

From Inner to Outer, Part 1

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

25 February, 2024

Children's Talk: Eating Crumbs

The story from the Lord's Word today is a bit of a strange one. It is about a woman who wanted the Lord to help her daughter, but at first the Lord said that He wouldn't. The woman was not from the Jewish people, whom the Lord had come to first, to make sure that they were living the Word right. But when she showed a certain kind of faith, Jesus was then willing to help. The story also involves children, dogs, food, and crumbs:

From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."

And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs."

Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter."

And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed. (Mark 7:24-30)

So the Lord and the woman had an interesting conversation about children and dogs. Could someone come up and sit here at this table? Now I have here a little dog. Do you think it would be right to take this food away from you so that I could feed the dog? I don't think so. The child needs the food more than the dogs do. On the other hand, as the child is eating, crumbs will fall onto the floor. Is it ok for the dog to eat those? Of course! That way both the child and the dog can get what they need.

This can help us understand why the Lord at first did not help the woman, but then did. The Lord came to help the people who most needed the help first. He came to the people who knew a lot about God and the Word, but were then twisting that to make themselves powerful and to boss people around and to hurt them. It was really

important that the Lord stop that first; He couldn't help anyone else if it would let those other people get away with what they were doing. Imagine if your brother cut a big cut, and your dad was trying to help him. Would it be right for your dad to leave him to help you with a small bump? No! But does that mean your dad doesn't love you, or that he doesn't care, or that he won't do anything for you at all? Also no! The woman understood that; she got the importance of what Jesus was doing; all she wanted was a little help, help that would not take away from those more important things the Lord was doing.

Because she understood that, and had real faith that the Lord could act on it, the Lord did heal her daughter. When we feel like the Lord is not fixing our problems, maybe there are more important things that He is fixing or making ok; but He also does still have time for us and our problems. We should not assume that our problems are the biggest or most important, or think that the Lord has to help us to the detriment of everyone else. But if we trust that the Lord does care about our problems, He can and will help us in time, in the best ways possible, so that things can be good for everyone, not just us.

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At first glance our story for today appears odd, even offensive. A woman, who was not Jewish, an outsider, asked Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter. Jesus' response is to compare her to a dog: "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs" (Mark 7:27). Yet that did not deter the woman. She pressed her case by saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). Because of this attitude the Lord did in fact heed her request and cast the demon out of her daughter. This story, on a spiritual level, has some important things to say about how those within the church view those outside of the church.

I want to take a step back and first think how we view people who are not part of the church, and what that actually means. The New Church has very expansive definition of the broader or universal church:

Those who are outside the Church, and yet acknowledge one God, and live according to their religion in a kind of charity toward the neighbour, are in communion with those who are of the Church, because no one is condemned who believes in God, and lives well. From this it is evident that the Lord's Church is everywhere in the whole world, although specifically it is where the Lord is acknowledged, and where the Word is. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10765)

Anyone and everyone who acknowledges some sort of Divine and lives in charity is part of the Lord's universal church. All the people who have these two qualities, whether New Church or Christian, Buddhist or Hindu, Muslim or Jewish, or whatever faith you can think of, are saved by the Lord and will live to eternity in heaven.

But this could very easily put a certain question into your mind: if all people of all faiths have some path to heaven, what's the point of being part of one particular faith at all? Why not take what you like from the Hindus and the Muslims and the Jews and so on and mesh them all together with what you like of the New Church? It

sounds a bit like a delightful buffet of spiritual ideas. This is where we come back to our story and the reason the Lord gave for maintaining such a strong distinction between the Jewish people and the gentiles. When asked to heal this gentile girl He answered, “Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (Mark 7:27). In other words, it would not be right to deprive the child of his food in order to feed the dogs. It’s more important that the child get fed.

This dynamic would happen in the church if, in our appreciation of the ways the Lord reaches all people, we started to water down or even negate the truths that we find in His Word. The Teachings of the New Church give as an example polygamy as practiced by the ancient Jews and Muslims: as it is something they do innocently, and from their religion, it is fine! And yet, were a Christian to practice polygamy, it would be adultery (*Marriage Love* §339-341). In other words, a Christian can look on a Muslim practicing polygamy, and understand that perhaps he is a good man or woman, doing their best according to their religion; and yet at the very same time completely and utterly reject polygamy as an option for himself, as something that would be vile and adulterous.

The same is true of how to practice true charity. The Teachings of the New Church is filled with details about repentance as the path to charity, and how to examine yourself, find the evils there, ask the Lord for help, shun them, and live a new life. Now it is true that all other religions have some form of this process, some way of identifying bad things and getting rid of them; and we should appreciate and love that the Lord has provided these things to all people. But imagine if, when we found a particular evil that we didn’t want to give up, we simply turned to a religion that said it was fine; or, when repentance got hard, we tried searching for a faith that

offered an easier, simpler alternative. We would quickly deprive ourselves of the very truths of the church that the Lord gave us so that we could live better lives; in the words of Jesus' saying, the children would be deprived of their food for the sake of the little dogs. If we claim to be part of the Lord's New Christian Church then we have to hold fast to what He teaches.

Now that's not to say that the benefit of the New Church is just an obligation to live a certain way, according to a certain understanding of the Lord. Although it may feel like a burden, the more we allow the deep and detailed truths of the New Church to shape us, the happier we will be. This is because the more we know about who the Lord is and about how to live a good life the better able we will be to live that good life (*Secrets of Heaven* §2049). I have many times heard people say, "It would be so much easier to be part of a different church; there are so many details and teachings and commandments in the New Church that it imposes an overwhelming level of obligations." And there's even some truth to that; but I think we should rather flip that attitude on its head. What an amazing opportunity to know so many details about the Lord, who He is and what He is like, the many ways He leads and guides us, the ways He reaches out and connects with us. And likewise what an amazing opportunity to have so many details about life change through repentance, to know in intimate detail what it means to live good life, to be able to continuously refine, through an entire lifetime, our understanding and wisdom of life. Yes these can feel like burdens, but truly they are blessings. Why would we cast aside the chance to truly be conjoined with God and live the happiest, most joyful life possible? Would we really be happier without these?

The importance of having the New Church being a distinct and strong faith is not just for us either. Take the example of a Catholic. Should a Catholic live a good

life by means of threats of punishment and purgatory and excommunication, all well and good. It may not be ideal, but if it through their faith they end up living a genuinely good life, then there is no problem (see *Arcana Coelestia* §3993). But should those false ideas warp them or turn them to evil, or going the other way turn them to reject the Lord altogether, there must be a church to which they can resort, a church that teaches clearly the Lord's love and forgiveness, the Lord's ability to transform a person through true repentance. As people who are aware of the Teachings of the New Church, our hope should be that we can use them to serve those who are struggling in their own faiths, or those with no faith, and especially those whose faiths have led them to live evilly. The Lord compares this way of being the church to the salt of the earth:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. (Matthew 5:13)

When the New Church offers something that can heal the world, it is like salt that can season food. But when the New Church withholds that healing truth from the world, there is no opportunity for healing. If even the salt loses flavour, there's not much point to adding it to anyone's food. If the New Church withers and fades because everyone can get to heaven anyway, then people who otherwise would have been reformed and saved through it will instead be lost.

The benefit of the New Church is also not restricted to those people who know of it and experience it directly. The Teachings of the New Church compare it to how the heart and the lungs operate in the body.

The universal church on the earth in the sight of the Lord resembles a single man, just as heaven does (see n. 59-72); but the church where the Word is and where the Lord is known by means of it is like the heart and lungs in that man. It is known that all the viscera and members of the entire body draw their life from the heart and lungs through various derivations; and it is thus that those of the human race live who are outside of the church where the

Word is, and who constitute the members of that man. (*Heaven and Hell* §308)

Not every cell in the body is part of the heart and lungs; and yet every cell in the body is fed and supported by the heart and lungs, and every cell needs for there to be a heart and lungs in order for them to do their job. When the New Church is strong, and is lived daily, everyone benefits, both people scattered around the world in this life and the spirits and angels of the next life. It is not that everyone has to be New Church, far from it! But there does have to be a healthy New Church in the world. That is crucial.

None of this is to say that a New Church person is automatically better or more important than a non-New Church person. Just as a person could have a weak heart in muscular body, if those who are part of the New Church do not live its Teachings, we will be useless to others, and those others may be extraordinarily good people, comparable to the strong and healthy muscles in a body with a weak heart. We'll talk more about this aspect next week, when we look at what the attitude of those who are in the New Church should be. The New Church in its ideal form is indeed the crown of all prior churches; yet any individual, whether New Church or not, is to be judged on the life they live, not the church they are part of.

Crucially then, the take away here is not to somehow think that those who are part of the New Church are better than anyone else. Rather the take away is to strive to be the best member of the New Church that you can be (or in fact, of whatever faith you may be part of). Yes, all people of all faiths can be saved. But when we live the specific teachings of the New Church, to the best of our abilities, we provide not only for our own happiness, but for the opportunity to increase the happiness of others, and invite them into a way of life that is steeped in the Lord's wisdom and inspired by the depth of His love.