

Picking and Choosing

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

27 October, 2024

Children's Talk: Appreciating Goodness

- When other people do good things, how does that make you feel?
- How does it make you feel when someone is better than you?
 - Especially if it feels like they are showing off
 - Or doing something that you tried to do, but they do it better
 - Jealousy – being mad that someone is good at something when you are not
 - When they get special praise

Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him. (Matthew 12:9-14)

- The Pharisees were very good at keeping the law: they knew not to do any work on the Sabbath
- But when Jesus healed on the Sabbath He showed that they could do better
- Did they appreciate that He showed them how to be better and a new way to do good things? No!
- They were actually angry at Him and wanted to get rid of Him
- It is clear they were wrong: of course we should love that the Lord can do good things better than we can
- But it's harder to do when we experience it. It is so easy to become jealous.
- But the Lord shows us rather to appreciate and love the good things that other people do.
- Goodness is not a competition: someone doing it "better" does not make your goodness any less.
- Appreciate, support and build up other people who do good.

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Is it good to decide not to do something good? Is it good to decide not to go out of your way for your child, to not put in extra effort at work, to not give to charity? In isolation we might say of course it is not good to not do those things! And yet by the very nature of life we are constantly saying no to things that are genuinely good. When you decide to go out of your way to focus on one child, you are at the same time deciding to not focus on another. When you decide to go home early for the sake of your husband or wife, you are deciding not to put in that extra effort at work. When you decide to donate to one charity you are simultaneously deciding not to give that same money to a whole host of other equally worthy charities. No matter what good things we choose to do, and no matter how often we choose to do them, we are also forced to leave some good things undone. We are forced to choose. So how do we choose which good things to do, and when, and how do we know when it's ok to leave something good undone and move on? That's our topic for today.

I want to start by looking at the general categories of good things we need to be thinking about. At first this may sound unhelpful: I'm going to give you more ways of doing good which sounds like having more options, which would be terrible! There are so many needs in the world that it becomes overwhelming to try to choose one. But as I list these categories my hope is that it can actually help you see that you may be doing more good than you think you are. These are all things that are defined by the teachings of the New Church as "charity:" working faithfully at your job, giving to charity, practicing integrity in personal affairs, and recreation. Now I suspect that we usually think of that second one as real charity, or the heart and soul

of what it means to do good: when we contribute to the less fortunate, *that's* real goodness.

But the teachings of the New Church actually put the focus elsewhere:

Charity Itself Is Acting Justly and Faithfully in Our Position and Our Work and with the People with Whom We Interact...

This is charity itself because it can be defined as follows: charity is doing good to our neighbour daily and constantly - not only to our neighbour as an individual but also to our neighbour collectively. The only way to do this is through practicing goodness and justice in our position and work and with the people with whom we have any interaction, because these are things we do every day. When we are not doing them, they still stay in our minds all the time; we think about them and intend to do them. (*True Christian Religion* §422)

We perhaps think that doing something good means doing something more than what we are already doing. Charity is something that only happens when we go above and beyond what is expected of us. But do you have a job? If the answer is yes, then you are halfway there! As much as possible do your job faithfully and justly. That is the greatest act of charity you can accomplish. Notice too that this passage does not say, "do an extraordinarily useful job perfectly." It refers to any occupation, from machinist to heart-surgeon to factory worker to lawyer to retail worker. If you have a job, and you do it with integrity, you are doing an amazingly good thing. As an aside, not all of you will have jobs. If you are retired or between jobs this is what makes it so hard to feel useful or good enough. Even then though the difficulty is not in being useless; the difficulty is defining your use without having a clearly definable label.

The other category I want to spend just a little time on is recreation. Spending time enjoying life can in itself be a good thing. It's not as if you stop doing good things and instead do something for yourself, which is how we sometimes think of it. For example let's say you have an opportunity to volunteer at the local hospital. But you also just want to stay home reading a book. This is *not* a choice between doing

something good or doing something selfish. Volunteering is one way of doing good. But so is sitting at home quietly reading a book. They are both good. As Jesus says, “Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” We practice real goodness when we have a mix of all these types of goodness.

Again, the goal is not to overwhelm you with the number of ways of doing good; quite the opposite in fact. When you consider these four areas: your job, your personal life, recreation, and charity, you may find that you are doing far more good than you give yourself credit for.

We also need to make sure that we are not beating ourselves up for the fact that we cannot do all the good all the time. It is crucial that we learn to prioritize and accept that prioritizing means it’s ok to choose not to do one thing that is good because you are choosing to do something else good. The Lord taught this principle very clearly in regards to prohibitions against working on the Sabbath:

Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, “What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other. (Matthew 12:9-13)

Jesus did not say in this particular instance that working on the Sabbath was fine.

Rather He pointed out that other forms of good took precedence: in the case in which both forms of good (honouring the Sabbath by doing no work and doing good to a person in need) could not possibly coexist, it was right and good to reject the lesser good in order to perform the greater good. To the extent that one area of life dominates and prevents you from practising charity in another, perhaps that is a sign

you need to reprioritize your efforts. Part of that will be noticing good things in your life that actually it might be ok to let go of.

But of course, even within those categories you still need to make the judgment call of what to focus on and what to leave undone. Not everything is a matter of better and worse. Sometimes it's just a question of different. I wish I had a clearer answer on how to pick the *right* good thing to do. But the Word spends much less time on what you need to do and much more on how you do whatever it is that you choose. In other words, for example, the Word won't always clearly tell you which of your children you should help and which you should ignore in any given moment; but the Word does tell us the attitude that we should adopt regardless of which options we take.

There is an interesting and perhaps surprising story told that illustrates what the Lord wants us to prioritize. It is the story of Mary and Martha:

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha chose to busy herself with work and so we might assume that she was in the right for chiding Mary, who simply sat at Jesus' feet and listened. Yet Jesus instead praises Mary for the part she had chosen. This is not to say that Martha was wrong for working hard. But certainly the internal work of forging a relationship with the Lord is in fact more important than how much we get done in a day, or a week, or a lifetime.

The Teachings of the New Church add to this in pointing out that the Ten Commandments do not tell us what we ought to do. Instead they mostly point to things we are forbidden from doing:

Briefly put, we are not to intend, think, or do evil against God or against our neighbour.

We are not commanded to do things that directly relate to charity; instead, we are commanded not to do things that are the opposite of charity. This is because the more we abstain from evils because they are sins, the more we want the goodness that relates to charity.

In loving God and our neighbour, the first step is not doing evil, and the second step is doing good, as you will see in the chapter on charity. (*True Christian Religion* §329)

If we examine our lives and intentionally refrain from sin, then whatever course we choose will be under the Lord's guidance. This is so useful when faced with the overwhelming needs that pull us in every direction, needs that we could never satisfy no matter how hard or long we worked on them. Instead of trying to accomplish them all, and instead of trying to pick the *right* one, or the *best* one, we simply need to focus on eliminating all the harmful or sinful options. If the path we choose is good, then it is right; the fact that there are thousands of other paths that would also be good is of no matter. We choose our good part, under the guidance of the Lord, and trust that as long as we do no evil, our path is right and good.

So how are we to know if we are doing enough good? How are we to know if we are choosing the right good things? First and foremost, are you creating space for a variety: are you doing a job with integrity, supporting some charity, taking care of personal responsibilities, and making sure to rest and relax? If any one of these is draining you of so much energy that you have no more to give to any of the others then it might be time to reprioritize. Above and beyond that though make sure not to get caught up in judging yourself by how big of a difference you make to the world. That might be a strange thing for a minister to say, but when we judge our worth

against the backdrop of the vast needs of humanity we inevitably fall short. Only the Lord can hold that great responsibility. Instead of looking at that vast chasm of needs, look within yourself: regardless of what path you have and are choosing, are you consciously putting aside selfishness in that path? Are you shunning evils where they arise? Are you forging a relationship with the Lord through your choices? Obviously you should have some positive impact on the people around you. But it is in the personal work of spiritual growth that you do the most good. It is to the Lord to then weave together the billions of good people's efforts together throughout the world. You don't need to make a difference for everyone. You need to make a difference for someone, even if only a small one.