

# Reacting to Evil, Part 1: Excusing

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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## Children's Talk: The Rainbow in the Cloud

This story happened just after a huge storm had flooded everything, but the Lord had rescued Noah, his family, and the animals.

Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God here is saying he will make an agreement, or a covenant, that He will never again flood the earth. God then said that when clouds came, and people might be afraid that there would be a horrible storm, He would put a sign in the cloud to remind people that He would keep them safe.

And God said: "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." And God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth." (Genesis 9:8-17)

What did God say would be the reminder that He was keeping them safe even when clouds came? It was the rainbow. I have here a picture, and what do you see? You can see the rainbow of course; but off to the left there is something else: huge storm clouds. Rainbows only appear when there is also rain somewhere nearby. Now when there are storm clouds, you could



just focus on them and nothing else. But then you would miss this beautiful rainbow!

The same is true when we notice bad things in our lives. The bad things are like storm clouds. Have you ever had a bad day when all you could think about was the bad things? Nobody likes me! Everything is going wrong! I never get what I want! I'm always going to be miserable! I'll never be happy! That's like seeing a storm coming and not seeing anything else. But there is always a rainbow, that reminder from the Lord that there are good things, and that there are even better things to come. The Lord will carry you through the storm.

What are some of the good things you could notice even when upset and having a bad day? Someone does love you; some things are going right; even if you are not getting what you want right now, perhaps you did yesterday and will again tomorrow; there are ways of becoming happier; the Lord will help you change what you see, and eventually how you think and feel.

That is the promise of a rainbow: the Lord will always be there to help make things better. So when there is a cloud, look for the rainbow, and remember the Lord's promises.

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We live in a fallen world, in which evil abounds. Now that sounds pretty bleak, and it is. But when I say evil I'm not just talking about sinister, malicious, horrific evil; I'm talking about anything and everything that is bad on some spiritual level. There are indeed colossal and widespread evil in the world. There is also the evil of stealing a Kit-Kat from the Spar or speaking rudely about someone behind their back. Today we aren't going to look at the evil itself so much as we are going to look at our reaction to evil. Depending on many factors we will have various responses to evil. Some of the ways we respond can help the situation, other ways can exacerbate or make things worse, or add further evil to that which already exists. How we respond to evil is a crucial part of how we engage with the world.

The story of Noah's drunkenness reveals a great deal about two of the most fundamental ways that people react when they see something bad done by another person. This took place after Noah and his sons had left the ark and begun to establish themselves again after the flood:

Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated. And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth 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. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. (Genesis 9:18-24)

Ham, upon seeing his father in an embarrassing and vulnerable situation, ran to tell his brothers. This was not a case of going to get help but rather taking advantage to mock and deride their father. The other brothers, Shem and Japheth, take the

opposite approach: they cover their father with a garment, going so far as to avert their eyes so as not to look on their father in his predicament.

On the literal level Noah's display is an embarrassing one, but hardly evil. But on the spiritual level it represents all of us when we fall into evil behaviour; likewise, the two reactions of the brothers represent the two ways of reacting to evil committed by another person. I should add that we will not so much looking at how we fix evil, but how we view it, how we hold it in our hearts and minds, how we think about the people who commit it, etc. There is of course a time and place for stepping up and doing something to stop the harm or redirect the individual, and that will be the topic for next week. But today the focus is on our view of people.

Ham, the son who mocked and derided his father, represents those who look on other people without any charity. Their quality is described in the Teachings of the New Church:

Here, those who are in faith separated from charity are described by "Ham" in his "seeing the nakedness of his father" that is, his errors and perversions; for they who are of this character see nothing else in a person....

Where there is no charity, there is the love of self, and therefore hatred against all who do not favour self. Consequently such persons see in the neighbour only what is evil, and if they see anything good, they either perceive it as nothing, or put a bad interpretation upon it. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079)

...with those who are in no charity, there is continual contempt for others, or continual derision, and on every occasion a publishing of their errors. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1080)

Unfortunately, many of us have, at times, fallen into this category. Have you ever known someone who, every time you see them, your mind goes back to the bad things they have done? Have you ever then dwelt on them, even when they weren't around anymore, maybe late at night as you fall asleep? I know I've thought back on some infraction from a teacher in my childhood and my blood starts to boil with

righteous indignation once again! Decades later, I'm still seeing or thinking of that person from the point of view of one mistake that they made.

It's funny that we can even intentionally dismiss any good things that might change our view. As the passage points out, "if they see anything good, they either perceive it as nothing, or put a bad interpretation upon it." We either say, "well that's not the *real* version of them, it's inconsequential," or worse, "they only do good when they have ulterior motives, they're just in it for themselves!" If someone praises them, we may be quick to point out exactly why they are not worthy of such praise after all.

It's like having a negative filter that taints everything we see. When we see bad things, it highlights them and obscures anything good; when we see good things, it warps them to look bad. Ironically, we have the phrase "rose-tinted glasses," referring to a naive optimism or nostalgia. Yet we actually have to be far more concerned with having lifeless, grey-tinted glasses. Yes, there is good and bad out there; but our filter changes how we see both good and bad, and our filter can make us see everything in a worse light.

I hope it is clear why that is not a spiritually healthy way of viewing people. But the opposite mind-set can be quite hard to achieve. Here's how the Teachings of the New Church describe the other kind of people, the ones represented by Shem and Japheth, Noah's two other sons who draped a garment over him and turned away their eyes.

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....

They who are in charity scarcely see the evil of another, but observe all his goods and truths, and put a good interpretation on what is evil and false. Such are all the angels, which they have from the Lord, who bends all evil into good. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079)

Those who are in charity think nothing but good of their neighbour and speak only well of him, and this not for their own sake or the favour of another whom

they flatter, but from the Lord thus working in charity. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1088)

It's a really beautiful sentiment: no matter who you are thinking of, even someone who has made a mistake or done something wrong, focus on the good in them, don't pay attention to the errors, and put a good interpretation on their mistakes. Even excuse them! I think we would all like to be seen this way: not defined by what we have done at our worst, but rather by who we aspire to be, to be judged by the good that we strive for. And if it is how we would like to be seen it is only fair that we work to see other people the same way.

For small infractions this is easy. I totally get why someone is late to a meeting or in a moment of anger says something he or she doesn't really mean. I can still see the good in the person and excuse the bad behaviour. But what of more egregious evils, or evils that are repeated again and again? Are we supposed to excuse them too? The Word doubles down in fact: the detail that the brothers bore the garment on their shoulders,

...signifies that they did this-that is, interpreted for good and excused-with all their might, [as] is evident from the signification of "shoulder" as being all power. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1085)

Even when it is extraordinarily difficult, we still must put a good interpretation on and excuse another person's evil. We must do so with all of our might.

This is the real challenge of today's topic. There are times when a great barrier stands in the way of us seeing someone from the point of view of goodness and charity. I won't go into all the possibilities, but what about when someone has done the inexcusable? They have lied to you over and over again, never shown any remorse, and seem hell-bent on ruining the relationship or having their own way no matter what. Or what about when we look at the horror we see that takes place daily

in the news: murders and abuse and destruction? We may even say, “there is no excuse!”

I suspect that part of what gets in the way is a righteous instinct. We don't want to let someone off the hook because if we do, their evil will continue to wreak havoc, and we cannot stand the evils they are committing. That is a good and right instinct. We should be totally averse to evil, and oppose it to the best of our abilities. But remember, we are talking today about how we hold the individual in our minds eye; and there, even when the evil itself is totally and completely unacceptable, we must find a way to love even our enemies.

So what might this look like in practice? We take someone who has done some evil, such that whenever we think of that person we are filled with hatred towards them. How can we excuse that person? Not, notice, how can we make what they did ok; evil is never good, and cannot become good no matter how we view it. But how can we separate the person from what they have done?

One excuse you can offer is ignorance: maybe they just had no idea what they were doing, or even if they knew it was wrong, they did not realize just how wrong. As hard as it can be to believe, some people have been taught such a wrapped view of the world that they really don't actually know what is right and what is wrong. Another excuse is that perhaps they had good intentions. Even people with the best of intentions can do grave evil. At the same time, some people have had such harsh experiences that when under pressure they retreat, instinctively, into protecting themselves even at the expense of others. It is self-focused, but it is a reaction beyond their control, and is not about hurting others on purpose. Another helpful way to excuse a person is to put yourself in their shoes. We are much more willing to excuse ourselves than others, since we can see our own underlying



motives in a way we cannot with others. This is hard to do with the egregious stuff because our reaction is to claim we would *never* do something that bad; but at the very least, give some thought to what if, somehow, you did? What might have put you into that situation that would at least make it comprehensible, something other than, “they are an evil malicious sinner.”

Allowing for any of these excuses takes trying to understand the person, and what may have led them to doing what they did. As you start down this thought process there will be a knee-jerk resistance, a part that doesn't want to believe there could be any excuse, because of a deep fear that if I truly do understand their reasoning, I would let them off the hook, and I don't want to do that. But understanding and even excusing is not the same as ignoring the problem or letting them get away with it; you can fully understand someone's motives, without it meaning that now they don't have to be held responsible. Next week we will look more into holding people accountable, as it is very important. But before we take that action we need to come from an attitude of forgiveness and understanding.

In none of these cases will we know for sure why they did what they did; that is known to the Lord alone:

What is not lawful, is judgment as to the quality of the interior mind or soul within man, thus as to what his spiritual state is and hence his lot after death. This is known to the Lord alone. (*Married Love* §523)

But in opening the door to these possibilities, we allow something of love to enter into our view of them. It is possible to love even our enemies, those who persecute and spitefully use us. If we can achieve this, through the Lord's help, we will find freedom from anger and hatred, and in its place will come love, charity, and eternal joy.