

A Blessing and a Curse

Polarization is a feature not a bug

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, September 29, 2024

“At first, everyone was clearly following the same path as far as the large boulder at the fork; but at that point they parted company. The good turned to the left and started along the confined path that led to heaven. The evil did not even see the boulder at the fork but fell over it and hurt themselves.” Heaven and Hell 534

When the evil fell over the boulder and hurt themselves, you might expect that they would have then seen that they were

going in the wrong direction and would have gotten up and taken the path to the left towards heaven. Instead, it says that they “got up and rushed along the broad path to the right that led toward hell.”

This is what we do. Sometimes the hardships and roadblocks that we trip over in life lead us to reflect, and to change our ways. More often we disregard these possibly helpful signs and continue as before. Luckily, we have more than one opportunity like this in life, and very often we do change our course.

Our topic this morning is the process involved in the

Lord’s parable about the broad way and the narrow way, and about the teachings in Deuteronomy about His blessings on the good and curses on the evil.

This process divides people, and it also unites them, and it does it in different ways repeatedly throughout our lives.

In the parable in Matthew there is no boulder in the road. Instead, there are two gates, a narrow gate and a wide gate, leading to a narrow way and broad way. The wide gate is the most obvious one and the broad way is the one most traveled. The choice of gates and ways divides the crowds of people moving through and along them.

There are many stories like this in the Word, from Moses’ stark choice between blessing and cursing in our lesson, to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, to the way that the Lord will divide the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the tares, the

good fish in the net from the bad, to His words in Luke: “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division”

(Luke 12:51). And the division is not the selection of the best among the good, or the kindest among the kind, but a judgment between the good and the evil, the saved from the condemned.

Why this polarization?

In this political season there is no need to point out how troubling polarization is to many people.

One of the great frustrations of politics is that they polarize and divide the nation, when what we are looking for is leadership that will unite us. Ukraine’s Zelenski this past week pleaded at the United Nations for us to unite the world and not divide it.

Yet politicians can’t help but

divide. They dwell endlessly on the great harm that will occur if their opponent is elected. They characterize the other’s views in the most extreme terms, while describing their own views as normal and rational. Having done this, they go on to say that they will unite the nation.

It seems as though there is something deeply wrong with a system that polarizes and divides this way. It is even worse when we realize that this isn’t a bug or a flaw in the system. Instead, this is how the system is designed to work. Polarization is a feature, not a bug. That is, any system that is based on the concept of free choice will have separating the sheep from the goats as a core feature.

Polarization captures the most committed, the ones most likely to work hard and contribute to the cause, while those in the middle are almost ignored. Those in the middle are often forced to pick sides



when they don't really agree with either one.

This divide is even more obvious in religion. The choice is between heaven and hell, between blessings and curses, between life and death, between the broad way or the narrow way.

The difference between religion and politics, however, is that heaven and hell are spiritual objectives, and our choices are eternally crucial for all of us. The realities that we choose between in politics, on the other hand, are between things that may be better or worse on the natural plane, but which seldom merit the extreme language we often use to describe them, much less the vilification of those whose choices differ from ours.

The goal is unity.

The goal in religion is not division, much less polarization. The divisions described in these parables in the Word are actually part of the process of unification. Many of them describe the Last Judgment, which is defined this way:

"The Last Judgment is the separation of those who live according to Divine truths, from those who do not live according to them." Apocalypse Explained 875

The separation brought about by the Last Judgment happens when the Lord comes with love and truth, causing those who love it to follow Him, and those who don't to take a different path. This is why the Last Judgment happens at the Lord's coming.

The Word also calls this "gathering the flock" of those who are willing to hear the voice of the Shepherd. Similarly, angels blow the trumpet and call people from the four corners of the world to come to the Lord. The fact that not everyone responds to this call does divide the population, but the purpose is to bring everyone who is willing.

More importantly, these divisions and unifications are things that happen within each of us. Over our lifetimes we gradually recognize and separate ourselves from things that are harmful and unite ourselves to good things. So we read in Psalm 86:

"Teach me Your way, O Lord and I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name."

Are there few who are saved?

An unsettling feature of the description of the broad and narrow way is the statement that *few* enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow way. Although the Lord makes many statements about dividing the people, this is the only example among

them where He suggests that few are saved. In Luke the Lord puts it this way:

"Then one said to Him, 'Lord, are there few who are saved?' And He said to them, 'Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able.'" Luke 13:23

The meaning seems clear, as He says in Matthew that "*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*"

By contrast, there seem to be equal amounts of wheat and tares, there were equal numbers of wise and foolish virgins (*Matthew 25*), the sheep and goats seem to be equally divided, and there is no indication that among the fish caught in the dragnet only a few were good.

Do few go to heaven and most to hell?

You would expect that the Writings would clarify the answer to this, but many passages just add to the confusion, such as the statement in our lesson that, "*The way that leads to life is not narrow because it is difficult but because so few people find it, as stated*" (*Heaven and Hell 534*). In addition, ten passages in the Arcana say that "*at the present day there are but few who suffer themselves to be regenerated*" (*Arcana Coelestia 4136*). Other passages say things like:

"The equilibrium between heaven and hell begins to perish at the end of the church, when few come into heaven, and many into hell." *Last Judgment 34*

This definitely says that few go to heaven at the time of the end of the church. But the implication is also that this is not normally the way that it works.

One indication that we have about this question is an observation in *Heaven and Hell* that children make up a "*third part of heaven*" (*Heaven and Hell 4*). Taking this to mean that a third of those who make up heaven are people who have died in childhood, all of whom go to heaven, we can see that the great majority of those in heaven are people who have lived to adulthood.

What does "few" mean?

So when we think about the teaching that few find the narrow gate and that few walk the narrow way, we are not saying that there are literally few people who enter heaven. Most people intuitively understand this, realizing that the point of the parable is that we need to make an effort to find the gate and to walk in the Lord's way. If we

pay no attention, and just do as we please, or just follow the crowd, we will trip over the boulder where the road divides, we will hurt ourselves, and we will take the broad way.

The word “few” in the Word can be understood as relating to our power to receive good from the Lord:

“Divine Good which emanates from the Lord is shared with all in heaven, with all in particular and in general, but everywhere according to the capacity to receive it. For there are those who can receive only little and there are those who can receive much.... Differences in that power are what are meant by 'a large number' and 'a few'.” Arcana Coelestia 8472

The statement about the “few” who find the gate would seem to be talking about the few who are able to receive that power from the Lord. But it is actually saying that it is our power that is “few”, or that we all have little power of our own, or that we cannot find that gate without the Lord’s help. Without His help none of us will find that gate.

Still, the literal idea of few and many has a lot of truth to it. Our desire to do what everyone else is doing can lead us on the broad path. It often does seem that only a few people try hard to do things right. Our tendencies to do it the easy way, to do what comes naturally, to do what we have always done, to ignore the advice of our teachers, leaders and elders, and to fail to read the directions, are all very real. They are the Goliath to our David, the many to our few.

The boulder.

But what about the boulder that is in the description from our reading in *Heaven and Hell* but not in the parable itself? The continuation of our reading explains this:

“The boulder I saw at the corner where the broad, common path ended and the two ways seemed to lead in opposite directions showed me the meaning of the Lord's words, “Have you not read what is written, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner’? Whoever falls over this stone will be broken” (Luke 20:17-18). The stone means divine truth, and the rock of Israel means the Lord in regard to His divine human nature. The builders are the people of the church. The head of the corner is where the fork is, and to fall and be broken is to deny and perish.” Heaven and Hell 534

That boulder is the “stone that the builders

rejected.” The Lord’s teachings are what mark the divide between the broad and narrow way. As we make our way through life, our response to the Lord’s teachings defines these forks in the road.

It is interesting that in the account in *Heaven and Hell* people are described as falling over that boulder and hurting themselves. They don’t see the stone, or they don’t acknowledge it. The meaning is that they don’t see the truth and love within the Lord’s words, and don’t accept or obey them.

People often complain that the Lord’s words on topics such as those having to do with morality can be harsh and even hurtful. But the Lord is not the cause of the hurt. His goal is to warn us away from the pain that goes along with following the broad way – where all of us will trip and fall over the stones of truth that we don’t see. Not seeing them does not prevent the pain caused by evil.

The wisdom of following the narrow way is not immediately obvious, as all the attractions and compulsions of the world lead us along the much broader path. Fortunately, there is not just a single fork in the road. We are presented with these diverging paths virtually every day. Few of us find them at first, but hopefully many of us will find them in the long run, over the course of our lives.

Division and unity

This is the way that the Lord divides us – dividing the sheep from the goats, and distinguishing right from wrong in each one of us. This is why He said that He came into the world to bring “division” and not peace, as we quoted above.

Still the end goal is not to divide but to unite us, for all people are united who have charity, who have the same purpose, and serve the same Lord. This is something that politicians hope for and promise, but which they seldom achieve. The Lord, however, will not fail to bring the unity that He has promised, opening our eyes to the truths that guide us. Being clear about what the Lord teaches may sometimes seem to divide us, but it actually leads to unity. The forks in the road that all of us encounter, as we walk the paths of our life, are just part of the process that leads towards the blessings and away from the curses that Moses spoke about in Deuteronomy.

“If you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.” Deuteronomy 28

Readings from the Word

Deuteronomy 28

Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God:

³ “Blessed *shall you be* in the city, and blessed *shall you be* in the country.

⁴ “Blessed *shall be* the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

⁵ “Blessed *shall be* your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶ “Blessed *shall you be* when you come in, and blessed *shall you be* when you go out.

¹⁵ “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:

¹⁹ “Cursed *shall you be* when you come in, and cursed *shall you be* when you go out.

Matthew 7

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. ¹⁴ Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Heaven and Hell 534

I was once shown the way to heaven and the way to hell. There was a broad path leading off to the left or north. There seemed to be a great many spirits traveling along it. In the distance, though, I could see a fairly large boulder where the broad path ended. Then two paths led off from the boulder, one to the left and the other, on the other side, to the right. The path to the left was narrow and confined, leading around through the west to the south, and therefore into the light of heaven. The path to the right was broad and open, leading obliquely down toward hell.

At first, everyone was clearly following the same path as far as the large boulder at the fork; but at that point they parted company. The good turned to the left and started along the confined path that led to heaven. The evil did not even see the boulder at the fork but fell over it and hurt themselves. When they got up, they rushed along the broad path to the right that led toward hell.

[2] Later, the meaning of all this was explained to me. The first path, the broad one where so many good and evil people were traveling together, chatting with each other like friends with no visible difference between them, pictured people who live similarly honest and fair outward lives, with no visible difference between them. The stone at the fork or corner where the evil people stumbled, from which they rushed along the path to hell, pictured divine truth, which is denied by people who are focusing on hell. In the highest sense this stone meant the Lord's divine human nature. However, people who acknowledge divine truth and the divine nature of the Lord as well were taken along the path that led to heaven.

This showed me again that both evil and good people live the same life outwardly, or travel the same path, one as readily as the other. Yet the ones who at heart acknowledge the Divine, especially those within the church who acknowledge the Lord's divine nature, are led to heaven; while those who do not acknowledge it are led to hell.

[3] Paths in the other life picture the thoughts that flow from our aims or intentions. The paths that are presented to view there answer exactly to the thoughts of our aims, and our course follows the thoughts that flow from our aims. This is why you can tell the quality of spirits and of their thoughts from their paths. This also showed me the meaning of the Lord's words, "*Enter through the narrow gate, for broad is the gate and open the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who walk along it; confined is the path and narrow the gate that leads to life, and there are few who find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14). The way that leads to life is not narrow because it is difficult but because so few people find it, as stated.

