

Becoming an Angel
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“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3-4)

We know that if someone refers to a person’s behavior as “childish” it is rarely a positive reference. What does the Lord mean by child-like state that is required for becoming an angel? The Lord is referring to an essential quality of innocence or a willingness to be led by Him that all angels have. We are taught:

There are certain people who identify innocence with early childhood, because the Lord, when speaking about young children, said that heaven consisted of such, and that those who do not become as young children cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. But those who think in this way do not know the internal sense of the Word, nor thus what is meant by early childhood. “Early childhood” is used to mean the innocence that belongs to intelligence and wisdom, the nature of which is such that they acknowledge that they possess life solely from the Lord and that the Lord is their one and only Father; for a person is human because of intelligence and wisdom - essentially truth and good respectively - which people have solely from the Lord. Innocence itself, which in the Word is called early childhood, exists and resides nowhere else than within wisdom, so much so that the wiser anyone is the more innocent that person is. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2305)

During the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord spoke of a special sight of what is true with these words: “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ be ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from evil (Matthew 5:37). In the teachings for the New Church we are told that these words speak of an immediate recognition that something is either true or not true with no further qualification. The best angels of heaven, those living in the third or highest heaven, called the celestial heaven, fulfill these words spoken by the Lord. On essential matters of charity, they never discuss whether something is or not true (*Apocalypse Explained* 826:2). Their life is far different from the way human life begins. The way that they lead their lives is immediately changed when they hear some new statement of what is true. They have an innocence that is a full willingness to be led by the Lord.

Is this what the Lord has in mind for us? Consider where we will be in one hundred years. What will our lives be like then? Hopefully we will be in heaven, but what will our lives be like there? Nearly everyone is sure that they don’t want to suffer in hell, but some are not too sure about heaven either. Sometimes people in the New Church have viewed the life of the angels as so distant from their own that they wonder how their life will fit in the scheme of heaven.

In Matthew 19 the Lord also speaks of the importance of a child-like state when He said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). This is immediately followed by the story of the rich young man who wanted to know what he needed to do gain the life of an angel. He said he had kept all the commandments. The Lord responded, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). The teachings for the

New Church are quite clear that a correct understanding of the Lord's words is not that poverty is required for one to become an angel. We are taught:

Good and useful activities include providing the necessities of life for oneself and one's own, wanting ample resources for the sake of one's country and one's neighbor, whom a rich person can benefit in far more ways than a poor person can. [These activities are useful also] because they lead the mind away from an idle life, which is destructive, since in that kind of life our thoughts turn to evil because of our inborn evil nature.

These useful activities are good to the extent that the Lord is within them—that is, to the extent that we focus on the Lord and on heaven and invest ourselves in these as good, investing in wealth only as a subservient means. (*Heaven and Hell* 361)

Our job is to keep the Lord's commandments as we strive to live good and useful lives. This is how we can love the Lord. Every one of the angels keeps the Lord's commandments and loves the Lord, but they are not alike in the quality of their obedience. The teachings for the New Church tell us of three different levels of heaven. There is the highest or celestial heaven, the middle or spiritual heaven and there is the lowest or natural heaven. Do you know what distinguishes these three heavens? The qualities that distinguish them will determine for us in which one we will live to eternity.

The angels of the natural heaven are in a simple faith from what they have been taught. Their life consists of a relatively unquestioning obedience. They keep the Lord's commandments, in their simple way. The natural angels are mostly in serving jobs in heaven.

Now, compare the life of the natural angels to that of the angels of the next higher heaven, the spiritual heaven. We are told that the dominant love of the angels of the spiritual heaven is a love of truth. They are in love to the Lord, yet it is a love that arises from receiving the life of His wisdom (cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 831:2). The angels of the spiritual heaven discuss what is true and what isn't. By discussing and comparing one thing with another, they come to a clearer insight of what the Lord's commandments really mean, than the angels of the natural heaven every attain. They really care about what is true and seek it. The spiritual angels never learn mere facts, without understanding. Through their pursuit of what is true, they become confirmed in the right course of action. Because they love of what is true, they acknowledge truth in act as the neighbor. They look to the good of the church, of the community in which they live, of fellow citizens, also moral and civil good. Their lives are intent on doing useful things from their sight of what is true.

Because the angels of the second heaven understand the Lord's commandments better than those of the lower heaven, they manage to avoid some of the problems that befall the lower angels. Their life is much happier and more productive. But they too are flawed. While in some ways it is very good, there is something less than completely innocent in their interest and pursuit of truth.

The angels of the celestial heaven are distinctly superior to those of the spiritual heaven. Their dominant love is a love of all things that are good. Their lives are led entirely by that love. They just don't discuss what is true the way the angels of the spiritual heaven do. Because of this quality, we are told that their ministers must come from the spiritual heaven, but if they disagree with what the preacher teaches, they politely turning their backs. The lives of these angels are taken up in use to the neighbor. We read that,

By the “neighbor” they mean useful service, . . . these have relation especially to worship of the Lord, to His church, to the implantation of its holy things, especially with children, with whom. . . they inspire innocence and its affections; also, to the good of their community in general and particular. (*Apocalypse Explained* 828:1)

The celestial angels do think about and discuss other things, such as matters relating to moral, civil and domestic life. (*Apocalypse Explained* 828:2)

The life of the lowest or natural angels comes from faith and obedience, that of the middle or spiritual angels from a love of what is true and life according to this truth, and the life of the highest or celestial angels from a love of what is good and a perception of what is true.

The teachings for the New Church state that each of us has the three degrees of life of the three heavens already with us, but only in a potential form. We are taught:

These degrees are opened with us according to the reception of Divine truth in our lives; and Divine truth is received in life by willing and doing what is true according to the knowledge and understanding of it. (*Apocalypse Explained* 832:6)

Obedience requires humility, a willingness to change and thereby to grow. Our primary battle is to work to rid our lives of whatever thoughts and deeds seem to stand in the way of the Lord. The sacrament of the Holy Supper is the perfect symbol of our innocent turning to the Lord to receive His life. To the extent that we have consciously been working to lead better lives, we have in our hearts and minds sought the bread of good loves and spiritual strength. We have in our hearts and minds sought the wine of true ideas and insights into how to better live our lives and serve the people around us. We must be willing to fight spiritual battles to receive these gifts.

Those who win even the first battle of relatively blind obedience enter into great happiness, the happiness of the angels of the natural heaven. When the next battle is fought and won there is even greater happiness and peace. For some the way becomes open all the way to the happiness and peace of the celestial angels. Their lives are filled with a heartfelt desire to do what is true as soon as they learn it. The Word is written on their hearts and they are gifted with a supreme contentment and peace in their active lives. They are filled with a strong assurance from inside themselves that they know what the Lord desires of them and what they want to do.

Can we look toward this state ourselves? It can be ours. No blind obedience. No extended discussion of what true. The Lord has told us that we must receive a wise innocence in order to enter heaven. The highest angels are the ones who mostly truly have this innocence. Perhaps we will meet there some day, for we are promised: “Those who receive the laws of life from the Word and live according to them and who worship the Lord, become angels of the third heaven” (*Apocalypse Explained* 826e). AMEN

Lessons: Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-22, *Heaven and Hell* 528, 533

Matthew 18:1-5

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, ³ and said,

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

Matthew 19:13-22

¹³ Then little children were brought to Him that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” ¹⁵ And He laid *His* hands on them and departed from there. ¹⁶ Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” ¹⁷ So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ He said to Him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “*You shall not murder,*’ *You shall not commit adultery,*’ *You shall not steal,*’ *You shall not bear false witness,*’ ¹⁹ *Honor your father and your mother,*’ and, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ “²⁰ The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” ²² But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Heaven and Hell 528

It Is Not So Hard to Lead a Heaven-Bound Life as People Think It Is

Some people believe it is hard to lead the heaven-bound life that is called “spiritual” because they have heard that we need to renounce the world and give up the desires attributed to the body and the flesh and “live spiritually.” All they understand by this is spurning worldly interests, especially concerns for money and prestige, going around in constant devout meditation about God, salvation, and eternal life, devoting their lives to prayer, and reading the Word and religious literature. They think this is renouncing the world and living for the spirit and not for the flesh. However, the actual case is quite different, as I have learned from an abundance of experience and conversation with angels. In fact, people who renounce the world and live for the spirit in this fashion take on a mournful life for themselves, a life that is not open to heavenly joy, since our life does remain with us [after death]. No, if we would accept heaven’s life, we need by all means to live in the world and to participate in its duties and affairs. In this way, we accept a spiritual life by means of our moral and civic life; and there is no other way a spiritual life can be formed within us, no other way our spirits can be prepared for heaven.

Heaven and Hell 533

We can now see that it is not so hard to lead the life of heaven as people think, because it is simply a matter of recognizing, when something attractive comes up that we know is dishonest or unfair, that this is not to be done because it is against the Divine commandments. If we get used to thinking like this, and from this familiarity form a habit, then we are gradually united to heaven. To the extent that we are united to heaven, the higher levels of our minds are opened, and to the extent that they are opened, we see what is dishonest and unfair; and to the extent that we see this, these qualities can be dispelled. For no evil can be banished until it has been seen. This is a state we can enter because of our freedom, since everyone is free to think in this way. However, once the process has started, the Lord works his wonders within us, and causes us not only to see evils but to refuse them and eventually to turn away from them.