

Are You an Optimist or a Pessimist?

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

6 October, 2024

Children's Talk: Finding the Good

What matters more: the good parts of a person or the bad parts of a person?

The good parts are much more important. But sometimes all we can see are the bad parts. It can be so easy to see the bad parts of someone else that we miss the good parts. For example, when someone misbehaves, it's easy to notice; but it is a lot harder to see how much work they have put into doing things better.

We also see the bad things someone has done in the past, and don't notice the good things someone is doing today. Jesus says that the good someone does now is more important than the bad they did before. He used a parable of a lost sheep to teach this:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:4-7)

A sheep got lost. Then the sheep was found and brought back. What if all the other sheep would not let it back because it had once been lost? But because it was found, it was brought back and was as much a part of the flock as any other sheep. Likewise, when a person does evil, it makes no sense to hold that against them when they repent. We should focus on who they are now, not who they were then!

So how can we make sure we are doing this? One way is to be always trying to find the good that is present in a person. Especially the good that we can see here and now. When someone is angry, can we understand what they care so much about, even if they are showing it poorly? When someone is unkind, can we remember that they have the potential to become kind again? When someone

disappoints us, can we trust that they may have reasons that we cannot see, and not take it personally?

Give people second chances, instead of writing them off. There is always some good that can be found, and if we see people from that goodness, we can help create opportunities for them to re-join the flock as it were, and move on from the past.

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Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Do optimists see the world as it truly is, and the pessimists are blinded by their own negativity? Or are pessimists just realists who are willing to acknowledge the inherent cruelty of life, while optimists naively turn a blind eye to pain and suffering? Or is life simply a mishmash of both positions, and whether we ought to be optimistic or pessimistic depends entirely on our own unique circumstances? There is not necessarily a clear answer. But the Lord does give us guidance on how we should view the world, and the attitude that we should foster if we want to see it as it truly is.

The existence of good alongside evil, even in their extremes, is attested in the Word. Jesus taught that,

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

This passage brings together both an optimistic view (rejoice and be exceedingly glad!) and a pessimistic view (the world will revile and persecute you). The optimism of the individual is placed against pessimism about the nature of the world. This is really where we have to go to understand what we are even talking about: are we talking about whether the world is ultimately a good or a bad place, or whether an individual focuses on the good or the bad of the world? Ultimately it is much less about what the world is actually like and far more about how you see it. The Eeyores and Tiggers of the world share the same experiences but have polar opposite views. As the Teachings of the New Church put it,

Take the person who has a cheerful disposition; everything he hears and sees seems to him to contain joy and laughter. But for one who has a sad

disposition everything he sees and hears seems to be sad and dismal.
(*Secrets of Heaven* §920)

Beauty (or lack thereof) is in the eye of the beholder. We see what we expect to see and miss what might actually be the case.

So which view does the Lord want us to take? The story of Noah gives us some insight. This is a lesser-known part of Noah's story, but after the flood receded Noah planted a vineyard and began to produce wine. At one point he became drunk and was found in an embarrassing state by his sons. Their reactions to his drunkenness represent our own reactions to good or evil in the world:

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. (Genesis 9:20-23)

Ham, when he saw his father drunk, ran to bring the news to his brothers, in order to mock their father together. Shem and Japheth on the other hand covered him with a blanket, and would not even look so that they might see his nakedness. Ham represents what we might call a pessimistic attitude, one that is on the lookout for evil wherever it goes, and so inevitably finds it. Shem and Japheth on the other hand represent a more optimistic attitude, one that turns away from and covers over evil.

That latter point of view sounds quite naïve, doesn't it? And yet that is exactly the attitude that the Lord and the angels of heaven take when it comes to noticing or focusing on evil in other people or in the world. The Teachings of the New Church assert this in explaining the story of Noah's drunkenness:

Here Ham's noticing his father's nakedness, that is, his errors and perversities, describes people with whom faith is separated from charity. Such people see nothing else but errors and perversities residing with a person. But those who have faith that inheres in charity are different. They notice the goods, and if they do see evils and falsities they excuse them, and if possible

endeavour with that person to correct them, as is said here of Shem and Japheth.

[2] Where charity does not exist self-love is present and consequently hatred towards all who do not show favour to self. As a result they see in the neighbour nothing except his evil. Or if they do see anything good they either perceive it as nothing or else place a bad interpretation on it....

But those who have charity hardly notice the evil in another person, but instead notice all the goods and truths that are his; and on his evils and falsities they place a good interpretation. Of such a nature are all angels, it being something they have from the Lord, who bends everything evil into good. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1079)

Just as the Lord bends even evil towards something good, He calls us on us to always see the good in others and in situations and in society.

For people who tend to focus on flaws, mistakes, and errors this can be an immense challenge. This is partly because we don't think of our point of view as a point of view per se. How we see the world feels like simply reality, the way things are. This is perhaps why so many pessimists prefer to call themselves realists. My own experience when I've been depressed is not that I am seeing the world through some negative lens; it's rather that the false lens of optimism has fallen away and now I truly see the negativity that was always there. Denying what seems to be reality feels a little unhinged, to say the least. We have to take it on faith that there is good in others, in the world, and even in ourselves, regardless of whether that seems to be the case at any given time. Even the worst people, in the worst situations, and even us at our own worst, have some goodness from the Lord that can be recognized, believed in, held on to, and fostered.

In practice this means fighting are base instincts. When we notice a mother in the shops and her child is screaming while the mother does nothing, we may leap to judging the mother. Surely she is a sub-par parent. Yet contrary to the evidence of what we are seeing, perhaps she is doing the best she can. Perhaps there is trouble at home and just being able to keep her head up is a victory. Perhaps the child has

had an emotionally fraught day and no amount of “good-parenting” would have prevented the screaming. There are always these possibilities to be considered, if we are willing, and they are just as, if not more, real than a pessimistic reaction. Or take even your own view of yourself. Noticing that you have once again let down your partner, you may pessimistically write yourself off as a worthless husband or wife. Yet even here there is an opportunity to see the positive side of things, to understand that even the best of us fall down, that no one is so far gone that they cannot improve, that our failures do not count as any more real than our successes.

That is not to say that we should entirely ignore the evil. If we go back to the story of Noah, while his two better sons did indeed avert their gaze from his shame, they did not ignore his situation. They did what they could to amend it. Likewise, the passage from the teachings of the New Church, while it does say that it is charitable to ignore or excuse a person’s evils, it also pointed out that part of charity is also amending evil as far as one is able to. There is a paradox here: on the one hand, don’t focus too much on the bad; on the other hand, when you do focus on the bad, do what you can to improve it. In spite of the fact that the Lord calls us to always look to the good, we also have to confront the bad in order to make things better, whether in the world at large or within ourselves. We have to “discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3). It’s no use sticking our head into the sand and pretending that everything is perfect.

For those who prefer to be optimistic this can be its own challenge. It is painful to admit how broken the world is, even more painful to admit how broken we are. The Lord models both the need to look honestly and the pain that comes with it. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord took Abraham to oversee the city and to inform him of its need to be destroyed. This represented the Lord’s perception of the

nature of humanity at its lowest point. In it is represented the sheer horror of evil, and the desire to pull back from that viewpoint:

Perception from the Divine, and consequent thought regarding the human race being such [i.e. steeped in self-love, see *Secrets of Heaven* §2140], struck Him with horror; for the Lord's love towards the whole human race was so great that He wished to save all for evermore... (*Secrets of Heaven* §2222)

The Lord Himself, in perceiving how strong evil was embedded in the human heart, recoiled and wished to look away.

Yet there is a crucial detail in this: He did not feel horror from condemnation or hatred for the evil; quite the opposite: He felt horror because His greatest desire was for people to be saved from evil and falsity and to enjoy the blessings of goodness and truth. Any time that we must look evil in the face, it ought to be for the sake of saving and loving, not condemning and rejecting. Indeed, in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord looking out over Sodom with Abraham gave an opportunity to consider and commit to saving those who were still good, all the way to the smallest remnant that might remain. In seeing evil, goodness could be protected.

This is the attitude that we should always bring to noticing evil. How can noticing be a step towards helping? Rather than simply complaining about how other people behave at work, consider how you might constructively improve your relationship with your co-workers. Rather than simply bemoaning the corrupt state of politics, become aware of the needs that must be addressed and advocate for addressing them. Rather than wallowing in despair over your own failings, pick one to work on, trusting that the Lord has brought it to your attention to help you grow. Noticing evil should never be done for its own sake, it should always be done for the sake of love and the potential goodness that can come from it.

The world at large and we as individuals both are a mix of good and evil. We need to look for the good and focus on it, and see evil so that we can amend it. As

one of my favourite authors puts in, “Can [a man] hate [the world] enough to change it, and yet love it enough to think it worth changing?” (Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*, p. 54). But this does not by any means indicate that we should simply balance optimism with pessimism or produce some kind of weak middle ground between the two. Our foundation and starting point should be a kind of optimism, that good is stronger than evil, that the Lord is present even in the worst of times, and that no one is without some goodness. To the extent that we tend towards a kind of pessimism in that we notice and point out evils, it must always remain subservient to that overall optimism and belief in the Lord. Even then it cannot really be called pessimism, for if done rightly, even seeing the worst of the worst will simply be an opportunity to see things improve, and a rock-solid belief that they can. Whatever our unique challenges or blessings, whatever the state of the world, or even just our little corner of it, the Lord’s love still overshadows all.