

## Just Do the Right Thing

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
Bryn Athyn, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.  
Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.”  
- *Psalm 37:3-4*

With the emphasis we find throughout the Writings for the New Church on self-examination, it’s not surprising that this question often comes up: *can we know our own spiritual states?* Jeremiah answered the question this way, saying, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9), but then added prophetically, “**I, the Lord**, search the heart, **I** test the mind, *even to give every man according to his ways*, according to the fruit of his doings.” (v.10) Still, we know that the Lord judges all our works according to their interior quality, and with that in mind, there are teachings that suggest we *need* to know our spiritual states, and there are teachings that seem to say we *can’t* – at least that we can’t know *for sure*.

So, our main question today is, how concerned should we really be about this?

Of course, our New Church teachings are clear that we *should* be thinking about our motives – not always, just now and then. But what if we find, on reflection, that something we have been doing, or that we want to do, is tainted with an element of pride or self-love: then what? Can we therefore say that we shouldn’t do it – or even think about doing it? What if we did it in the first place because we knew we should – because it was the right thing to do – and then began to feel some unhealthy pride self-satisfaction in it? Or again, what if we find, on careful examination, that we really were thinking mostly of ourselves all along – our reputations, hope of reward, or even just that very self-satisfaction? Does that make us hypocrites in the Lord’s eyes?

In this connection the apostle, Paul’s famous saying that we are “justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:28) was not based only on the idea that the Lord did everything FOR us, meaning there is nothing left for us to do but have faith in Him. When you read the whole context of that teaching you can see that an important part of the message is that *we are still obliged to do what is right*, it’s just that we must not take credit for it, lest we start to boast about it *as if we ourselves were good*, whereas the truth – and our doctrine confirms this! – is that any good we do comes exclusively from the Lord. We are simply instruments in His hands *when we do what He teaches*.<sup>1</sup>

In any case, how can we change the way we feel about ourselves? It is the Lord Himself, and He alone, who can change our loves, giving us what we call a new will *in the understanding*.

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<sup>1</sup> The Writings do not dispute Paul’s teaching, they simply say that it has been badly misunderstood (see AR 417 & TCR 506).

So what is the answer to this motives question? Can we know if we're on the road to heaven or not? And how much attention should we give to this question, anyway?

When the Lord called His first disciples, He did not tell them to go into some deep reverie about their motives. Rather He said two things: "Repent," and "Follow Me," that is, shun evil and do good. These two messages were reinforced over and over throughout His ministry. And yes, of course, He taught a great deal about the importance of our loves and motives, but in the end, He always focused on simply doing the right thing: "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, give to him who asks of you... Love your neighbor as yourself," and "When you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." (Matt 5 – 6) In other words, *don't overthink it*. Just do it.

How can we help it if something of selfishness creeps into our actions? The important thing is that we recognize it, acknowledge it, and try to get past it.

In that vein, the risk of hypocrisy is often misunderstood. People think of it as doing one thing while actually intending something else, or, as in this case, doing something good while there are selfish motives in the back of your mind. But in fact, *everyone has two minds*, including the "old will" and the "new will," or the external and the internal. As long as we live in this world we are all going to be like that field of wheat the Lord described, having tares growing in it. And, as He said, we have to let them grow together until the time of harvest, lest in the effort to uproot the tares we destroy the wheat, too. This is NOT said to excuse or justify evil of any kind, it is simply making the point that regeneration takes a lifetime, and we need to be patient – with ourselves and with others.

Real hypocrisy involves deceit, that is, the deliberate effort to make people believe you are good when you are really bad, or that what you are doing is good when what you are really doing is bad. But if you have *mixed motives* you are, to be clear, simply human. You can love yourself (as our third lesson clearly indicated) and still love the Lord "and from the heart perform acts of kindness to the neighbor, and from conscience behave justly and fairly" (AC 3993:9). Like Jacob's speckled and spotted livestock, it will all be sorted out in the end – specifically to the end that, like Jacob, we should "become exceedingly prosperous."

As you probably know, despite the Writings' use of the term, "the regenerate" to indicate one who IS on the right path, our spiritual development is never an accomplished fact. We always have the potential to improve; even the highest angels have the potential to improve. No one is ever absolutely perfect – except the Lord. And yet we use the term as if it were a state of perfection that we should be able to attain, a state of wholesome goodness unaffected by any sort of selfish or worldly considerations. Regeneration is a process, not a goal – except in the sense that a joyful, peaceful, heavenly life *dominated by love to the Lord and the neighbor* is the goal.

So we have the teaching frequently referenced in the Writings, about our “ruling loves.” We read,

“A person’s life is really the same as his love; and what his love is like determines what his life is like, in fact his whole personality. ***But what makes a person is his dominant or ruling love.*** That love has a number of subordinate loves with it, which derive from it. These appear to be different but are each a part of the dominant love and make up a single kingdom with it. The dominant love is as it were their king and chief; it controls them and by their instrumentality, using them as mediate ends, aims at and pursues its end which is the mainspring and ultimate of all, and this both directly and indirectly. What belongs to the dominant love is loved above all.” (NJHD 56)

OK, fine! But then, how can we determine our dominant or ruling loves? We read,

“Everyone’s pleasure, bliss and happiness comes from that person’s dominant love and is characterized by it. One calls pleasant what one loves, for that is what one feels. One may, however, call pleasant what one thinks about and does not love, but it is not the pleasure of one’s life. It is what pleases his love which is anyone’s good, and what displeases it which is his evil.” (NJHD 58)

But then again, what is the point of knowing this? It’s not as if we can compel ourselves to have better loves!

“The external [we read] cannot compel the internal, but the internal can compel the external. Who can be compelled to believe and to love? One can no more be compelled to believe than to think that a thing is so when he thinks that it is not so; and one can no more be compelled to love than to will what he does not will, for belief belongs to the thought and love to the will.” (DP 136:2)

HOWEVER, “the internal CAN fight with the external and by combat force it to compliance. Combat takes place when a person thinks that evils are sins and so resolves to desist from them; for ***when he desists*** a door is opened, and when it is opened the lusts of evil which occupied the internal of his thought are ***cast out by the Lord*** and affections of good are implanted in their place.” (DP 145)

Here, in a nutshell, we see the challenge of our whole lives: we are all a mixed breed – speckled and spotted, wheat and tares, fruitful, rocky, thorny and hard soil where the seeds of truth may or may not take root. But the ONE THING we can control is what we choose to SAY and DO. So to build on the last analogy, we can cultivate the soil of our minds by simply doing what the Lord expressly teaches us to do. Why? – Because He said so. – Because we know we should, even when we don’t really feel like it.

As the prophet, Jeremiah said, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose hope is the Lord” (Jer. 17:7). Why? – Because, as we noted at the beginning,

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? **I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind,** even to give every man *according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.*” (Jer. 17:8-9)

This brings us right back to our leading passage this morning from Psalm 37:

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and *He shall give you the desires of your heart.*”

Clearly this does NOT mean He will give us whatever we want, but that He will give us what TO want, or in other words, He will give us the new loves that can only come from Him, and that do come from Him, little by little, over time, when we devote ourselves to keeping His Word.

Remember the Lord’s instructions to Moses after He had given him the Ten Commandments: speaking about the conquest of the Land of Canaan, in the spiritual sense He was referring to our own combats of temptation against the loves of self and the world, and He plainly said,

“I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.” (*Exodus 23:29-30*)

Why does it have to be this way? Why can’t the Lord just make it happen quickly? The answer of course is, *it’s complicated!* In expounding these verses, the Lord points out that because we are born into evils of every kind, and because our whole identity is so completely tied up with them, this life “cannot be destroyed suddenly; for if it were destroyed suddenly the person too would perish. Nor can the life of heaven be implanted suddenly, for if this were implanted suddenly the person would again perish.” (AC 9336:2) Little by little, however, we can adjust to the necessary changes and retain a sense of our identity, even rejoicing in the growth that we experience along the way ***because we feel a part of it;*** we feel we ***as if*** we are doing it ourselves, only with the Lord’s help – even though the reality is exactly the opposite: HE is doing it with a little help from us as we co-operate, and just simply do the right thing.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Genesis 30: 25-43*  
              *Arcana Caelestia 3993:8-9*  
              *Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43*

***Arcana Caelestia 3993:8-9***

(This is in explanation of the speckled and spotted  
of Laban's flock in *Genesis 30:31-32*)

“No pure good, or good with which evil is not mingled, exists with anyone. Neither does any pure truth, or truth with which falsity is not mingled, exist with him. This is because man's will is nothing but evil, from which falsity is constantly passing into his understanding; for as is well known, he possesses by inheritance the evil that has been accumulated consecutively by his forefathers. From this inheritance he brings out evil into his own actions and makes it his own, adding further evil from himself to the inheritance. But the evils residing with man are of various kinds. There are evils with which goods cannot be mingled and there are evils with which they can. And the same applies to falsities. If this were not so nobody could ever have been regenerated. The evils and falsities with which goods and truths cannot be mingled are ones that are contrary to love to God and love towards the neighbor, namely, hatred, revenge, and cruelty, and consequent contempt for others in comparison with oneself, and also consequent false persuasions. But the evils and falsities with which goods and truths can be mingled are ones that are not contrary to love to God and love towards the neighbor.

“Take for example anyone who loves himself more than others and because of that love strives to excel others in private life and in public life, to excel them in knowledge and doctrine, and to be promoted to positions of greater importance than others, and also to greater affluence than others. If at the same time he acknowledges and adores the Lord, from the heart performs acts of kindness to the neighbor, and from conscience behaves justly and fairly, the evil that belongs to his self-love is such that good and truth can be mingled with it. For this is an evil which belongs to a person as his own and into which he is born by heredity. And to take that away from him suddenly would be to put out the fire of life that burns in him at first. But in the case of someone who loves himself more than others and because of that love despises others in comparison with himself, hates those who do not hold him in esteem and so to speak adore him, and therefore enjoys the feelings of hatred that are present in revenge and cruelty, the evil of that love is such that good and truth cannot be mingled with it because they are contraries.”