

“THE SACRIFICE OF OBEDIENCE” – by Rt. Rev. Bradley D. Heinrichs

LESSON 1 – EXODUS 23:14-19.

14 "Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year:

15 "You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you...;)

16 "and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field.

19 "The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of Jehovah your God.

LESSON 2 – ISAIAH 1:2-4; 10-20.

2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For Jehovah has spoken: "I have nourished and brought up sons, and they have rebelled against Me;

3 The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider...."

4 Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, sons who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord..., they have turned away backward.

10 Hear the word of Jehovah, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah:

11 "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says Jehovah. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls...

13 Bring no more futile sacrifices...

15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil,

17 Learn to do good...

18 "Come now, and let us reason together," says Jehovah, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword"; for the mouth of Jehovah has spoken.

LESSON 3 – MARK 12:28-34.

28 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?"

29 Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

30 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.

31 And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

32 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.

33 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."

34 Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

LESSON 4 – TRUE CHRISTIAN RELIGION 329.

[1] The Ten Commandments of the decalogue contain all things that belong to love to God, and all things that belong to love toward the neighbor. In eight of the commandments of the decalogue...there is nothing said of love to God and love toward the neighbor; since it is not said that God should be loved, that His name should be hallowed, that the neighbor should be loved and consequently that he should be dealt with sincerely and uprightly. It is only said, "You shall have no other God before My face;" "You shall not take the name of God in vain;" "You shall not murder;" "You shall not commit adultery;" "You shall not steal;" "You shall not bear false witness;" "You shall not covet what belongs to your neighbor;" that is in general, that evil, either against God or the neighbor, is not to be cherished in will or thought, nor to be done.

The reason why such things as relate directly to love and charity are not commanded, but only such things as are opposed to them are forbidden, is that so far as a person shuns evils as sins, so far does he will the goods that pertain to love and charity. [Therefore], the primary thing of love to God and the neighbor is not to do evil, and the second to do good....

[2] Since then, a person is born into all kinds of evil, and therefore from birth inclines to what pertains to hell, and since he cannot enter heaven unless he is born again or regenerated, it is necessary that evils, which belong to hell, should be removed before he can desire goods, which are heavenly. For no one can be adopted by the Lord until he is separated from the devil.

Prayers:

O Lord, open our lips, and our mouths shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else we would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart - these, O God, You will not despise. O Lord, You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of justice, mercy, humility. the knowledge of God, and obeying Your voice. Psalm 51:15-19, Micah 6:6-8, I Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6

O Lord, what shall we render to You for all Your benefits towards us? We will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon Your name. We will pay our vows to You now in the presence of all Your people.... O Lord, truly we are Your servants, we will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving. For You are the one and only God, and to love You with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength by first ceasing to do evil and then learning to do what is good, is greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifice. Psalm 116:12-16, Mark 12:33-34, Isaiah 1:16-17

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

As we approach the celebration of Thanksgiving, we often become reflective about what it is that the Lord requires of us. What sacrifices or offerings does He want? Certainly, this was the question being asked in our recitation from Micah, to which the answer was not more burnt offerings, but rather to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

In our reading from Mark, the scribe asked the Lord a question that was meant to trap Him, when he asked what the greatest commandment of the law was. If the Lord had said, “You shall not commit adultery,” then the lawyer could argue “isn’t not murdering just as important!” Instead the Lord answered by saying that we should love the Lord with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves. Most of us have probably thought at some time or another about what the Lord requires of us, so that our offerings or what we render to the Lord is well pleasing to Him.

Well, here in these lessons, and particularly in our text from Isaiah, the answer is given as plainly as can be – cease to do evil and learn to do good. These are pretty straight forward directions – right? In fact, they are so simple that you might even say that the Lord has made them foolproof so that anyone can follow them. So if the directions are that simple – then why do we so often get lost along the way?

Chances are the problem is not with learning to do good. We all like to do nice things for other people. Most likely, the problem arises when we have to cease to do evil and sacrifice or give up something evil we delight in.

Now, with this in mind, let’s start with the first part of the Lord’s directions for meaningful sacrifice – ceasing to do evil! This is easy in concept, but considerably harder in practice.

However, there is a good reason for that, namely, that we are born into tendencies towards evil of every kind. Now some of us may pity ourselves, saying, “Thanks for dealing me such a rotten inheritance, Dad and Mom.” But before we begin to pin the blame on the heredity we got from our parents, let’s remember that we are not held responsible for any of those tendencies to evil, unless we willingly make them our own by perpetual habit (AC 2308; TCR 521).

This is why the first thing the Lord asks of us is to stop doing evil. It is interesting to note that the very first words in the Doctrine of Charity state: “*The first of charity is to look to the Lord, and shun evils because they are sins*” against Him. (Char. 1).

How many people today, if asked what the most fundamental aspect of being charitable to their neighbor was, would answer, “Oh definitely, to shun evils as sins.” Actually, it does sound odd to say that shunning evils is the key to charity. We think of being charitable as doing nice things and acting kindly towards other people. These are definitely charitable acts, but the simple fact of the matter is that they are not genuinely good – unless evils are first shunned as sins.

This is why the word order in our text is so critical. First, it says “*cease to do evil,*” and then after that, “*learn to do good.*” Notice that the Ten Commandments are given first in the Word, long before these Two Great commandments are given by Jesus: “***You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself***” (Matt. 22:37,39). So the Writings tell us that the Ten Commandments should be “*the first things taught in the churches*” and “*to boys and girls*” (AE 939:3).

And this for the reason that they do not teach what good things should be done, but only what evils should not be done. “***You shall not...You shall not...You shall not.***” In short, they instruct us how to cease doing evils.

One well intentioned congregant once bewailed the fact that the ten commandments were so negative and asked why we couldn't instead recite them in a positive way by saying, "You shall build up your neighbor, you shall support marriage, you shall tell the truth, etc." The answer is that yes, we should do all those things, but first it is essential to master not doing the evil things that harm others.

Later, Jesus came to earth and explains the Law and sums up the ten commandments in two great commandments stated in a positive way, saying, "***You shall love the Lord, and you shall love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.***" It is only after we cease doing evils, that we can really learn to do good and become loving, kind, and charitable individuals. And so the Heavenly Doctrines teach, "*the first thing of charity is to put away evils, and the second is to do goods that are of use to the neighbor*" (TCR 435).

Shunning evils is the first or primary thing we must focus on because we are born into evils of every kind, and our will or proprium starts out completely corrupt and hellish, or as the Lord called the Israelites in Isaiah, "***a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, sons who are corrupters!***" Therefore, if we hope to offer sacrifices that are well pleasing to the Lord, then these evils must be removed because evil detests and repels good, or as our third lesson from True Christian Religion stated, "*no one can be adopted by the Lord until he is separated from the devil*" (TCR 329:2).

That we should cease to do evil is clear and it sounds quite easy to do, so why do most of us struggle so hard with this simple directive? Well, as the Heavenly Doctrines succinctly put it: "*All evils are born delightful, because a person is born into the love of himself, and that love makes all things delightful that are of his proprium, thus whatever he wills and whatever he thinks*" (Char. 2). It's hard for us to stop doing evil because it is delightful to us.

That number in the Writings concludes by saying that these evil delights cannot be *“subdued unless they are regarded as sweet drugs that kill, or as flowers apparently beautiful that carry poison in them; thus unless they are regarded as deadly”* (Char. 2). What a great description of evil delights – *“sweet drugs that kill.”*

In another place our innate love of self which finds these evils delightful is called the *“deadliest enemy of God”* and that this hides itself in our interiors and *“guards the door”* lest we should recognize it and allow the Lord to cast it out (DP 210).

This is why children should be instructed first with the “you shall nots” of the Ten Commandments and later the “you shalls” of the Two Great Commandments. Likewise, in the early steps of regeneration, we must first obey the Ten Commandments so that we can recognize and separate ourselves from those sweet drugs that kill. Consequently, we’re told that when a person begins to think for themselves that *“it must be to him the first and chief thing to refrain from doing evils for the reason that they are sins...against God...and afterwards as he grows up and becomes old he must shun them as damned, and must turn away from them in thought and intention”* (AE 803:2).

The words, ***“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean”*** in our text, symbolize this removing and cleansing of ourselves from evil. Then once those evil delights no longer entice us, we can focus on learning to do good and being charitable to our neighbors.

The importance of first ceasing to do evil, and then learning to do good, is driven home forcefully in this teaching from the Heavenly Doctrines: *“Good works are evil works unless those things belonging to love of self and of the world are [first] removed. For when [good] works are performed before these [evils] have been removed, they indeed appear good outwardly, but are inwardly evil”* (AC 3147:7). This the Lord taught on earth when He said, ***“Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.”*** (Matt.23:26).

Now all that we have talked about has led up to the second part of the Lord's foolproof directions for inheriting eternal life – learning to do good. This can be a daunting task for many of us. How many times has a man at some point tried to do a nice thing for a woman, only to have it backfire and leave her upset. Like on her birthday when he proudly gives her a gift and says, “Look honey, here's that new dual-bag vacuum cleaner you said you wanted.” Or how about the woman who arranges a surprise romantic night out dining and dancing with her man, only to find out that he would really have preferred to stay at home and watch the Super Bowl.

You see, it can be hard to do good and charitable things sometimes, because our wisdom is often lacking. So the Lord has made it easy for us. He established this universal and unfailing spiritual law of order: *“In proportion as a person shuns evils as sins, in the same proportion he does goods, not from himself but from the Lord”* (Life 18). Therefore, *“in proportion as a person wills not to do evil to the neighbor, he wills to do him good, and not the converse”* (Char. 13).

This law holds true, because good is flowing in constantly from Lord. He is always standing at the door knocking. But we can only make room for the Lord's goodness to come in by removing the evil delights and thoughts inside us, which stand in the way and block the door. We are guaranteed that as long as we shun evils, good will flow in from the Lord. In fact, we cannot do anything genuinely good from ourselves, but only from the Lord, as He taught in John: ***“A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven,” (3:27) “without Me you can do nothing” (15:5).***

So we can see that the Lord really has made it simple for us. All He requires of us is to cease doing evil and good affections will enter. Obey the Commandments and He will take care of the rest. We're told that as far as we detest hatred, charity enters. As far as we detest adultery, chastity enters. As far as we detest lies, honesty enters (AE 803:2).

Consider this also, the Lord told His disciples, ***“He who has My commandments***

and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.... He who does not love Me does not keep My words” (John 14:21,24). Now the Heavenly Doctrines point out, that this saying is particularly in reference to the Ten Commandments. So even in describing how we should love the Lord, the greatest of all loves, the Word simply teaches us that we should cease to do evil by obeying His words - the Ten Commandments.

This is the type of offering and sacrifice that the Lord really wants and why He said to the scribe that, *to love the Lord “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”* (Mark 12:33).

Sometimes all of us can overcomplicate things and lose sight of the basic, fundamental teachings that the Lord gives. First: cease to do evil. Second: learn to do good. The Lord could not have made the directions any easier for us to follow. It’s as though He is saying, “You just shun evils as sins, then I’ll flow in and teach you how to do genuine goods that really benefit your neighbor.”

Let’s all engrave these simple, clear, and foolproof directions into our memories. Yes, the Lord’s goal for us is to love Him and serve our neighbors by learning to do good, but it all starts with that first crucial step that cannot be overlooked – ceasing to do evil! So this Thanksgiving let’s offer the Lord our complete obedience for He says, *“to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams”* (I Samuel 15:22). *“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land”* (Isaiah 1:18,19). **Amen.**