

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes  
for Sunday, 19 January

## Children's Talk: Scarlet and Crimson

- Which is easier, making something dirty or cleaning it up afterwards?
- What would be easier, adding red to a white piece of paper or making the paper white again afterwards?
- Making mistakes seems a lot easier than making up for them.
- So much so that it can seem impossible to make up for mistakes.
- But the Lord promises we can do it:

16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;  
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.  
Cease to do evil,  
17 Learn to do good;  
Seek justice,  
Rebuke the oppressor;  
Defend the fatherless,  
Plead for the widow.  
18 "Come now, and let us reason together,"  
Says Jehovah,  
"Though your sins are like scarlet,  
They shall be as white as snow;  
Though they are red like crimson,  
They shall be as wool.  
19 If you are willing and obedient,  
You shall eat the good of the land;  
(Isaiah 1:16-19)

- Even if sins (bad choices) are deep red, they can be white as snow and wool
- We CAN make up for bad choices
- The Lord can make us good
- That is the promise of baptism: the commitment to wash away the bad things, so the Lord can make us spiritually well and whole.

# Overcoming Avoidance

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

19 January, 2025

What are you avoiding? I would bet that most, if not all of us, right now, having something in our life that we are avoiding. It could be a small thing, like ignoring your body's signals that it's time for a diet or procrastinating on yard work. It could be something bigger thing, like putting off that important but difficult conversation you need to have or refusing to think about future decisions that need to be made. And we do it even with the most important things in our spiritual lives, when we know we have an issue but it is too challenging to face. Why do we do all those things? Why do we avoid the very things that we know we have to do? It's especially perplexing when we even know that our life would be better and happier for having taken the time. Yet there is something within us that would rather avoid an issue or a challenge than fix it.

This aspect of human nature is fairly universal. It even shows up in one of the earliest stories in the Word: when Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit they did all they could to avoid having to confront the Lord. This is the particular kind of avoidance I want to focus on today. It is spiritual avoidance, whether that be avoiding the Lord or avoiding our spiritual responsibilities or avoiding spiritual work, and instead focusing on other things.

Let me explain what I mean. At times I know that there is some spiritual work that I need to do. It could be a bad habit I need to shun, such as a judgmental attitude that has crept into my daily thinking. It could be a pattern of behaviour that has gotten out of hand such as being disrespectful or at least less than charitable. Or it's the flipside, a good habit that I've let slide, such as taking the time to pray, and especially taking the time to pray genuinely and meaningfully, not just saying the Lord's prayer from memory and then hopping into bed. These are all bad habits that I know I need to work on. I know that they are making less happy than I could be and more importantly they are making me a worse person than I could be. And it's not as if I woke up this morning and only then realized it and I'll get on it right after we're done here today. I've known for some time now that these are the areas of my life that need work.

And yet. In spite of knowing that, I have put the bare minimum of work into them lately. Even when I start to contemplate maybe doing the work I quickly distract myself or find something else to do. In short I am avoiding the very spiritual practices that would improve my life. So why? Why do we do that? I don't know that there is any one reason, but the Word gives us some hints at a few of the reasons we act against our own interests this way.

First there is the fact that we want to have it all. We want to think of ourselves as fine, upstanding individuals while also having the freedom to do what we want. Spiritual commitment seems to take away that. When we make a firm spiritual commitment we can no longer have our cake and eat it too. The Children of Israel fell into this pattern of behaviour: they wanted to worship both Baal and Jehovah. They wanted to be able to receive the Lord's blessings even as they also pursued their own pleasure from a false God. The prophet Elijah bluntly called them out for this attitude:

So Ahab sent for all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together on Mount Carmel. And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will

you limp between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word. (1 Kings 18:20-21)

You can imagine peoples hesitancy to speak up: if they rejected Jehovah, who knew what the consequences might be? But if they rejected Baal, what would they lose out on, especially since their king and their queen were firm adherents of Baal? So they answered not a word. They avoided the question.

Of course, although their position was a comfortable one, it could not endure. It's appropriate that Elijah should compare it to limping or staggering back and forth. It is actually a weak position to be in and we cannot remain in it. As Jesus say, we cannot serve two masters. So what have you been avoiding because you are afraid of what you will have to give up if you do address it? That avoidance is not sustainable. Make a choice, and trust that the Lord will give you all that you require. We do not need our little indulgences in order to be ok, as much as we might feel like it. We can be ok, and better than ok, in committing fully to the Lord.

A second reason for avoidance is lack of motivation. Or to put it simply, avoiding something for the simple reasons that I don't want to do it. It takes too much effort. This is a mentality that at times has crept into and corrupted Christianity: after all, if God is all-powerful and we are mere sinner, why not just let the Lord sort everything out? Why should we put in the effort when God can do it all on His own? This idea flies in the face of the countless exhortations and commands we find in the Word. Yes, all power to accomplish anything comes from the Lord alone; but we are responsible for making use of that power.

Theologically the New Church is very affirmative of the truth that we ourselves must take action rather than awaiting some miraculous inspiration from the Lord. Even so we can still fall into the trap of thinking that we can wait for some inner desire before we get to work. I know that this is one I personally struggle with. I'll think of doing something, but when there isn't some innate desire prompting me to action I'll put it off and do something mindless instead. This attitude completely detroys our ability to grow. We actually must take action before we feel inspired to do so. It is in compelling ourselves that we shape our wants. If we always avoid the things we don't want to do, we will never learn to want to do them. As the prophet Isaiah says,

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;  
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.  
Cease to do evil,  
Learn to do good;  
Isaiah 1:16-17

If you are waiting for the spark of inspiration before you take the plunge, stop waiting and start doing. You, and you alone, are responsible for making choices about your own spiritual life. You cannot defer that responsibility to someone or something else.

The third reason for our spiritual avoidance is the magnitude or the pain of the work to be done. This is especially true when we need to confront an evil that we have allowed to fester and spiral out of control. The more guilt we feel, the more we avoid it, the more we avoid it, the guiltier we feel, and so on. Likewise the longer we carry on the more ingrained it becomes as a habit, the more ingrained it becomes the harder it is to imagine removing it as a habit, and so the more we avoid it.

The good news is that the Lord designed things such that He wants us to draw out what is evil and examine it in the light of day. As much as it hurts to do it, it is healthy and the first step towards wholeness and accepting His forgiveness. The Teachings of the New Church compare the situation to an internal wound that must be exposed in order to be treated:

...a love of evil unseen is like an enemy lying in ambush, like pus in a wound, like poison in the blood, and like putrefaction in the breast. If they are kept shut in, they lead to death.

But on the other hand, when a person is permitted to think about the evils of his life's love even to the point of intending them, they are curable by spiritual remedies, as diseases are by natural remedies. (*Divine Providence* 281)

What are you avoiding because the mere thought of dealing with it inspires pangs of guilt or embarrassment? Remember that as long as it remains undealt with, it will cause more and more hurt and damage. Although it is painful to address, it is actually healing, not destructive, to address it.

Feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude and hurt of addressing something challenging does not only come from addressing our own evils. Sometimes addressing the evils others have inflicted on us has the same impact. Or even situations where no one has committed evil but the hells have warped and twisted a situation so that there is pain and hurt. This is not the same as having to examine and discover one's own flaws so they can be worked on, but it is similar in that things can only be fixed and made right when they are seen in the light of day. In relationships and families in particular we can avoid hard conversations for the sake of holding on to peace and comfort, even though it allows destructive behaviour to fester. The pain however is worth it to actually work through.

There is also some hope in the fact that a desire to avoid hurt is not in itself wrong. It is perfectly human. It is a valid feeling to have towards the hurt we anticipate. Recoiling from the pain is in itself a kind of rejection of the evil that caused it. Remember what Jesus did on the night before Good Friday, as He faced the Crucifixion: He asked that the cup be removed from Him, so that He might avoid the events and pain of the following day (Luke 22:42-44). Yet still He carried on, and endured, and gained the victory. Likewise the Lord has full sympathy for us when we fear the hurt that facing a challenge head on might bring. He knows our pain and gently leads us.

I'm sure there are other reasons for avoiding spiritual work. Some are even valid prioritizations: it is ok to put something off so you can focus on something more important. But at the end of the day we cannot avoid the things we need to do. It only prolongs the suffering. Whether we avoid because we want to keep all our options open, or out of spiritual laziness, or from fear of what it will take, or some other reason, avoiding will not give us what we actually want. In order to move forward and grow we have to come to grips with the things that challenge us, face them openly and honestly, dive into the work of sorting them out, and letting the Lord lead us on to a resolution. *Amen.*