

Live Your Faith

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Does it matter what we believe? Probably most of you are present in this specific space because you would answer *yes* to that question. But I don't just mean, "Does it matter to you what you believe?" ... I mean in the more universal sense ... I mean in the sense of getting to heaven.

If you have spent much time in this church and around the ideas of this specific faith, there's a good chance you are familiar with—and it may even be one of your favorite ideas—the New Church teaching that is expressed beautifully with this passage from the work *Divine Providence*: "In the spiritual world, the world every person comes into after death, no one asks what your faith was or what your doctrine was, but what your life was like, whether it was of this character or that" (101.3). If we think about these words just a little bit, it's not hard to come to the conclusion that our salvation is not dependent on our faith, and so it doesn't matter what our faith is. Anyways, as the passage alludes to, we are going to be asked what our life and character were like, not what our faith was. What matters is that "I'm a good person."

Today, I hope to shake loose any notion that it doesn't matter what you believe. This kind of idea can lead us down a type of *laissez-faire* path that is more likely to result in apathy than a sense of purpose, and, in the end, does not help strengthen our relationship with the Lord.

Let's jump into our story about Saul to help us explore the topic of today's talk: Living Your Faith.

In our story, Saul offered a sacrifice. He says, "I had not made supplication to the Lord. Therefore I felt compelled and offered a burnt offering." That doesn't sound so bad. Sacrifices and burnt offerings were even commanded by Jehovah. If it is being offered to the Lord, why would it be wrong for him to do it? Especially when we consider that burnt offerings are a symbol of worship. And isn't it good to worship? *We* worship the Lord by going to church, and we worship Him through a life of charity. As long as we are being good, isn't that what matters?

Well, Saul *was* punished, which means he *did* do something wrong. What he did wrong was that he didn't listen to the specific instructions of the Lord. The Lord's prophet Samuel told Saul to wait seven days for him. And Saul did wait until the seventh day—he waited as long as he could bear when the enemies were at the door and his own army was running away anywhere they could out of fear. Out of fear, Saul acted. Life was hard, and so he had to take matters into his own hands. Oh, and also, sacrifices to Jehovah are good things, and so it's all right.

The thing is that worshipping the Lord and living a good life and how *those* things are defined are not up to us. The Lord tells us what is right or wrong and what the "good life" is. Just because we think that something is good and may even seem like something from the Lord, does not mean that it is what He wants for us.

Today I'd like to give some examples of what parents could wish for their kids, and we could just as well apply these examples each individually to ourselves.

Parents could wish for and teach their kids that the goal of life is to be successful. That doesn't seem like such a bad thing ... we don't want our kids to have a hard time getting through this world. The trouble is that it teaches them that it's all about this world.

Parents could wish for and teach their kids that the goal of life is to be happy. Again, who doesn't want their kids to be happy—the Lord wants us to be happy. The trouble with this one is that there are lots of ways to try to make ourselves happy ... and they are definitely not all good.

Parents could wish for and teach their kids that the goal of life is to be good. Of course this seems like a good option, and we could even back it up doctrinally. The trouble with this one is that, if we stop at “be good”—if that is the goal—then who’s telling them what’s good, and by what standard are we measuring goodness? Are we measuring goodness simply by worldly measures? Does your culture or your political party tell you what is good?

A final option I’d like to offer is that parents could wish for and teach their kids to follow the Lord. This is the only benchmark that doesn’t waver and doesn’t change. An argument against this specific life goal might be that there are many religions and ideas of God, so which one should a person choose?

The point here is: choose ONE and follow it. In our earlier readings, we read, “People born outside the church are just as human as people born within it ... and all of them who do believe in God and lead good lives become spiritual on their own level and are saved” (DP 330). So, they are saved on their own level ... or in their own way. So, yes, it’s true that anybody from any religion can go to heaven, in that they follow what God has provided them in their religion, and something the Lord provides in every religion is the Ten Commandments in one form or another.

If this is true, why then do we have teachings like another one of our earlier readings: “No Christians will go to heaven unless they believe in the Lord God the Savior and turn to Him alone” (TCR 107), and, “The Word is the only means by which Christians can go to the Lord and the Lord can come to them” (142). That’s pretty strong language, and seems pretty exclusionary. Also, here’s a touchstone verse that broader Christianity uses to support a faith-alone doctrine that we find in John: “that the world through Him might be saved.”

This idea that Christians find salvation through the Lord and His Word is true for a similar reason that people from other religions can go to heaven: if you follow and submit your heart and mind to God as He presents Himself in the faith you follow, this is what opens the gates of heaven to the faithful. This universal idea is also what allows Christians and we in the New Church faith to enter heaven: following and submitting our hearts and minds to God as He presents Himself in the pages of our specific doctrines.

You see, every religion is its own system that the Lord has accommodated to various types of people, and they are not to be mixed. A natural-world example of not mixing systems is the Mac computer vs. the Windows PC computer ... even the same computer program, like a game or presentation software, cannot simply be transferred from one system to the other ... the computer programs must be configured according to the system in which they are operating.

And that gets us to our faith—our operating system. In the New Church, we have a specific body of teaching that, as New Church people, we ought to be following because the Lord gave it to us, and we should not be adding to it or taking away from it, even if it seems “good” in our eyes. In the case of Saul, he was supposed to follow the Lord’s command in that situation, not make the decision for himself of what HE thought was good.

Here are some basic New Church doctrines that the Lord has provided us.

We should be following the Commandments. This includes no other gods than the one God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain by saying “Oh Lord” or “Oh my God” frivolously, and yes, you should be keeping the Sabbath. Stay tuned for the other commandments as we cover one each month throughout this year.

Another New Church teaching: we should be repenting. The good life isn’t just about “doing good”. The good life begins with shunning evils ... noting the times we are putting self and material loves above the Lord and the neighbor, and asking the Lord to help us with it.

We should maintain habits like reading the Word daily and regular prayer. Our operating system needs regular updates, and the only way for that to happen is by re-connecting to the Server. *Religion* means *re-connection*.

We should observe the sacraments and rites the way the Lord has given them to us. We should not be adding to them, and we should not be doing them the way the world does. Our children should be baptized, adults ought to be taking the Holy Supper on occasion, and betrothal leads to a marriage that then allows a couple to live together, forever.

Mind you, the doctrines the Lord provided us do not invite us to judge the intentions of others. Yes, we should decide whether certain external actions and habits are healthy for our society, but the spiritual judgment is something we should reserve for ourselves.

The idea is that we follow the religion, the faith, that we are in. If we consider ourselves believers in the New Church faith, then we should submit our hearts and minds to the Lord in the way He presents Himself in New Church teachings. If we don't ascribe to the ideas of this religion, then we should find one that inspires us to follow the Lord—we are not to make up our own way, and we cannot leave out the ways that are inconvenient to us. When we do this, we are following ourselves and no longer the Lord. The more we look to His will and less to our own, we can indeed ask anything in His name, and He will do it.

The purpose of religion is for us to reconnect with the Lord, and that has to happen according to specific spiritual ideals that the Lord has provided. Within His providence, He has indeed provided several different systems to reach all of His created people. Why should we choose one system over another? It should provide us with a clear understanding of what life is all about and shine a light on the path you are walking. In the New Church, the teachings the Lord has given us shine a bright light on the path and open up our understanding of what life is about.

Live your faith. And as we said together in our recitation today: “If it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Amen.

Readings:

1Sam 10. You shall go down before me to Gilgal; and surely I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and make sacrifices of peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, till I come to you and show you what you should do.”

1Sam 13. Then the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger, then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, “Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me.” And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him.

And Samuel said, “What have you done?”

Saul said, “When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the Lord.’ Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering.”

And Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you.

John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

John 14:12-14 Jesus said, “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.

Divine Providence 330.5,6 It is an insane heresy to believe that only those born in the church are saved. People born outside the church are just as human as people born within it. They come from the same heavenly source. They are equally living and immortal souls. They have religions as well, religions that enable them to believe that God exists and that they should lead good lives; and all of them who do believe in God and lead good lives become spiritual on their own level and are saved. Someone could point out that they do not know the Lord, and that apart from the Lord there is no salvation. But no one is saved because of knowing about the Lord. We are saved because we live by his commandments. Further, the Lord is known to everyone who believes in God because the Lord is the God of heaven and earth.

True Christianity 107 No Christians will go to heaven unless they believe in the Lord God the Savior and turn to Him alone. ... There are those of course who know nothing about the Lord. If they believe in one God and follow the principles of their religion in their lives they are saved by their faith and by their life. Spiritual credit or blame applies only to those who know; it does not apply to those who do not. We do not blame the blind for tripping. As the Lord says, "If you had been blind you would have had no sin; but now that you say you see, your sin remains" (John 9:41).

142. The Word is the only means by which Christians can go to the Lord and the Lord can come to them.