

Being Led: Seeing and Hearing

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Your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
“This is the way, walk in it.” (*Isaiah 30:20-21*)

If our lives are going to be blessed and be a blessing to others there are many things that we need to see that only the Lord can show us. There are many things that our ears need to hear that only the Lord can bring to our conscious understanding. Each of us has a pathway that the Lord wants us to walk. As the lesson from Matthew stated, the Lord wants us to let our light shine in what we do.

The text for this sermon is from the prophet Isaiah. Prior to these words, Isaiah was forewarning the people of Jerusalem of the dangers that threatened them. In the Word, Jerusalem represents the Lord’s church in general or the quality of that church as it exists with each of us. Sometimes Jerusalem is exalted and praised, other times it criticized and condemned. So too the Lord’s presence with each of us can be strong and good with tremendous potential or it can be weak and flawed inclining us to be led into trouble for ourselves and anyone around us. When the people of Jerusalem obeyed the commandments, worshiped the Lord, listened to His prophets they were always blessed. When Isaiah spoke the words in chapter 30 this wasn’t the case.

All of us also face similar challenges. The Lord needs to come to us to guide us away from patterns of motivation, thought, word, and deed that are dangerous to us and others. With His infinite love and wisdom, He is ever guiding us to a better life. But substantial changes do not happen in a moment or with a single decision. The second law of the Divine Providence is:

. . . that people should as from themselves remove evil [thoughts, words and deeds] as sins in their external person, and thus and not otherwise can the Lord remove evils in their internal person, and then at the same time in the external. (*Divine Providence* 100)

It is a fundamental part of the Lord’s government in caring for us that He wants us to work on our bad habits from a sense of internal motivation and choice. He has given us an inner spiritual freedom that allows us to consider what we do and don’t want to do. While there may be many external forces that affect how we actually behave, we can still have an inner determination that no one can absolutely control. The Lord has given us a mind that can learn many ideas, think, see relationships, and understand. He wants us to learn from Him and to freely choose to follow what we’ve learned and understood by working to change fundamental habits in our lives. He wants us to recognize the destructive habits of motivation, thought, word, and action that exist and work consciously to change these habits in thought, word, and action.

In the section of the book of Isaiah that our text comes from the Lord reflects on the qualities of the people of Jerusalem. He said:

This is a rebellious people, lying children,
Children who will not hear the law of the LORD;
Who say to the seers, “Do not see,”

And to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us right things;
Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits.
Get out of the way, turn aside from the path,
Cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.” *Isaiah* 30:9-11

Part of the freedom that the Lord gives us as human beings is the freedom to reject or deny the ideas and life to which the Lord calls us. We know that people can make this denial overtly, proclaiming that this or that commandment is foolish or does not apply today or to a particular setting. We know also that people can announce allegiance to the commandments but in their own lives they can ignore and break them, particularly when they think no one will know of these hidden evils. We can smile when a little boy calls out to a parent, “Don’t look at me now” as he is intent on breaking a household rule, but we as adults can be similarly hopeful that evil choices can be hidden. The foolishness is that being hidden doesn’t take away their destructive effects.

The Lord had a second criticism of the people of Jerusalem in this chapter of *Isaiah*.

In returning and rest you shall be saved;
In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.
But you would not, and you said, "No, for we will flee on horses";
Therefore you shall flee! And, "We will ride on swift horses";
Therefore those who pursue you shall be swift!
One thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you shall flee,
Till you are left as a pole on top of a mountain and as a banner on a hill. (*Isaiah* 30:15-17)

Trust in the Lord’s help is the only true source of rest and strength. But human beings can choose to put their trust in their own powers of thought and understanding. This understanding is represented by a horse. Seeking spiritual safety and happiness through natural learning and thought will not work. There are clear examples of people who may have a Ph.D. in child psychology and be among the least effective parents. There are other examples of people with no formal education at all who are capable of providing the best parenting any child could ever hope for. The western world in the last two to three hundred years has, at intervals, seemed to put its faith and trust in human reason or science to solve all our problems. We live in a culture that can incline us in this direction. The Lord comes to us in His Word to remind us that natural human learning and thought will not lead us to happy and useful lives by itself.

The Lord promised the people of Jerusalem that there was cause for hope. He said: “Your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it” (*Isaiah* 30:20-21). “Seeing” in the Word refers to understanding what the Lord teaches. “Hearing” refers to obeying. The simple value of understanding and obeying what the Lord teaches might seem so clear that we might wonder if there is an alternative that anyone would consider. History shows that the human mind does seek alternatives and even has believed itself to have some.

Why do we seek alternatives? Rather obviously, following what the Lord teaches is absolutely incompatible with some of the motives, thoughts, and actions that we really like to do. There is a

part of our thought that believes that we have to be able to continue with some of these things that the Lord has labeled evil and destructive.

What are the alternatives? Medieval Christianity developed the idea that a person could make up for bad choices with other behaviors. The concept of penance, in popular thought, meant that evils could be done, but then another behavior, say going on a difficult pilgrimage, could be done to wipe out the sin of the initial behavior. But isn't this like a person whose job is to do one thing but who doesn't do that job thinking he can make up for it in some other way. Can a lawyer be a useful lawyer and not serve his clients legal needs because he writes nice poetry to them? Can a father be a good father to his children if he fails to teach and lead them toward maturity but thinks he can make up for it by taking them to a sporting event every so often? If the Lord asks us to do certain things and not do other ones, will He really be just as happy if we break these commandments but try to make up for it with other actions?

The other historical alternative to understanding and obeying what the Lord teaches is the belief that this is unnecessary except as a principle of thought. A reaction to Medieval Christianity was the idea that evils were so pervasive in the human spirit that we could do nothing to rid ourselves of them. This led to the false idea that we can just rely on the Lord miraculously giving us a clean heart and mind apart from any effort by us. The result of this concept and its continued teaching is that many people don't reflect on any specific bad habits they have. In fact, the teachings for the New Church describe such people as being petrified at the thought of even considering specific evils they might harbor in their mind. Here are some of the excuses given.

Some said, 'How can anyone examine himself, when he knows he is nothing but sin? This would be like casting a net into a lake full from bottom to surface of mud teeming with noxious worms . . . Some said that when they have it in mind to examine themselves, they are struck by fear and terror, as if they saw a monster beside their bed in the twilight. These facts have made plain why it is that real repentance in the world of the Reformed Christian churches is as it were in decay and abandoned. (*True Christian Religion* 562)

The second law of the Divine providence states "that people should as from themselves remove evils as sins in their external person, and thus and not otherwise can the Lord remove evils in their internal person, and then at the same time in the external." (*Divine Providence* 100)

The Lord wants us to recognize that He has given us the capability of cooperating with Him in becoming better human beings. He has given us minds that can learn, understand, and think. He has given us to inner spiritual freedom to choose what values and ideas we will use as a basis for our lives. He calls us to work together with Him by learning from His Word and by reflecting on the meaning of what He teaches us for our daily lives. The Lord wants us to recognize the specific areas of our lives in which we need to change habits of motivation, thought, word, and deed. If we work with Him, we will indeed change. This change will not come in a moment or without significant spiritual battles, but it will come surely. The Lord has promised it. This is the meaning of the Lord's words to the people of Jerusalem through the prophet Isaiah. 'Your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it" (*Isaiah* 30:20-21). AMEN.

Lessons: *Isaiah* 30:18-21, *Matthew* 5:13-20, *Divine Providence* 100, 116

Isaiah 30:18-21

¹⁸ Therefore the LORD will wait, that He may be gracious to you; And therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the LORD *is* a God of justice; Blessed *are* all those who wait for Him. ¹⁹ For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem; You shall weep no more. He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; When He hears it, He will answer you. ²⁰ And *though* the Lord gives you The bread of adversity and the water of affliction, Yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, But your eyes shall see your teachers. ²¹ Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This *is* the way, walk in it," Whenever you turn to the right hand Or whenever you turn to the left.

Matthew 5:13-20

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. ¹⁷ "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

Divine Providence 100, 116

It is a law of the Divine Providence that people should as from themselves remove evils as sins in their external person, and thus and not otherwise can the Lord remove evils in their internal person, and then at the same time in the external.

Evils in the external person cannot be removed except through a person's instrumentality, because it is of the Divine Providence of the Lord that whatever a people hear, see, think, will, say and do should appear to be entirely as their own. Without this appearance there would be no reception of Divine Truth with each person, no choice of doing good, no reception of love and wisdom and of charity and faith, and no relationship thereby with the Lord, and consequently no reformation and regeneration and thus no salvation.

It is clear that without this appearance there can be neither repentance from sins nor even faith. It is also clear that without this appearance a person is not a person, but a being devoid of rational life like an animal.

Let anyone who will, consult his reason as to whether it does not appear that a person thinks from himself about good and truth, spiritual as well as moral and civil. Let that person then accept this tenet of doctrine that everything that is good and true is from the Lord and nothing from a person alone. That person will then acknowledge this as a consequence, that people ought to do good and think truth as of themselves, but yet should acknowledge that they do these things from the Lord, and that people should remove evils as of themselves but yet should acknowledge that they do so from the Lord.