

"Although a Fool...."

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Isaiah 35:5-8

- 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
- 6 Then the lame shall leap like a stag,
And the tongue of the dumb shall sing aloud.
For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness,
And streams in the desert.
- 7 The scorched place shall become a pool,
And the thirsty place gurgling springs of water;
In the home of dragons, where they lay down,
There shall be grass with reeds and rushes.
- 8 A highway and a way shall be there,
And it shall be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean shall not pass through it,
But it is for others;
Whoever walks in the way, although a fool,
Shall not go astray.

Psalms 25:4-10

- 4 Make me to know Your ways, O Jehovah;
Teach me Your paths.
- 5 Make me to tread in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
For You I wait all the day.
- 6 Remember Your compassions, O Jehovah, and Your mercies,
For they are from eternity.
- 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions;
According to Your mercy remember me,
Because of Your goodness, Jehovah.
- 8 Good and upright is Jehovah;
Therefore He will instruct sinners in the way.
- 9 He will make the meek to tread in judgment;
And He will teach the meek His way.
- 10 All the paths of Jehovah are mercy and truth,
To those who observe His covenant and His testimonies.

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³ [Jesus said,] "Enter in through the tight gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads away into destruction, and there are many who come in through it, ¹⁴ because tight is the gate and narrow is the way which leads into life, and there are few who find it."

Secrets of Heaven 1043:2

We are regenerated by what we suppose to be religious truth. (We each imagine our own accepted beliefs to be the truth.) This supplies us with conscience. So for us, after we have acquired conscience, violating what has been stamped on our minds as religious truth is violating our conscience. This is true of every regenerate person, because the Lord regenerates large numbers of people of every accepted belief. When we have regenerated, we do not receive any direct revelation (except the ideas instilled in us through the Word and preaching from the Word). But since we do receive [charity, or] love for our fellow humans, the Lord works through that love to affect our cloud [of falsity]. Light then floods out of it, as happens when the sun strikes a cloud, making it brighter and variegating its color. The same process also creates something like a bow in the cloud. So the thinner the cloud is – that is, the more religious truth it has mixed in – the lovelier the bow is. The thicker the cloud is, though – or the less religious truth it has – the less attractive the bow is. Innocence adds a great deal of beauty; it lends a vivid glow to the colors, so to speak.

Introduction

- Around Christmas last year I heard that reading from Isaiah 35 and I was struck by the verse that says, "Whoever walks in the way, although a fool, shall not go astray" (8).
 - This is a really hopeful thought to me – the thought that we can be rather clueless and foolish but still be heading enough in the right direction that the Lord can keep us from going too far astray.
- It reminds me of bowling with little kids.
 - Have you ever gone bowling where there are bumpers in the gutters on the side so that you can bowl the ball not very well but it still bounces its way down towards the pins in spite of that?
 - It might take a long time to get there but it will eventually get there.
 - Now, when you're bowling with bumpers, you'll be OK as long as you're aiming in generally the right direction.
 - But, if you were to turn all the way around and bowl the ball towards the people or tables or whatever else, you're likely going to break some things, hurt some people, and not knock any pins down.
 - The question for today is what kinds of foolishness can the Lord work with – foolishness that's not going to go astray – and what kind of foolishness is the spiritual equivalent of bowling the ball into the rest of the building instead of down the bowling lane?
- We'll talk about a number of different passages about foolishness from the Lord's Word and see what we can learn.
- As we go through these, I think you'll see certain themes coming up again and again.
 - 1) The importance of trying to live according to what the Lord teaches
 - 2) The importance of charity or love for our neighbor.

The Parable of the Rich Fool

- Let's start by looking at one of the parables that the Lord told – the parable of the rich fool.
- The context in which Jesus tells this story is that someone from the crowd is having a dispute with his brother about how much of their father's money he gets to have.
 - Luke 12:13-21 (NKJV)
 - ¹³ Then one from the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."
 - ¹⁴ But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."
 - ¹⁶ Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, "What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?" ¹⁸ So he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." ' ²⁰ But

God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?"

²¹ "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

- What kind of foolishness do we have here?
 - The foolishness of believing that our lives consist in the abundance of the things we possess.
 - Having all the coolest stuff – money, clothes, computer games, food, going on awesome vacations – believing that that stuff is what matters most of all.
 - Those things are pretty great and pretty appealing and it is rather foolish to set our hearts on those sorts of earthly treasures that we can't take with us when we die.
- Some religious people have concluded that, in order to be spiritual, we need to reject all worldly things.
 - But the teachings of the New Church say that, instead, it is about having our priorities right – having love of the Lord and love for our neighbor as higher priorities than our love for worldly things (*True Christianity* 507:2-3).
 - If we do that, then we can be OK spiritually to still enjoy having nice things, having nice experiences.
 - To put it in the language of the parable, we could say, it is OK to lay up treasures for ourselves as long as we are rich towards God or as long as our heart is not set on those things (*Secrets of Heaven* 5433:2).
 - The real test that shows what our priorities are is, if we have to pick between worldly things and people or between getting more stuff and serving the Lord, which one do we pick?
 - If you're like most people, sometimes you'll probably make the right decisions and sometimes you'll make more self-serving decisions.

Thinking We Know It All

- At a deeper level, this parable about the fool storing up all of his crops is not just about storing up material wealth: it's also about a person storing up knowledge.
 - It's good to know things and we human beings like to learn more things.
 - The passage in our lesson talked about how the cloud of our thoughts can be a little thinner if we have more religious truth mixed in there.
 - But when we become a know-it-all then learning more becomes a problem.
- And the teachings of the New Church talk about the foolishness of people who are proud of how much they know.
 - *Sacred Scripture* 118
 - Let me say... what people are like after death if they have attributed everything to their own intelligence and little if anything to the Word. At first they seem to be drunk, then foolish, and finally brainless; and they sit in darkness. So beware of this kind of insanity in yourselves.
 - "Beware of this kind of insanity in yourselves."

- Part of what can come with this kind of insanity is thinking that we are above having to believe in and follow what the Lord says in His Word.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* 5433:2
 - [P]eople who do not learn truths for truth's own sake and for their life's sake, but for the sake of material gain, inevitably think that the truths known to the Church are not truths. [The person] then thinks that heavenly things are of no importance, while earthly ones are everything [and]... they believe themselves to be more learned and wiser than everybody else, in that they... do not accept the truths known to the Church, and... say that they exist for those who are simple.

- Here's how the same idea is put in the Psalms:
 - Psalm 14:1
 - ¹ The fool has said in his heart,
 "There is no God."
 They are corrupt,
 They have done abominable works,
 There is none who does good.

Wise to Do Evil

- Notice the connection to doing evil – that's a big part of what makes us not believe in God or in what He says.
- The same idea is expressed by the prophet Jeremiah.
- Listen to these two passages about foolishness.
- Jeremiah 4:22
 - ²² "For My people are foolish,
 They have not known Me.
 They are silly children,
 And they have no understanding.
 They are wise to do evil,
 But to do good they have no knowledge."

- Jeremiah 5:3-4
 - ³ O Jehovah, are not Your eyes on the truth?
 You have stricken them,
 But they have not grieved;
 You have consumed them,
 But they have refused to receive correction.
 They have made their faces harder than rock;
 They have refused to return.
 - ⁴ Therefore I said, "Surely these are poor.
 They are foolish;
 For they do not know the way of Jehovah,
 The judgment of their God."

- That part about refusing to receive correction seems particularly important.
 - If we're going to be lead in a good direction by the Lord then we need to be willing to receive correction.
 - If we're that bowling ball heading down the bowling lane of life then we need to be willing to be bumped by the bumpers.
 - We need to be willing to course correct.
 - If we want to be heading in the Lord's way then part of that is being willing to accept His judgment, accepting that the Lord judges certain things to be not good for us or for the people around us.
- The evil spirits will try to convince us to think that the sophisticated and smart way of thinking is to reject what the Lord says.
 - But we need to humble ourselves to walk with our God (Micah 6:8) and be willing to look like a gullible, unsophisticated idiot to the evil spirits and to certain people we might meet in the world.

Holiness in Ignorance

- This seems to connect to the "Way of Holiness" that the passage from Isaiah talked about.
- Isaiah 35:8
 - ⁸ A highway and a way shall be there,
 And it shall be called the Way of Holiness.
 The unclean shall not pass through it,
 But it is for others;
 Whoever walks in the way, although a fool,
 Shall not go astray.
- The teachings of the New Church say that holiness can be in us in our ignorance.
- Listen to this great passage:
 - *Secrets of Heaven* 1557:2-3
 - Even among the angels themselves, who enjoy the greatest possible light from understanding and wisdom, holiness resides in ignorance. They recognize and admit that they know nothing on their own, that anything they do know comes from the Lord. They also recognize and admit that all their learning, their understanding, and their wisdom is nothing compared to the Lord's infinite knowledge....

Holy ignorance does not consist in knowing less than other people but in admitting that we know nothing on our own and that the things we do not know infinitely outnumber the things we do know. It consists especially in acknowledging that facts and intellectual pursuits are far less important than heavenly concerns; in other words, what we understand is far less important than how we live.
- It's so freeing and useful to be able to say, "Yeah, I'm a fool and I know *nothing* in the grand scheme of things!"

- It doesn't mean that we should stop trying to learn things; it's just keeping the right level of humility about what we know.
- And it's always keeping in mind that the real point of knowing things is so that we can live according to them.
 - Like Jesus said in another parable about a foolish man, "everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand..." (Matthew 7:26).
- Are we wise enough to do what the Lord tells us to do or foolish enough to think that just knowing a bunch of things is enough?
 - Sometimes it's only when our lives start to fall under the rain, floods, and winds of life that we wake up to the fact that we need to start living our lives differently.

Walking in the Way

- Let's now talk about what it looks like when we're trying to do it right – trying to live according to what the Lord teaches.
- Psalm 25, from our lessons, puts it beautifully:
 - Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10
 - 4 Make me to know Your ways, O Jehovah;
Teach me Your paths.
 - 5 Make me to tread in Your truth and teach me,....
 - 8 Good and upright is Jehovah;
Therefore He will instruct sinners in the way.
 - 9 He will make the meek to tread in judgment;
And He will teach the meek His way.
 - 10 All the paths of Jehovah are mercy and truth,
To those who observe His covenant and His testimonies.
- We can be sinners and fools and the Lord will still be able to help us, if we are wanting Him to tell us what to do, if we are trying our hardest to keep His 10 Commandments.
- We've all got clouded minds and we're all confused and off-base in one way or another.
 - But we've also each got a conscience and the Lord can work with that to help us become new people – to be gradually reborn as people who actually care about the human beings around us.
 - As that happens there's more warmth and light coming through our clouded foolish minds.
- The way we cooperate with the Lord to allow Him to bring that warmth and light into our minds is by trying to keep the commandments.
 - As we work and fight within ourselves to not murder our neighbor, not commit adultery with them or against them, not steal from our neighbor, not bear false witness against our neighbor, and not covet anything that is our neighbors, that is what opens us up to receive genuine love for our neighbor.
 - And that is what keeps us on the right track.
 - Those are the truths that we need to tread in.
 - Those are the boundaries and the bumpers that we need to try to stay within.

- Relationships are hard sometimes and confusing and we may often find ourselves unsure of what to do.
 - This applies to marriage relationships but also to our relationships with our parents or children, with our co-workers, with our siblings, with the people who live in our neighborhood, and even with people we interact with online.
 - It can be hard to figure out what we should do or not do, say and not say, in any of these relationships.
 - But the Lord gives us the boundaries.
 - He says, "Whatever you do, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, and don't covet what is your neighbors."
 - And we can learn what those different selfish inclinations feel like in our body.
 - We can learn to recognize the different ways that they sneak into our motivations and into our actions.
 - We can learn to see the pain and hurt that we cause when we mess up and do break one of those commandments.

- When we're struggling and seemingly failing to live according to our principles, we can feel pretty hopeless about ourselves and about the state of the human race in general.
- Sometimes we are going to foolishly get too caught up in worldly things sometimes.
- Other times we may be tempted to be arrogant, conceited, know-it-alls and think that we know better than other people and the Lord.
- Often we may be very resistant to receiving correction.
- But the Lord can work with us despite our ignorance, in fact because of our ignorance.
- And, if we are willing to try to walk in the way of His commandments, He will help us and lead us not only away from death and hell but towards life and joy.
 - Isaiah 35:8
 - Whoever walks in the way, although a fool,
Shall not go astray.

 - Psalm 16:11
 - You will show me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.