

Reacting to Evil, Part 2: Amending

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

21 January, 2024

Children's Talk: Should You Help Bad People?

Matthew 5:43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

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Last week we looked at how we are to think of people who commit evil: we are to find a way to love them, and to look on them with compassion, and find ways that we can excuse their evils by considering their possible motives. We continue with this theme today, but with a shift in focus: having adjusted our view of the person, we can then move on to addressing the evil itself. It's important that before we move on to amending the evil, we have worked on our own viewpoint first: if we are still looking on someone from anger or hatred or any lack of charity, we will be in no position to help them. As the Lord said:

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. (Matthew 7:3-5)

This well-known teaching reminds us to work on ourselves before we judge another.

But we also cannot neglect the final phrase: "First remove the plank from your own eye, *and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*"

Again, one of the reasons to work on self first is so that we can then help someone else.

This is reflected in the story of Noah's drunkenness that we looked at last week. The two sons, Shem and Japheth, did not look at their fathers nakedness; instead they,

...took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (Genesis 9:23)

They put every effort into not seeing their father; but that did not stop them from doing something about it: they covered him to the best of their abilities until he

awoke and sobered up. This reflects how those with charity react to evil done by other people:

Those who are in the faith of charity observe what is good, and if they see anything evil and false, they excuse it, and if they can, try to amend it in him, as is here said of Shem and Japheth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079)

If we have both faith and charity, we won't just put a good interpretation on someone who does evil; we will also strive to amend that individual. Now before we go further, I want to point out that the passage says that people like this excuse the evil, and *if they can*, try to amend it. In other words we have control over ourselves and our viewpoints, and so are always responsible for excusing and bringing charity to bear on the matter. But we are not always in a position to amend someone else's behaviour, and in fact there are aspects that we have no control over whatsoever. I'll go into that side of things later, but I wanted to draw attention to it at the outset. We are not responsible for fixing people; we are simply responsible for doing what we can to help.

But let's start with the things we actually can do to amend evil. And we'll start with an Old Testament law that at first glance has nothing to do with this, but actually says quite a lot. It's a law about what they had to do with the animals belonging to an enemy:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, returning you shall return it to him again. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from removing it, removing you shall remove it with him. (Exodus 23:4-5)

The law is, even if someone is your enemy, you have to return their missing ox or donkey to them; and even if they hate you, you still have to help them out if you notice their donkey is overburdened. Alright, so what on earth does this have to do with amending evil in another person? There is a spiritual meaning that is highly relevant to the question at hand. An enemy represents someone outside the church,

or in other words, someone who doesn't know right and wrong, good and evil, the same way that you might. When someone does not know any better, they are led astray.

Remember last week we talked about one way of excusing evil is by considering that perhaps someone does not know better? That's exactly what this is talking about. If we notice someone committing evil from ignorance, we are obligated by this spiritual law to set them straight by indicating what the truth really is. That's what returning the ox or the donkey represents. So yes, give them the benefit of the doubt; but don't leave them in ignorance! Tell them about the damage they are causing! Let them know what it is doing to you, or others, or even them themselves!

The representation of the overburdened donkey is even more pressing: it represents a case in which the falsity that a person is going by is pressing down on them and even killing the goodness in them. They will spiritually perish without any intervention. It is paramount that we intervene!

Removing you shall remove it with him. That this signifies exhortation and effort toward amendment, is evident from the signification of "removing," when said of the falsity which does not agree with the good of the church, as being amendment (see above, n. 9258), and here effort toward amendment, and exhortation, because such falsity is amended with difficulty. (*Secrets of Heaven* §9259)

Sometimes, out of ignorance, people just make basic mistakes. But at times they really mess up, in ways that actually destroys something good. That is the falsity that does not agree with the good of the church. Take a friend who genuinely and sincerely believes that an affair now and again will improve his marriage. That falsity is not just a mistake; it will kill his marriage. Before that happens, we are called to let him know that in fact fidelity is the only way to improve his marriage. This is no easy task. It takes not just informing someone of the facts, but actually exhorting them to a new way of life and putting effort in. It will feel confrontational, judgmental, and just

plain awkward. But if you actual value the life of your friend, calling out their evils and urging them to change is an obligation. Going back to the image of the donkey that is being crushed under the weight of its load: when we call someone out, and encourage them to change, and we do it from love and charity, we actual are removing a burden from their life. Evil and falsity hurt the person engaged in them, not just others. We must return what is lost and relieve the burdens even of our enemies.

But what is actually our responsibility here? We are obligated to try to amend the person first by instructing or setting them straight. But what if they refuse to listen? What if they commit great evils, or continually engage in the same evil over and over again? Are we just to let them off the hook? The answer is no, not at all. We can forgive and excuse, while also holding people responsible. Sometimes imposing a punishment itself can be a form of love for the one who has committed evil. This love is described in the Teachings of the New Church:

There is charity in punishing the evil, for to this he is impelled by his zeal to amend them, and at the same time to protect the good, lest these suffer injury at the hands of the evil. In this way does a man consult the welfare of one who is in evil, or his enemy, and express his good feeling toward him, as well as to others, and to the common weal itself; and this from charity toward the neighbour. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2417)

There are some people who are in the position of actually imposing a clear punishment. A judge can take all the steps that we have talked about today and last week to love the criminal, and give him the benefit of the doubt, and look on him with true love; and yet also impose a punishment, in the hope that it will help the individual reform, even if they won't listen to the appeals of reason and empathy.

Obviously very few of us are in the position of imposing punishments, although parents, teachers, and supervisors are some examples that are common. But all of us are able to impose consequences and put up boundaries. The key is

that in doing these things we not do them out of vengeance or vindictiveness, but that they are done with the sincerer hope that the friend we cut out of our life, or the acquaintance we avoid at all costs, or whoever it may be, will take the hint and change their behaviour.

But although that change of heart should be our hope, it is the thing we have the least control over. We can confront people, and inform them, and encourage them to do better, and strive to help them improve, and if necessary set up boundaries and impose punishments; but at the end of the day we cannot force a person to reject evil and embrace good. That is a choice that lies solely between the individual and the Lord. This reality is expressed in another Old Testament law, the law of the pledge:

When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you. (Deuteronomy 24:10-11)

Again, a rule that might seem irrelevant. But the Teachings of the New Church explain this as representing our limits in working with other people: we can call to them and instruct them and, as we have seen, even impose consequences; but we cannot go in and artificially change their minds (*Secrets of Heaven* §9213:6).

Just as the house of the debtor was inviolate against his creditors, so the minds of all are inviolate against the impositions of all, no matter how good or wise those others might be.

Reaching this point with a loved one or a family member can feel tragic. It usually comes after exhortation after exhortation, pleading and begging for something better from them, and countless consequences given followed by countless second-chances. There comes a point though when we have to accept that stopping the evil behaviour might be the best we can hope for. That we can cut

them off or allow them to suffer the full force of the consequences for their actions, but we cannot cross that threshold and force them to be good at heart. We can only amend others to a certain extent; the rest is up to them.

In the end, the part we have most control over is our viewpoint. Even when we see that someone refuses to change, and seems hell-bent on persisting in causing harm, we can still love them through the belief that even the worst of us can be reformed, and the sincere hope that they wake up and repent. In this way we can keep the Lord's command to love all, even our enemies, and also protect the innocent, and strive to make the world a better, more loving, wise place.