

## “Written on the Heart”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.  
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***“This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (Jeremiah 31:33)***

There are certain things, for all of us, that are so central to who we are that we would never go against them. That’s because they’re founded deep within our spirits. Most of us would say, for example, “I could never hurt a child.” Or you might have a deep-seated internal commitment to honesty that causes you to say, “I could never lie to my spouse.” Or in your business dealings with other people, you may have an internal bond of conscience that absolutely forbids you to knowingly cheat someone; it’s just not the honorable things to do.

The Word of the Lord speaks of things of this nature in terms of a law that is written on our hearts, and it gives a number of inspiring examples. One passage in the Heavenly Doctrines draws our attention to parental love. It describes “a mother [who] would rather endure starvation than see her child go hungry.” Immediately following is that same love in the form of a husband who would rather die than let his wife be harmed (*Arcana Caelestia* 548:3). Deep within such people, written on their heart, is a love for another human being that exceeds their concern for themselves.

Another teaching talks about love of country, saying,

There is a law written on the human heart that gives rise to the statement all just people say when they are in imminent danger of dying because of an enemy or some other cause. They say that it is a noble thing to die for their country...because that is how much one ought to love [it]. (*True Christian Religion* 414)

Isn’t this why so many of us have a ready respect for those who serve in the armed forces?

A third example relates to spiritual principle more than any particular person. It says of some spirits in the next life that “they would rather die than be led away from the Lord,” or “drawn away from worshipping” Him (*Arcana Caelestia* 8950). For these people, their faith in the Lord and the “uprightness of life” that He calls them to is their very being. If they were faced with a life without the Lord as a central focus, or if they were pressured to go against one of His commands, they would rather not live. Of such a nature are all angels, at least in the higher heavens, who have internalized the Lord’s laws of order to such an extent that they simply cannot go against them.

**A long-term goal.** Such then, should be our goal, if we are to live among them one day. We turn our attention today to a place in Scripture where the Lord says as much. To the ancient Israelites, during a particularly dark time in their history, the Lord sent the prophet Jeremiah to give them a message of hope and encouragement. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the LORD: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Arguably people back then, according to Scripture, had a hard enough time merely obeying the basics, and were held in check, really, by threats of dire punishments. In fact, it wasn't long after this that the punishment of Assyrian captivity took place. This message, then, stands as a prophecy for a future state of the church, when the Lord's people would not only be obedient, but would have that type of character we spoke of, of rather dying before being led away from the Lord's commandments.

For most of us, too, the concept of having the law written on our hearts, in any holistic way, is a long way off. Few of us could say there isn't serious spiritual work to be done before we reach that benchmark. Nevertheless, this is the spiritual goal that the Lord holds before us, and He wouldn't do so unless we were capable of achieving it with His help.

So let's take a deeper look at this prophecy of the Lord, and absorb some of the ways that ordinary, flawed human beings, such as ourselves, could cooperate with the Lord to that end that we have His law written on our hearts.

**Knowing the laws.** Perhaps obviously, a good place to start is knowing what the laws of the Lord are, that are to be inscribed on our hearts. In the Psalms we read about the Lord's commandments, judgments and statutes—that they are “more to be desired than gold, yea than much fine gold...; [for] by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them is great reward” (Psalm 19:10-11). The Lord also said while in the world, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:31-32). And in the reading we heard earlier, a scribe interacted with the Lord around the two great commandments. When this man demonstrated, not only knowledge of these foundational spiritual laws, but expanded on them, the Lord said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). In other words, he wasn't there yet, but he had taken the first step—he had learned the truth.

It is not surprising, then, to read in the Heavenly Doctrines that “no one can be regenerated unless they know the things that compose the new life, that is, spiritual life” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8635). It goes on to say that these things must be learned from the Lord's Word (*Ibid.*). Only then, it says, can we “think about them, then intend them, and go on at length to do them, and so possess a new life” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8638). Another passage puts it in terms of people hoping to live in heaven one day, that “they ought to be anxious to know the laws of that kingdom” (*Spiritual Experiences* 2664).

Implied in all this, then—and the first step in terms of having law written on our hearts—is to be students of the law. We could with the foundations: the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the two Great Commandments (Exodus 20, Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40). But of course all the Lord's teachings, be they about the internal ways of obeying those commandments—to pay attention to anger as the seedbed of murderous intent (Matthew 5:22), to resist lust in our hearts (Matthew 5:28), to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44); or about relationships—forgiving up to seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), looking at the beam in our own eye (Matthew 7:3-5), using our gifts and abilities to be a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2), about going to each other in conflict with the goal of reconciliation (Matthew 5:24, 18:15)—these and so many other words of wisdom need to find their way into our minds. We have to know the truth, the laws, before any of them can be written on our hearts.

**Fighting for the law.** Next comes temptation. Somewhere along the line, quite often in fact, students of the law experience a dissonance within themselves. An unregenerate part of them is used to acting, or reacting, in a certain way—but now they know that the Lord commands in a different direction. There is a conflict within, between part of us that wants to be obedient, and another part that wishes to carry on in the way that comes naturally. It is stated this way in the Heavenly Doctrines:

When a person is in the first state, that is to say, when his actions spring from truth but not as yet from good, that is, when they spring from faith but not as yet from charity, he is in the state in which temptations have to be undergone. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8658:2; cf. *Heavenly Doctrine* 197).

Most of us can attest to what this looks like. Reconciliation may be a mental goal, but argument comes naturally. Forgiveness may be the Lord’s known calling, but harboring resentment and acting out in passive aggressive ways feels justified. Chastity and purity of mind and heart are what the Lord requires of us, but the justification mechanism comes into play with the thought that no harm is done if no one knows. Letting our yes be yes and no be no is the simple requirement, but twisting the truth to suit our purposes is what this particular situation requires (Matthew 5:7). There’s a clear opportunity to do an errand for a family member, but in comes the negative emotion together with the thought, “What has he done for me lately?”

In these situations the obvious need is to fight for the law. It matters little that we know it, if it doesn’t filter into our actions. It is hardly a principle of our lives if it never changes the ways we choose to show up. The Heavenly Doctrines put it this way:

Briefly put, the more we put the Devil behind us, the more we are adopted by the Lord and are taught, led, held back from what is evil, and kept in what is good by Him. (*True Christian Religion* 567:6)

That requires our determined effort to do the Lord’s will in the moment—to say in effect, not this time; in this situation, the Lord’s will be done.

**Acting on conscience.** A central tool that the Lord gives us in this direction is our conscience. We know it is formed by means of the truths that we know and come to believe. Based on this network of true ideas, the Lord is able to remind us in the familiar dictates of conscience what must not be done in the moments that matter. Conscience is often called an “internal bond” in the Word. It leads us to be “governed by the Lord” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1101), who “holds us in thinking, speaking, and doing what is good, and withholding us from thinking, speaking, and doing what is evil” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1919). It is “an internal dictate that something ought to, or ought not, to be done (*Ibid.*). It is very similar to another term used in the Word, namely “holy fear”—the concern lest we do harm to another person or dishonor the Lord (*Arcana Caelestia* 7280).

**Coming to love the law.** An amazing thing begins to happen when we steadfastly work at keeping to the Lord’s principles, and following the dictates of our conscience. Slowly but surely the Lord engages our hearts.

Take conscience once again—it manifests as a feeling. “I’d feel terrible if I did that” to this person. “I’d feel so guilty if I went ahead, because I know it’s not right.” When we do our spiritual work with any given law or command of the Lord, we eventually come to love this new way of living. The Lord opens us up to feel concern for the welfare of others, so much so that the law itself becomes something we care about. We come to love honesty, because it leads us to interact with other people in ways that bring inner peace and mutual trust. We come to feel the goodness and rightness of treating others as we would wish to be treated. We find ourselves reaching for the internal delight of standing up for those who are being mistreated.

This change is described as follows in one of the teachings we heard earlier in the service:

This is because they now love their neighbors and have a heartfelt desire for their welfare; their lives are now directed by a law written on their hearts, for an affection that belongs to charity governs their actions. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8013:2)

A law written on our hearts. Notice the perfect balance that has taken place within us, of truth and goodness. It’s not compassion alone that drives us, but compassion fortified with the Lord’s principles of what truly works. Love alone can so often lead us to accept everything. Truth alone can so often lead to harsh and condemning treatment. But the two together, because they invite the Lord Himself into our lives, are the strongest thing there is.

**A high, but achievable, goal.** This is the goal we’ve been talking about—coming to not only obey the Lord’s commands, but to have something inside of us that will not let us disobey—that even comes to abhor the very notion of breaking that core principle. It is a high bar, and an advanced spiritual state. It is the state of the best of the angels of heaven, and we may rightly view ourselves as having a long way to go.

Yet there are those echoes of principled living that we mentioned before: the willingness to face death rather than see a loved one suffer, the example of soldiers—maybe even ourselves if it came to it—willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for our country. Each of us could, too, catalogue our absolute no-go-zones—things we couldn’t even fathom doing, like engaging in abuse, or breaking the bonds of marriage with adultery. We can reflect on what we consider honorable—the kind of person we strive to be, who’s word is our bond, and who can be counted on to do the right thing when it really matters.

To the extent that we see some of these traits within us, we can be assured that the goal is achievable. Maybe we won’t notice it as it’s happening, but as we learn ever more about the law, fight in the moment to do it even against our native reflexes, pay attention to our conscience, and consider from compassion and love the welfare of those we are dealing with, the Lord will be writing His law on our hearts. He will become more and more our God, and we will become more and more His people—who “would rather die than be led away from the Lord,” or “be drawn away from worshipping” Him (*Arcana Caelestia* 8950). **Amen.**

**Readings from the Lord’s Word:** Jeremiah 31:31-34; Mark 12:28-34; *Arcana Caelestia* 8013:2

### **Jeremiah 31**

<sup>31</sup>“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—<sup>32</sup>not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. <sup>34</sup>No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

### **Mark 12**

<sup>28</sup>Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, “Which is the first commandment of all?”

<sup>29</sup>Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup>So the scribe said to Him, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. <sup>33</sup>And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup>Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

But after that no one dared question Him.

### ***Arcana Caelestia* 8013:2**

Before regeneration a person leads a life in keeping with the commandments of faith, but after regeneration in keeping with the commandments of charity. Before regeneration no one knows from affection what charity is, only from doctrine, whose commandments, which are called the commandments of faith, at that time direct a person’s life. But after regeneration people do know from affection what charity is. This is because they now love their neighbors and have a heartfelt desire for their welfare; their lives are now directed by a law written on their hearts, for an affection that belongs to charity governs their actions. This state is entirely different from the previous one.... From this one may recognize what is meant by leading a life in keeping with the commandments of faith, and what by leading a life in keeping with the commandments of charity.