

# Childhood Spirituality, Part 2: Heavenly Innocence

A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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## Children's Talk: Following the Lord

- What does it mean to be a Christian?
- It means to follow the Lord, Jesus Christ.
- How does someone become a Christian?
- They are baptized:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:16-20)

- Baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
  - Water = washing away evil, facing temptations
- Teach to do what the Lord commanded
- VERY simple: worship the Lord, and try to do what is right, and you are on your way to being a Christian.

# Childhood Spirituality, Part 2: Heavenly Innocence

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What words come to mind when you think of little children? Children are innocent. Last we talked about how the loving things of childhood remain and sustain the love we have in adulthood. This week we are going to look in more detail at how the innocence of childhood becomes the innocence of adulthood.

What makes children so innocent? In popular culture we might say that innocence is a combination of ignorance and sweetness. There's some truth to that. But the Teachings of the New Church give a more spiritual definition of innocence: innocence is simply a willingness to be led by the Lord, without question or hesitation. Little children have this kind of willingness to be led by others because they have as of yet not formed their own personal idea of what is good or evil, or what is true and false. Now this is obviously true of a new-born. But we can see that children are still innocent even when they have reached an age at which they can "know" right and wrong. This is because even then there is a kind of ignorance; yes, they can identify right and wrong, and that is important; but they cannot fully understand the implications of right and wrong, nor can evil, true, consciously chosen, malicious evil, be ascribed to them. This state of mind, this simple willingness to be led, produces all the other aspects of innocence, as explained in the Teachings of the New Church:

Children have no prudence from what is their own, no purpose or deliberation, thus no end that looks to evil; neither have they anything of their own acquired from love of self and the world; they do not attribute anything to themselves, regarding all that they have as received from their parents; they are content with the few and paltry things presented to them, and find delight in them; they have no worry about food and clothing, and none about the future; they do not look to the world and covet many things from it; they love their parents and

nurses and their child companions with whom they play in innocence; they allow themselves to be led; they give heed and obey. (*Heaven and Hell* §277)

I think we have seen all these qualities in children, and it touches and moves us. It is a little piece of heaven in human form, directly connecting us with the Lord. They are happy with simple things; they don't stress about the million things that we adults stress about; they love people and play so freely and unselfconsciously. They let parents take the lead and they obey without hesitation.

And yet. We all know the flipside of that. Children can be stubbornly disobedient, can throw a tantrum at the drop of a hat, and can worry about a bewildering array of (to adults) insignificant issues. What gives? What happened to all that heavenly innocence? Even in those circumstances children still are innocent; but their very innocence can lead to conflicts. Children are easily led and obedient; but that means they can easily be led by all manner of unhealthy things. The sweet in the check-out line can lead just as easily if not better than mom at times. Being so easily led a child will have a harder time than an adult choosing which pulls to follow and which to resist.

Another way of thinking of it is that children are sponges. They absorb everything around them, one way or another; and the very lack of discernment that makes them so innocent makes them vulnerable to harmful influences. They don't have a conscious filter separating out the good from the bad. Like a sponge, they will suck up whatever they are surrounded by.

The responsibility of adults is therefore not to just appreciate the innocence of childhood, but to surround children with good things for them to take in, to be led and shaped by. Without this environment, they will take in other things that are not so healthy. We don't need to make children innocent; they have that already, regardless of what we do! We need to feed their innocence with good and healthy things.

Children are less like sculptures and more like plants. A sculpture you carefully shape to be formed exactly as you like; you control the outcome completely. A living plant on the other hand is outside of our control. We give it a good environment, and yes even prune it at times; but it grows apart from us. We cannot force a child to be a certain way; but we can give it the loving spiritual environment that will foster healthy growth.

The ways of doing this are endless, but I will mention a few here:

- Openly discuss spiritual things
- Read the Word
- Have worship at home
- Pray together
- Be a role model of spiritual living
- Take seriously the spiritual aspect of the child's life.

But as we all know, no matter how positive the environment we give a child, he or she will grow up, and the innocence will start to fade, perhaps even disappearing. Adult life brings hardness to most people, an awareness of all that is harsh and evil, and a more conscious need to deliberate on what is right and wrong before making a choice. We then run into a misconception of innocence: once lost, it is never recoverable. Perhaps this is why some parents do everything to delay their children growing up: it feels like a permanent loss. This is even truer for those who have been exposed to grave evil or harm. We talk of them having "grown up too soon." When we, as adults, make our own grave mistakes we move even further from an idea of innocence. We feel as if we are forever stained by those mistakes, never to return to that pure, innocent state of childhood.

But although this idea is common, it is not true; the innocence has not actually gone anywhere. As we discussed last week, it is hidden perhaps, but not gone; and in fact all of us have the capacity to return to innocence, and in fact to enter into a kind of innocence that is greater and purer than anything we experienced as a child. This rebirth comes up in a discussion that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-8)

The Lord said that you must be born again. Nicodemus (correctly) points out that it is impossible to go back and start over at birth. In his objection I think we see a parallel to our own sense that we cannot go back to the innocence of childhood; and in one way we are correct, just as Nicodemus was about rebirth.

But Jesus then points us to a different kind of rebirth, a different kind of going back. We can be born again spiritually. If we are willing we can become as innocent as a little child; except with this crucial difference: we will no longer be innocent because we were born into it; instead we will be innocent because we will have chosen it, heart and mind. As such our innocence will not be skin-deep, nor will it be easily manipulated. Our innocence will give us an amazing and powerful perspective of life; all of the tenderness and love and wonder of childhood innocence, paired with a deep love and understanding of the Lord:

Neither are they anxious about the future; anxiety about the future they call care for the morrow, which they define as grief on account of losing or not receiving things that are not necessary for the uses of life. With companions they never act from an evil end but from what is good, just, and sincere. Acting from an evil end they call cunning, which they shun as the poison of a

serpent, since it is wholly antagonistic to innocence. As they love nothing so much as to be led of the Lord, attributing all things they receive to Him, they are kept apart from what is their own; and to the extent that they are kept apart from what is their own the Lord flows into them; and in consequence of this whatever they hear from the Lord, whether through the Word or by means of preaching, they do not store up in the memory, but instantly obey it, that is, will it and do it, their will being itself their memory. These for the most part outwardly appear simple, but inwardly they are wise and prudent. These are meant by the Lord in the words,

Be ye prudent as serpents and simple as doves (Matt. 10:16).

Such is the innocence that is called the innocence of wisdom. (*Heaven and Hell* §278)

I think all of us would love to have this level of love and trust in the Lord. And we all can. This innocence is not something we are born (or not born) with. It is not for special people who have been blessed with it more than others. It is the result of following the Lord, to the best of our abilities, day in and day out, for years and decades.

When we as adults see the innocence of childhood, we are not merely seeing a reflection of our past. We are also seeing a picture of our future selves: our second birth will come with a permanent return to innocence. But this time around the innocence will not be of ignorance, but of wisdom; and it will be an innocence that deepens and grows to eternity, and an innocence that fuels a profound love and charity, both for the Lord and for others.