

## **Listening with Humility**

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*Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours? ~ 1 Kings 3:9*

Our topic this week is “Listening with Humility.” It is the third sermon in a series here at the Bryn Athyn Cathedral focused on listening. The first two weeks were focused on “Listening with Awareness” and “Listening with Patience.”

Some key ideas brought out in those sermons were that there are many things that get in the way of truly listening and being present with each other, like feeling too busy, always being in a hurry, being disinterested, being distracted (hello smartphones!), being impatient, being tired, being annoyed, and just generally being so focused on our own concerns that we may not even be aware of other people’s needs around us. We learned that a way to combat these tendencies and become a better listener is to be sure to spend time with the Lord in His Word to help calm our spirit and better align our purposes with the Lord's purposes, and to focus on the greater good of loving the neighbor to help us not get dragged down by the demands of the day.

This week we look especially at learning to listen with humility. Our text comes from the story in the 1 Kings, Chapter 3, where the Lord appears to King Solomon in a dream and says to him (vs. 5) “Ask! What shall I give you?” What a tremendous opportunity the Lord was giving Solomon, offering to give Solomon whatever he asked for! Solomon was clearly overwhelmed by the enormity of the responsibility of ruling and said to the Lord (vs. 7-8), “but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted.”

Solomon’s response that he is “but a little child” is not meant literally as Solomon is not a child but a young man who has recently made a treaty with the Pharaoh of Egypt, married the Pharaoh's daughter, and was now working on building his palace and the great Temple in Jerusalem. Instead it shows his deep humility and an awareness of his own limitations as a new ruler with no experience. He feels like a little child in the face of great responsibility. And in saying he “does not know how to go out or come in” he is acknowledging that he has no experience and no idea how to be a king.

When asked what he wants by the Lord, rather than ask for great power and wealth like many kings would have done, Solomon (vs. 9) asks instead for the gift of wisdom, saying, “Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”

An “understanding heart”— other translations call it a “listening heart” or a “heart that hears”—what a fascinating request! And what an incredibly humble and insightful request! Solomon wanted to be able to lead his people and be their judge with the wisdom that comes from a heart that listens. And, as the story continues, we are told the Lord was so pleased with this request and so pleased that Solomon did not ask for great power, or great wealth, or a long life that He would give them all to Solomon along with a “wise and understanding heart.”

How often could you have used a wise and understanding heart!—as a parent, as a spouse, in your job. What a gift it would be to be able to truly listen to and deeply understand the people we live and work with so that we could help discern the best ways to love and help them. But, like all stories in the Word, the Lord isn’t telling us this story as something only Solomon had. It is something that He promises to give to each of us if we truly want it and work for it.

Let’s look at some of the ways we can receive the gift of an understanding heart. An understanding heart is a heart that learns by connecting with other people’s hearts. It’s easy to have a heartfelt connection with each other when we are in full agreement. But what if we don’t agree? What if we don’t like their opinion? What if we think they’re wrong? What if we don’t like their style—too opinionated, too closed-minded, too judgmental, too whiny, too whatever!

That’s where we often go straight into judgment mode: “THEY are wrong,” “THEY need to change.” It’s now us vs. them. And when we are judging we are no longer listening because we think we have heard all we need to hear. That’s when the Lord’s words we read in our second lesson today from the Sermon on the Mount need to come into play: “Judge not, that you be not judged. . . . Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

If we are judging—and hopefully we are only judging them on the natural level, not spiritually—even our natural judgments are obscured by the planks in our own eyes. Our biases are like a plank that blind us to seeing other ways of thinking, and block us from striving to make heart to heart connections with people we deem different from us. We like to think we have great judgment, that our ideas make more sense and will lead to a better world. But we are all biased by our will, by what we love. We see what we want to see because will is actually the driver of our decisions, not intellect.

The Heavenly Doctrines put it this way in the book *Divine Love and Wisdom* (n. 422:2): “The intellect does not lead the will, and wisdom does not produce love, but the intellect only informs and points the way – informing the person how they should live, and pointing the way they should go. It follows, too, that the will leads the intellect and causes it to operate in harmony with it, and that the love which resides in the will calls wisdom anything in the intellect which

accords with it. . . . It is the will that, by flowing into it, takes the intellect into partnership with itself, and not the reverse.”

This is fine if our will is good, if we are truly motivated by charity and neighborly love. But how many of us can claim to be at that level on our spiritual journey? Don't we all still have planks to remove? Can we really see evils in other people like we often think we can? Even more, should we even be looking for their evils in the first place?

The passage we read in our lessons from *Secrets of Heaven* (n. 1079) says we shouldn't: “People with whom faith is separated from charity . . . see nothing else but errors and perversions residing with a person. But those who have faith that comes from charity are different. They notice the good qualities, and if they do see evils and falsities they excuse them, and if possible endeavour with that person to correct them.” And further, “Those who are guided by kindness . . . hardly even notice evil in another but pay attention instead to everything good and true in the person. When they do find anything bad or false, they put a good interpretation on it. This is a characteristic of all angels — one they acquire from the Lord, who bends everything bad toward good.”

That can seem like an almost impossible task when we see people doing and saying things that seem so obviously wrong and harmful to us. But the Lord asks us not to look for their evils but to look for their good qualities; not to judge them but to excuse them and put a good interpretation on what they say or do. This is what angels do.

This especially requires humility. As it says in *Secrets of Heaven* (n. 8873), “Life from the Lord flows only into a humble and submissive heart, since it is fitted to receive. And it is fitted to receive because when a heart is truly humble no self-love or love of the world stands in the way.”

We love our own ideas and our own interpretations of events. If we didn't think they were correct we wouldn't believe them. But we are all affected by conceit and pride in our own intelligence (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 502). Having an understanding heart requires intellectual humility. It means we have to accept that our understanding of things is only one of a variety of ways to interpret things. It means we have to accept that we are not always right and that other people are not always wrong. It requires us to look at other people's ideas with the sincere belief that we can learn from them.

Having an understanding heart means we have to listen to other people with empathy. Empathy seems to come more naturally to some of us than others, but it can be cultivated. We have to learn to listen with our heart, not just our head. It means we have to listen to their heart. We have to listen for the love, the concerns and the values behind their words. We have to try to walk a mile in their shoes. Even if we have had some similar experiences, we don't have their

exact experience. Each person is unique and their experience is unique. We don't know all the things that transpired to lead them to this point. We have to hear them before we can know how to help them. Listening with empathy is an act of humility and love.

As a teacher, I don't know if I am actively being humble as much as I might, but I certainly get humbled all the time. My great plans to communicate some profound truth fall flat if I come across as arrogant and inflexible, and if I don't show respect for their responses and different ideas. I need to ask the Lord to help me cultivate a humble and listening heart. I like to remind myself that I don't teach curriculum, I teach people. Curriculum is not really the end goal, it's only the means. The goal of New Church Education is to work with the Lord to create loving and wise human beings who love the Lord and love their neighbor. There is an old teaching adage that says, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." If I can't make a human connection with my students, the ideas I want to teach won't be received. They might be memorized for a test, but they won't be taken to heart.

Having an understanding heart doesn't mean we will always agree with each other. But even when we disagree, that shouldn't stop us from listening and striving to make deeper connections. The key is to put charity first in all our discussions and disagreements. It is a core New Church teaching that "doctrine divides but charity unites." From *Secrets of Heaven* (n. 1799): "If we would make love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the principal of faith, doctrinal matters would then be only varieties of opinion concerning the mysteries of faith, which truly religious people would leave to everyone to hold in accordance with their conscience. Thus from all the differing churches there would be made one church; and all the dissensions that come forth from doctrine alone would vanish; yea, all hatreds of one against another would be dissipated in a moment, and the Lord's kingdom would come upon the earth."

We can share similar values, similar hopes, similar goals and still not always agree with each other. But if charity and humility are put first, different views don't have to divide us. When humility is put first we can allow differences to be varieties of opinions.

Better connections with each other takes an understanding heart. It takes a heart that listens to others with humility; a heart that does not judge but listens agenda-free; a heart that values and respects people as the children of God they are; a heart that seeks to listen to the love and concerns that lie beyond people's words and actions; a heart that is willing to learn, not just teach.

The Lord tells us to ask and it will be given to us, to seek and we will find. May we all, like Solomon, ask the Lord for an understanding heart.

AMEN.

**Lessons: 1 Kings 3:5-15; Matt 7:1-5; Secrets of Heaven 1079**

**1 Kings 3:5-15**

“The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask! What shall I give you?’ And Solomon said: ‘You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day.

Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?

’The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: ‘Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you.

And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days. So if you walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.’ Then Solomon awoke; and indeed it had been a dream. And he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, offered up burnt offerings, offered peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.”

**Matthew 7:1-5**

“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

**Secrets of Heaven (*Arcana Caelestia*) 1079**

“People with whom faith is separated from charity . . . see nothing else but errors and perversions residing with a person. But those who have faith that comes from charity are different. They notice the good qualities, and if they do see evils and falsities they excuse them, and if possible endeavour with that person to correct them. . . .

Where neighborly love is absent, self-love is present, along with hatred for anyone who does not cater to oneself. That is why people who lack neighborly love see nothing in their neighbor besides that neighbor's evil. If they see anything good in the person, they either dismiss it or put a bad interpretation on it.

People governed by charity act in an entirely different way.

These differences form the distinction between the two types of people, particularly when they enter the other life. Those who lack all kindness radiate hatred from every pore. They want to examine and in fact judge everyone and crave nothing more than to find evil, constantly bent as they are on condemning, punishing, and tormenting others.

Those who are guided by kindness, on the other hand, hardly even notice evil in another but pay attention instead to everything good and true in the person. When they do find anything bad or false, they put a good interpretation on it. This is a characteristic of all angels — one they acquire from the Lord, who bends everything bad toward good.”