

# Are you Trustworthy?

A sermon about our spiritual credit score

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, November 25, 2018

*“My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant.” Genesis 18.3*

This isn't the beginning of the Abraham story. We meet him at the end of Genesis 11 and his story continues to chapter 25. But here in chapter 18 we learn something important about him. He is a good man. His extravagant hospitality to the three strangers marks him as an excellent person.

In the internal sense, this story describes the way that the Lord's external Human received and communicated with the Divine within Him (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 2137). Everything that follows depends on the nature of that reception.

Similarly, everything with the person of the church depends on the way in which we receive or fail to receive what is from the Lord (cf. *Heaven and Hell* 7).

But in the literal sense this episode shows us what kind of person Abraham is, someone that the Lord can trust. In the preceding chapters he has been tested a number of times with the same purpose. He willingly left his homeland and traveled to Canaan at the Lord's call. He was willing to sacrifice his only son at the Lord's request. But here he is receiving strangers, not knowing that it was the Lord, a real test of his character.

## The importance of hospitality

Hospitality was extremely important in Old Testament times. In several instances in the Word the mark of a good person is the way that they receive visitors. In this story Abraham welcomes these angels (or the Lord) not knowing who they are. In the next story his nephew Lot's treatment of these same angels sets him apart as a follower of the Lord.

By contrast the person who refuses to be hospitable is evil; and those who actually abuse visitors are so evil that they can no longer live. Lot's hospitality is contrasted with the incredible inhospitality of the men of Sodom, to illustrate why that city is to be

reduced to rubble and ashes by fire and brimstone from heaven.

The same point is made in a similar story in the book of Judges. In that story the graciousness of a certain Levite's father-in-law is contrasted with the Levite's treatment at the hands of the Benjamites in

the city of Gibeah (*Judges* 19). The mistreatment suffered there presents the extremity of evil, and as a result the entire tribe of Benjamin is virtually exterminated.

The reason for this emphasis

on hospitality is that to receive a visitor represents our reception of the Lord (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 2328, 2317). As the Lord teaches in Matthew, *“Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren you did it to Me”* (Matthew 25.40). As you act towards each other, so you act towards the Lord. Everything depends on our reception of the Lord. Those who do not receive Him fail to receive the source of life itself, and the result is that their own lives begin to fail.

The Lord told His disciples that those who will not receive them will be cursed, and their fate is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah:

*“Whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Truly, I say to you it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for that city.”* (Matthew 10.12; cf. Mark 6.11- Luke 9.5)

Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned because of their refusal to receive the angels. These cities are worse than them because whereas Sodom and Gomorrah were gentile cities, the disciples were sent to cities in Israel, who should know better.

This is the reason why Israel was so often commanded that *“the stranger who dwells among*



*you shall be to you as one born among you and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”(Leviticus 19-34; 24-22; Deuteronomy 10.18; 26.12; 27-19). For, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25.30)*

And in Hebrews 13.2 the author tells us: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.” He is referring to Abraham in this story.

### **What is the true mark of someone’s character?**

**B**ut what is the lesson here for us? Is our hospitality the true mark of our quality as individuals?

In our culture there is not the same emphasis on hospitality as there was in the Old Testament world. While it is considered important, it is not the test of an honorable person, as it was for Abraham. In fact, Abraham’s solicitous and elaborate welcome would strike many of us as odd. Most Western readers don’t even realize that the point of this story is to show what a good person Abraham is.

Our question today is what *is* the mark of an honorable and good person in our world? If hospitality is not the major indicator, what is? What do you look for in someone that you meet to know whether they are trustworthy? What are the factors that we hold in high esteem among us that identify people as respectable, decent, and good?

In the spiritual world this is not an issue. In that world people know a person’s quality by reading their thoughts, as happened with the newcomer to the next life in our reading, who was then immediately lifted up into heaven. We read:

*“In the next life discernment is so sharp that angels can discern what someone’s interiors are like from the sound of just one of the words he uses.” Arcana Coelestia 10454*

*“Angels perceive the quality of our will from a single action of ours, and the quality of our thinking from a single thing we say.” True Christianity 593; Divine Love and Wisdom 215*

*“Whatever a person is thinking (in the next life) those around him know and perceive in an instant.” Arcana Coelestia 830*

People often think that they have this same ability in this world – that they can intuitively know people’s quality and intentions. As a result, we are fooled by untrustworthy people and wrongly judge innocent ones. It is a spiritual task for each one of us to learn to refrain from judging other people, while at the same time being prudent and observant about who we trust.

### **The credit score**

**W**e do have shortcuts. One of the miracles of our current economic world is the credit score. Almost everyone in this room has a score, which might be said to measure our trustworthiness. Depending on what this score is a person can walk into any store, or visit one online, and come away with virtually anything that they want to buy. The store knows almost instantly if your credit is good. None of us know each other’s credit scores. We may not know our own score or even what a score is. We mostly take it all for granted. Yet our financial lives depend on it, and a bad score is a great hardship.

This shortcut, however, doesn’t help us at all in knowing who to trust in our day to day lives, nor is it considered to be the mark of a good person.

A similar shortcut that might be more useful is something being developed in China called a Social Credit Score. You might have heard about this.

China’s rapid economic development has had to deal with many issues of honesty and trust that in the west are largely taken care of by the credit score system. But how do you create a credit score when large numbers of people don’t have much credit history and don’t use banks?

The answer has been to find records of people’s other behaviors and extrapolate trustworthiness from that. In China, big companies like Alibaba generate huge amounts of data on what their customers buy. The government has partnered with Alibaba to use some of the company’s data to help formulate people’s social credit score.

The government is also collecting data of its own, and that data factors into people’s social credit scores, too. If you speed or get a DUI, your score will fall. If you donate to charity, you get a boost. The government is also piloting neighborhood watch programs in cities across China where a designated watcher will watch you, record your behavior and then factor that into your score.

China is expected to roll out these scores nationwide by 2020. There are many pilot cities throughout China, though, where people already have them. And there, the effect these scores can have on people’s lives has become evident.

If you have a high credit score, you can get a promotion at work. You can put your high credit score on a dating site and get better matches.

If your score is bad, though, it can affect your life in far reaching ways – making you an outcast.

Although the program is still in development in China the effects on people’s social behavior have

been remarkable and powerful. Honesty and trust are on the rise. Despite what would seem to most Westerners to be unacceptable invasions of privacy, the program is viewed favorably by most Chinese.

There is some similarity between this program and practices in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – the Mormons. Every Mormon in good standing is interviewed annually by the Bishop before their Temple card is renewed. The Bishop quizzes you on your fidelity to church teachings, your attendance and contribution patterns, your participation in church and community activities, your good works and charitable behavior, your personal morality and beliefs. If your answers are not good, your Temple card, and your standing in the community, may be at risk.

Again, although this may seem to many of us to be unacceptably intrusive and coercive, it is a system that is accepted and supported among Mormons.

The results speak for themselves. Mormons have a strong reputation for being both kind and clean-living, and the church continues to grow rapidly.

### Do the Heavenly Doctrines support these shortcuts?

Is there any kind of shortcut or system such as these that is taught in the Writings to help us know how to recognize a good person?

If hospitality is not the mark of a good person, what are some other possibilities? Is it a good job? A happy marriage? A happy family? Participation in church and community activities? Kind and moral behavior? The willingness to listen and treat people respectfully? A pattern of going out of one's way to help other people? There are many examples in the Word that we might look to, such as the story of the Good Samaritan.

But by now you may be realizing that there is an issue with this whole line of reasoning. The goal of our spiritual lives is not about knowing who to trust. Nor is it about knowing how to recognize a good person. Rather it is about becoming a good person, someone who can be trusted. There is no single quality or credit score or Temple card that marks any of us as good people. We all have our faults.

Maybe the best way of describing it is in what the Writings say about the functions of baptism. We might say that baptism is a sign of a good person, but it is clearly more complicated than that. We read in *True Christianity* that baptism does three things:

The first is that “*baptism is a sign in the spiritual world that the individual in question belongs among*

*Christians.*” (*True Christianity* 680). That is, a baptized person is called a Christian.

The second is that it “*allows Christians to know and acknowledge the Lord...and to follow Him.*” (*True Christianity* 681). That is, if they are to be called a Christian it implies that they will learn to be a Christian, that they will follow the Lord.

The third is that the person will be regenerated. (*True Christianity* 684). This follows from the previous two, that they will learn to actually be a Christian, and will be regenerated.

The fact of our baptism means nothing unless the life-long process that it describes actually takes place: identifying as a Christian, learning to be a Christian, and then actually being one. It is an internal process. Only the first part is clear to others.

### Judge not

We are not to judge other people. And yet we live in communities, so our known characteristics and reputations are important. Living among people who we perceive as loving, trustworthy, honorable and moral helps us to be the same way, giving us confidence and a sense of security and belonging.

Every community has its standards, and it will always be the case that our reputation is a valuable thing. No one wants to have a bad reputation. But the Writings place a heavy emphasis on the value of freedom and the pitfalls of any kind of coercion in other than criminal matters. So communities need to go out of their way to protect people's privacy, and to avoid public means of coercion, shaming, or public examples when it comes to our religious life

Abraham in our story is portrayed as a good man because he showed hospitality to strangers, not realizing that they were the Lord. The Lord said similar things in the parable of the sheep and the goats. These kinds of actions are marks of a good person. But the real goodness is in what they stand for. This is that we are to receive the Lord into our hearts and to follow Him in our lives. Everything depends on our reception of what He has to give us, welcoming Him, and saying to Him spiritually what Abraham said:

“*My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash Your feet, and rest Yourself under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that You may refresh Your heart.*” AMEN

## Readings from the Word

### Genesis 18

**T**hen the LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak grove of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. <sup>2</sup>So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, <sup>3</sup>and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. <sup>4</sup>“Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup>“And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.” They said, “Do as you have said.” <sup>6</sup>So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, “Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead *it* and make cakes.” <sup>7</sup>And Abraham ran to the herd, took a tender and good calf, gave *it* to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup>So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set *it* before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

### Matthew 7

**A**nd why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? <sup>4</sup>Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank *is* in your own eye? <sup>5</sup>Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

### Arcana Coelestia 318

**A** man came and spoke to me who, as certain signs indicated, had recently departed from life. At first he did not realize where he was, supposing himself to be in the world. I then informed him that he was in the next life and that he no longer had any possessions--house, money, and so on--but was in another realm, where he lacked everything he had owned in the world. Filled with anxiety over this, he did not know what direction to go or where he would live; but I told him that the Lord alone looks out for him and for everyone. Afterward I left him alone to think as he had thought in the world. He started to wonder (everyone's thoughts can be perceived clearly in the other life) what he should do now, being destitute of everything that had allowed him to stay alive.

Still laboring under this anxiety, he was transferred to the company of spirits with a heavenly nature. They were in the vicinity of the heart and everything he wanted, whatever it was, they helped him with. This done, he was again left alone and, under the inspiration of charity, began to consider how he could repay such great kindness. All this showed that in the life of the body he had possessed the charity that belongs to faith. As a result he was lifted up into heaven instantly.

*Jeremy.Simons@brynathynchurch.org Box 277, Bryn Athyn PA 19009 215-947-6225 [www.brynathynchurch.org](http://www.brynathynchurch.org)*