of hyperbole, an obvious and intentional exaggeration to emphasize a point of contrast – in this case that eternal life is far more important than worldly life. In the very next verse the Lord said exactly the same thing about the right hand, but of course we know that the hand itself does not cause anyone to sin; rather in both these cases it is the mind – something in the will or the understanding – that sins, the hand or the eye is simply the means by which we do it outwardly. Still, the means are important, and we need to be careful not to dismiss the practical implications of this teaching.

The eye, for example, is an instrument of our understanding. It “corresponds” to the understanding because the two things work together. So we DO need to be careful about what we look at, *and how we look*, lest we invite something foolish or destructive into our minds. As we read in DLW #46, “Thought from the eye closes the understanding, but thought from the understanding opens the eye.” Same thing with the hand: we need to be careful about what we DO, so we are not responsible for some spiritual harm to ourselves or others.

In fact, the Word *and the Writings for the New Church, too*, are full of teachings like this, and while we need to understand them spiritually we also need to take them seriously in our natural lives. For example, we know that adultery inwardly considered is a state of mind: “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her,” the Lord said, “has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28). We also know that it corresponds to a corruption of the relationship between the will and understanding. But that doesn’t mean the physical act is somehow insignificant. Rather the physical act is symptomatic of the spiritual problem and represents it openly.

Again, consider the story of the servant who owed his master 10,000 talents (Matt. 18:24-35). Friends, 10,000 talents would be a king’s ransom (maybe 400 years’ wages for the average man), far more than any servant could possibly owe his master. But the point is to contrast that with the hundred denarii (approximately one hundred days’ wages) that the servant’s fellow-servant owed. Now we know that the numbers here are representative but that does not take away from the incredible exaggeration in the parable, which the Lord used to illustrate the principle of forgiveness, which also included the admonition to forgive a brother not just 7 times but “seventy times seven” times. Think about that: when we forgive someone we expect that person not to do the same thing again. We expect repentance and a change of behavior. But if someone commits the same offense 7 times, not to mention 490 times, we have a whole different kind of problem. Yet the Lord, using hyperbole, still says, “Forgive.” You might even say, “Forgive until it hurts.” Seriously, *this is the spiritual sense applied to practical life!* In fact it’s not about the

sinner, it's about ourselves and, as Pastor Mac has said, the fact that we just have to let go.

Naturally this brings to mind the Lord's teaching that "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what is a person profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26, Mk. 8:34, Luke 9:25). And just in case this is a little too abstract or theoretical, the Lord gives a specific example just two chapters later, where He says, "If you want to be perfect (that is, whole), go, *sell what you have, and give to the poor*, and you will have treasure in heaven... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:21 & 24).

Think about THAT. Yes, of course it all has a spiritual meaning. The cross represents temptation – indeed, not just temptation but torture – and spiritual treasure is knowledge. The poor are the poor in spirit, meaning those who acknowledge how little they know, and selling represents communicating, or sharing, what we have with others. Is it easy to share our faith with others? You know the answer. The truth is we often struggle with this – for all sorts of reasons, not the least being our own sense of security and vulnerability, just exactly the same things we worry about financially. What if people reject us? What if they argue and quote the Bible to us and make us look foolish? What if we mess up and misrepresent the teachings? In short, what if we don't have what it takes to make a good impression? *What if the Lord doesn't provide for us?!*

We might as well say, "What if the Lord doesn't provide for us *in the way we want*," because this is exactly what it comes down to. And that's the whole point. There's nothing wrong with having material wealth, just as there's nothing wrong with having a lot of knowledge, but as Swedenborg said about his own work, "What 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?" And he concludes with strong words: "*Spiritual avarice is nothing else*" (ISB #18). See the connection to the parable of the rich man, selling what he has?

In fact, the Lord says that even "when they deliver you up [for persecution], do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt. 10:19-20). It's not a question of whether the Lord will provide; He plainly told the disciples that if they laid down their lives for His sake they would gain eternal life (see also Matt. 10:39). The question is, are we His disciples or not? And are we sufficiently concerned about eternal life...?

The Necessity of Temptations

One of the particular teachings in the Word that we all kind of wish weren't there is the inevitability of temptations in spiritual life. "Woe to the world," Jesus said, "because of offenses! *For offenses must come*, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Matt. 18:7). And again, "*In the world you will have tribulation*, but be of good cheer (that is, have confidence), I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Many other passages say the same thing. And the doctrine for the New Church expounds on them all at great length, emphasizing, among other things, that we just can't be regenerated or get to heaven without temptations – temptations even to the point of despair!

Why is this? Well, basically it's just exactly because of what the Lord said in the gospels: we have to give up our own loves and ideas and receive new loves and ideas from the Lord, which is HARD WORK, very threatening, and at times quite painful. The situation is laid out plainly in AC #8549:

“A person does not receive spiritual life by birth from his parents, only natural life. Spiritual life consists in loving God above all things and loving one's neighbor as oneself, and doing so in accordance with the commandments of faith taught by the Lord in the Word. But natural life consists in loving self and the world more than the neighbor, indeed more than God Himself.”

Furthermore:

“Each individual is born into the evils of self-love and love of the world inherited from parents. Every evil which has become second nature through habitual surrender to it is transmitted to offspring, thus from one generation to the next by parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and so on going a long way back. The evil transmitted in this way becomes at length so great that the whole of a person's own life is nothing but evil. This chain of transmitted evil is not broken or altered except by the life of faith and charity received from the Lord” (AC 8550).

There are, of course, mitigating circumstances. “Offspring,” we read, “born of two who are in true marital love derive from their parents the marriage of good and truth, from which they have an inclination and faculty, if a son, for perceiving the things which are of wisdom, and if a daughter, for loving the things which wisdom teaches” (CL 202). Still, it's only an inclination, which then has to be cultivated. On top of this we also have what the doctrine calls “remains,” or in Old Testament terms, the “remnants” of Israel during their captivity, which refer in the spiritual sense to all the good loves and true ideas that we take in during our natural lives, and that get stored away in the interiors of our minds for future use, whether we realize it or not. Without these good loves and true ideas (again, as Pastor Mac pointed out recently) we could not be tempted since these are the very things that are challenged and attacked in temptation. In fact, one simple definition of temptation is “an attack against some love” (AC #1690:3).

So when we go through temptations, assuming they are real spiritual temptations and not just worldly anxieties (NJHD #189), we should try hard to remember that one reason for this is that there is something really good from the Lord being challenged, and that good, with His help, can be strengthened by the temptation.

We Pay for What We Value and We Value What We Pay for

A recent article in the ECHO (church newsletter) referenced King David's approach to a man named Araunah to buy a piece of land from him so that he could build an altar and worship the Lord there. Generously, Araunah offered him not only the land but the sacrifice as well, free of charge. But David answered, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing” (2 Samuel 24).

Although this was written in connection with the idea of making financial contributions to the

church, the point is much more deeply significant. If we are not willing to give up something of our “standard of life” for the sake of the Lord and our neighbors we are not really honoring Him OR them, and we are not taking His teachings seriously.

We ALL have SO MUCH, both naturally and spiritually, compared to literally billions of people on this planet, it would be embarrassing if we really thought about it. But we’re so steeped in extraordinary wealth that we’ve come to believe it’s somehow normal – or even worse, that we still don’t have enough! We travel freely – or we did until this month – around the world in the most incredible planes and vehicles. Right here within 7 miles of us there are literally no fewer than SIXTEEN major grocery stores, all carrying the most exotic foods from all over the world, probably just as many drug stores, and even more restaurants and pubs. And we feel unfortunate if we can’t just patronize them all if we feel like it. We live in comfortable, insect-free homes with heat, light, cable TV and hot running water at the touch of a switch, and many of us carry \$600 computers in our hip pockets. Seriously, how much do we need?

Yet the Lord said, “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.... Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches, nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:31-34).

For sure there is a good deal of hyperbole in this, as mentioned earlier, since we know it’s not prudent or useful to sell everything *literally* (NJHD 96 & 100). But think about what it means. What we “have” is what we accept as our own. Spiritually we call that our *proprium*. But all the good and all the wisdom we have is really the Lord’s; it is *borrowed* from Him and it should be returned to Him in the uses that He invites us to perform for others. In fact this is the essence of heavenly life, where everyone lives to serve others *more than themselves* (see HH #268 & 399).

OK, so what are the practical implications here? What should we be doing about all this?

Of course, the answer to this question is personal. It’s a matter of one’s individual conscience. But even though it involves natural things the principle of generously moderating our own acquisitiveness in order to accommodate others who are less fortunate is profoundly spiritual, and the discipline required to do it is spiritually sacrificial. After all, it can leave us feeling insecure, and that insecurity can lead us to a deeper reliance on the Lord.

This month and next, many Christians around us are practicing the discipline of Lent, giving up or sacrificing something to increase their appreciation of the Lord’s sacrifices for us all. This thoughtful practice is especially enhanced when it provides for someone or something else that’s better in the long run. And that certainly looks and feels like the genuine charity discussed in our heavenly doctrines. What do you think?

Let’s face it, being a real Christian is not easy. But being a member of the New Church is even more challenging because in this church we understand that it’s not just about treating one another with love and respect, it’s about coming to grips with the selfishness and worldliness that we uncover deep within ourselves and that we have to overcome through a serious exercise of prayer and self-discipline. This is hard. The *proprium* does not want to let go – neither of our natural loves nor of our worldly possessions. But following the Lord truly requires it.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 20:1-17, the Ten Commandments
Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes & 27-30; *NJHD* #97 – 99

Third Lesson: *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* #97 – 99

It is commonly said that each person is his own neighbor, that is, each person should take care of himself first. But teaching about charity shows how this should be understood. Everyone ought to see to it that he has the necessities of life, for instance, food, clothing, somewhere to live and many more things which the civilized life he leads demands. This too not only for himself, but also for his own, and not only for the present time but also for the future. For unless anyone provides himself with the necessities of life, he cannot be in a position to exercise charity, being himself in want of everything.

In what way each person ought to be his own neighbor can be established from the following comparison. Everyone ought to provide his body with food and clothing. This must come first, but with the intention of having a healthy mind in a healthy body. Everyone ought also to provide his mind with food, such things as have to do with intelligence and wisdom, in order that they may be in a condition to be of service to one's fellow citizens, society at large, one's country and the church, and so to the Lord. Anyone doing this provides well for himself to eternity. It is plain from this that the end in view must take priority, for everything has regard to that.

This is also like the situation of someone building a house. One must first lay the foundation, but the foundation must be for the house, and the house for living in. Anyone who thinks being his own neighbor comes first is like a man who regards the foundation as the end in view, not the house and living in it. Yet living in it is the first and last end in view, and the house with its foundation is only a means to that end.

The end in view proclaims how each person should be his own neighbor and look after himself first. If his end is to grow richer than others merely for the sake of riches, or for the sake of pleasure, or of eminence and similar reasons, his end is evil, and he does not love the neighbor but himself. But if his end is to acquire wealth so that he may be in a position to look after his fellow citizens, society at large, his country and the church; or likewise so that he may acquire high office to the same end - then he loves his neighbor. The end which motivates his actions makes the man, for his end is his love; everyone has as his first and last end what he loves above all.