

Don't Look Back

"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back,
is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:62

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of stories in the Word that warn us *not* to...

"look back" or "turn back..."

There's the famous incident of Lot's wife who
- ignored the warning of the two angels who had told her family to...

"Escape for [their] lives" from the city of Sodom, saying...

"Do not look behind you..."

but *"escape to the mountains..."* (Genesis 19:15-17)

Lot's wife, in escaping, nevertheless couldn't resist the
temptation to look back at the destruction of the city, an act
which caused her to turn into a pillar of salt!

There are instances in the Gospels in which various people come to the Lord and
say they want to follow Him, but ask that they *first*...

"Bury their father..."

Or, bid their family "farewell..."

To which the Lord responds with the words of our text,

*"No one, having put his hand to the plow, **and looking back**, is fit for
the kingdom of God."*

And there are other puzzling Scriptural statements which expand on this topic, as when Jesus is asked when the kingdom of God would come, to which He replies...

*"In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, **let him not go back down to take them away...**"*

*"And likewise, the one who is in the field, **let him not turn back.**"*

And to re-iterate this point, the Lord says,

"Remember Lot's wife."

(Luke 17:20-21, 30-33).

1. DIFFERENT TYPES OF "LOOKING BACK"

As we read in one of our lessons today, clearly this idea of not "looking back" must have some kind of inner, spiritual meaning because, on the surface, in the letter, it doesn't make a lot of sense, and doesn't seem wrong...

Why would Lot's wife be punished in such a bizarre, shocking way for disobeying this command?

Why would a grieving family member not be permitted to first bury his father before following the Lord?

Why would the person seeking the kingdom of God not be permitted to first go back to his house to get his belongings?

There are lots of healthy ways in which we *can* and *do* use our mind to "look back"

For example, the Word often encourages us to "remember..."

E.g. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and **forget not** all His benefits..."
 Or "**Remember** the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy..."
 Or, in the Holy Supper, "Do this in **remembrance** of Me..."

There's obviously a powerful use in remembering, in recalling certain events, thoughts and feelings, which is something the Lord wouldn't want to deny us...

In our mind, we often recall, reminisce happy times, happy memories

- tap into childhood remains
- or think about feelings of nostalgia - these have a use
- we're invited to "look back" at our life for all the signs and indications of the hand of Providence (see DP 187)
- also invited to "reflect," use reflection on spiritual matters (AC 7341)

So, clearly there are different types of "looking back," many of which are appropriate and healthy and useful because they enrich our lives...

- give us a fuller sense of appreciation and gratitude for...
 - what we have
 - where we've been
 - what the Lord is doing in our lives...
- also, re-enforces what's important to us
 - e.g. think about self-examination, the work of repentance
 - even when we're doing this spiritual work, we're "looking back" at our own bad attitudes, habits, and telling the Lord, reminding ourselves, that we don't want these thoughts and feelings - this is why we're shunning them!

2. GOING BACKWARDS

Of course, we can also go *backwards* in our mind, in ways that are not useful or constructive.

Take the feeling of *regret* by way of example...

In our spiritual work, the work of regeneration, we find ourselves "looking back" at certain events in our lives...

- something we did or said that was unkind or hurtful
- maybe it was how we treated someone poorly

- or how we handled a certain situation we're not proud of...

And we experience regret, sorrow, even shame - all important "ingredients" in the work of repentance...

But from the Lord's perspective, our feelings of *regret* over something we've done or said need to have a "beginning, middle and end,"

They need to come to a conclusion, a resolution, and this is where a bad, unhealthy kind of "looking back" starts to creep in...

You see, evil spirits, thrive on *stirring up* our faults...

- they don't want us to reach a *resolution*
- they don't want us to actually confront an evil, reject it, and "move on"
- they want us to get stuck in all the angst, confusion, and hurt...

- stuck in the past
- stuck in feelings of shame, regret, guilt, embarrassment
- stuck looking in the rear-view mirror
- stuck "looking back"

And we're taught that they do this by constantly "accusing and condemning" us (see AC 8159, 8960, SE 5656)

- by making us second-guess ourselves
- by making it really hard to move on

Or, in the words of our text, they work hard to make sure we don't...

"put hand to plow"

So, with these thoughts in mind, we're now ready to look more closely at the Lord's command to "not look back."

In the *Genesis* account of Lot's family being told to escape for their lives from the city of Sodom, the two angels give them specific instructions,

directions if you think about it.

They were...

1. to keep the city behind them
2. to not linger (in the plain)
3. to escape to the mountains

At first glance, the spiritual explanation for this command is a bit confusing:

1. Keeping the city "behind us" means ***not resorting to matters of doctrine*** once we've made the decision to go forward, a "city" meaning doctrine.
2. To not linger in the plain but make haste means just that - ***not hesitate or second-guess*** what we've decided to do.
3. Keeping the "mountains" in front of us means ***focusing on the good, the love***, that comes from following the Lord in His Word.

The part that's confusing in the spiritual explanation of this command is that it sounds like doctrine should no longer play a role in our lives once we've made the decision to go forward, head for the mountains, or in the words of our text from the New Testament, once we've put "hand to plough."

Our reading today said,

"to put hand to plough" means to be governed by good or love (AC 2454)

and that *"if a person **went back to the understanding as the source of their thought and action** they would encounter temptations in which they would succumb..."* (AC 3652)

3. PUTTING HAND TO PLOUGH

So, what's going on here?

I think the most important thing to remember is that truth, doctrine, doesn't change. **What changes is our response to it!**

You see, there comes a point in time when we no longer want to argue or reason about the truth of a matter...

We see the truth of a teaching in the Lord's Word, say, the truth about...

- the need to forgive
- or go the extra mile
- or turn the other cheek
- the need to trust the Lord, His providence, the afterlife
- the need to have faith
- the need to look to the good in others...

And we no longer want to discuss it, dissect it, reason about it - we just want to live it, incorporate it into our life, our psyche, our way of living.

We're reacting to the same truth, the same doctrine, the teachings we've known since childhood, but now, as adults, our hearts are stirred in different, new ways (see AC 8505).

And so we're taught that:

"...all reasoning does and must come to an end when a person's state is one in which they will what is true and good, for in that case the will and therefore conscience are the source of their thought and action, and not the understanding" (AC 3652)

This is to face the mountains
 This is to turn our back to the city
 This is to put hand to plough and not look back...

4. PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

If you think about it, there are three "realms" we can choose to live in...

The past, the present, and the future
 Each have their use, to be sure

But only one can make us *truly* happy and that's the present. One of my favorite teachings says,

*"The more interior and perfect the angels become the less do they care about the things of the past or think about those of the future. **This [mindset] is also the origin of their happiness.** They say that the Lord provides them every moment with what to think, accompanied by blessing and happiness, and that this being the case, they have no cares or worries"*
(AC 2493)

Now, for sure, adopting this mindset is easier said than done but it's still a wonderful spiritual practice to work on -

knowing ***that our happiness, the deep, abiding peace and happiness we're all looking for***, comes from living in the present, from letting the Lord lead us in the moment, in the now!

And the point is this - the hells don't want us to live in the present because they hold **no power** over us in the present!

The evil spirits from hell want us to "look back" and they will use worry about the past or worry about the future to accomplish that end.

They want us to look back at the city...

They want us to get stuck in the continuous loop of using truth, using doctrine, to argue, to reason, to justify, to second-guess...

- "I shouldn't have forgiven _____."
- "I shouldn't have helped _____."
- "Maybe I married the wrong person."
- "Maybe what I'm doing isn't so bad!"
- "What's the point of taking that stand."

These are the types of attitudes,
reasonings,

justifications that turn us into a "pillar of salt,"

where the truth of the Lord's Word loses its flavor.

These are the types of attitudes, & reasonings, & justifications,

that make our spirit "unfit for the kingdom of God."

And as we read in our lesson today, we will start using doctrine this way whenever **"we no longer take to heart what kind of life we lead..."** (AC 2454).

CONCLUSION

We can probably all point to certain decisions in our lives that were, what we might call, "no-brainers," in the sense that we say,

"It was the best decision of my life; I've never looked back!"

But our *spiritual lives* are much more complicated than this - sometimes we make good decisions, sometimes we don't...

Sometimes we have faith, sometimes we don't.

Sometimes we have to "look back" to see the error of our ways or re-learn something from the Lord's Word to gain a new perspective...

but as we've seen in our sermon today there are *also* times in our lives when the Lord calls us to put hand to plow and not look back.

There's tremendous POWER in heeding this call...

This call is a "present-tense" call

- it's a call to not hesitate, to not linger,

- to unleash the *power* that the present holds (the "realm" in which angels dwell)

And here's the litmus test - are you at stage in your life where you "**will what is true and good**" (AC 3652)?

I don't think any of us could say we **will** every teaching, every command, in the Lord's Word...

We're all works in progress, but we certainly have an *affection* for many of the beautiful truths of the Lord's Second Coming.

And this is the point of our sermon today:

- the Lord wants us to "plough" the good ground, those parts of our mind that **do** have a deep affection for the truth (see AC 5895)

Because in doing this, the soil of our mind is softened, prepared in such a way that we can receive new joys and new delights from heaven.

Two things happen simultaneously when we do this...

- we **turn our backs** to the second-guessing, to the rationalizations, to the misuse of doctrine, to the unnecessary guilt and shame...

- and, in facing forward, we, in the case of our Genesis story, heed the call to "*escape to the mountains...*" from whence comes our help.

AMEN.