

Heritage Day: Choosing Your Heritage

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

21 September, 2025

Children's Talk: Passing on a Heritage

This week there is a holiday, called "Heritage Day." It is a day when we celebrate heritage. But what is heritage? Heritage is all of the things that we have been given from our parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents, and even further back.

People have different parents and grandparents, and so they have different heritages. Some people speak English, some Zulu, some Xhosa, some Afrikaans. People get different styles of clothing as well, and might eat different types of food. You might think that you just talk, and dress, and eat, and doing everything else "normally." But actually, everything you had was given to you by the people who came before you.

One of the most important things we get as part of our heritage is the Lord's teachings. You are very used to coming to Church and hearing stories from the Lord's Word. But these stories took place hundreds and even thousands of years ago; so how did they come to us?

Well the Lord told the people who experienced the stories that they could not keep them just for themselves; they had to teach their children:

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What is the meaning of the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which Jehovah our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your son: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and Jehovah brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and Jehovah showed signs and wonders before our eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household. Then He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to give us the land of which He swore to our fathers. And Jehovah commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear Jehovah our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day. Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before Jehovah our God, as He has commanded us." (Deuteronomy 6:20)

The Lord saved them from being slaves, and gave them good rules to follow. They then shared those rules with their children, and they shared them too.

To help think about this I want a few volunteers. First could someone in their 70s come forward. Stand over here. Now he has learned a lot from the Lord in his life. But the Lord wants him to pass that on to others too. Can someone in their fifties or sixties come up? Thirties or forties? Teen or twenties? We can be so grateful that people have passed on what they have learned from the Lord. We wouldn't have it otherwise.

And we get to pass it on to the next generation too.

Choosing Your Heritage

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We are going to spend some time talking about our spiritual heritage and what we can do with that. Now with Heritage Day coming up, you may have spent at least some time thinking about your cultural heritage. You may really enjoy your cultural background and celebrate it. Or you may have a few backgrounds to pick from. Or you might be a bit embarrassed or disappointed in your heritage. You may choose to pick one over another or to deemphasise certain aspects. Or you may not have a strong sense that you even have one at all. But one thing that you can't do is choose to have a new one. Everyone has a heritage or heredity that they did not choose. What's more, that heritage has shaped you. Some of the things that we take for granted as just innate to who we are as people are actually specific to the time and place and people among whom we were born and raised. We have received ideas, attitudes, and behaviours from our ancestors.

1. We All Inherit Inclinations to Evil

The fact that we inherit so much is a good thing. We can be grateful for a lot of it. But part of our heritage is not so pleasant. This is where I want to move away from cultural heritage and to spiritual heritage. Just as you have been given a culture not of your choosing that has shaped you in various ways, you have been given spiritual influences that likewise are out of your control and that have shaped you. The Teachings of the New Church describe something called hereditary or inherited evil. Everyone is born with some inclination towards evil. This is part of the inheritance we get from our parents and ancestors. It is the beginning or source of our attraction towards evil:

But, my friend, parents are the only source of inherited evil; not the evil itself which a person actually commits, but the inclination to that evil.

...

The before mentioned inclination and tendency to the evils that are passed by parents to children and their posterity, are broken only by the new birth from the Lord, which is called regeneration. (*True Christian Religion* §521)

Your ancestors had a particular tendency to specific kinds of selfishness. And they passed that on to you. Thanks mom and dad. You can to some degree see this from experience. I know that I have at times seen traits in my parents that I judged them for; only to find that I have the exact same traits. That is incredibly frustrating, to put it mildly.

2. No One is Doomed (or Saved) by Their Heritage

It also seems really unfair. You didn't choose to have the parents you were given, and yet you are stuck with their bad influence! The truth though is that while our parents provide the context in which we face evils within ourselves, we get neither blame nor credit for our parents' evil or goodness. Now that's not what everyone believes. The ancient Israelites believed that a person might be punished for the sins of his parents, or be blessed because of their righteousness. The Lord takes great pains though to set us straight on this count. In the prophet Ezekiel he talks in terms of spiritual death:

Yet you say, "Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?"
Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezekiel 18:19-20)

They thought it was only fair that if a father was evil, then his children should bear the blame and the punishment as well. But an individual is only responsible for their own selves. The son of an evil man can be righteous. And a righteous man can have

an evil son. This is comforting because it can free us of the burden of thinking that the heritage from our parents (remembering that it is real, and we cannot change it) does not hold us back from becoming righteous.

In the modern western world I think we have made great progress in moving away from the idea that we can be guilty of our parents' sins or take credit for their success. But it does creep into our thinking in subtle ways. Have you ever felt guilty because of your parents bad behaviour? Maybe a racist comment that was acceptable in their time? Why do *you* feel guilty for that? Or have you ever felt resentment that you are the way you are because of how your parents behaved when you were young and the example they gave you? We can at times take on the baggage from our parents as if it imposes guilt on us regardless of our own choices.

3. Evil and Goodness Come from Outside Ourselves

Ironically, one of the reasons we struggle to escape the shadow of our heritage is that we mistake the things we have inherited for things that are innately true about us. It sometimes really does feel like we are innately broken or evil or sinful, that the weight of our heritage is too much for us to overcome. Conversely, we can feel like we are good without any effort on our part, just because we were born that way.

Realizing that many of these things do not actually define us is a crucial step in breaking free of them.

If man only believed, as is really true, that all good is from the Lord and all evil from hell, he would neither make the good in him a matter of merit (i.e. take credit) nor would evil be imputed to him (i.e. take the blame); for he would then look to the Lord in all the good he thinks and does, and all the evil that flows in would be cast down to hell from which it comes. But because man does not believe that anything flows into him either from heaven or from hell, and therefore supposes that all things that he thinks and wills are in himself and therefore from himself, he appropriates the evil to himself, and the good that flows in he defiles with merit. (*Heaven and Hell* §302)

This passage warns us against becoming either complacent or fatalistic about our heritage, the things we have received, but received so early in our lives that we have no sense other than that they are in us and from us innately. We blame ourselves for the evil in us and we take credit for the good in us.

Let's start with the danger of fatalism. If you believe that all the evil tendencies in yourself define you, and are innate, then what's the point of trying? You are stuck with them. You are doomed to be selfish and materialistic. Take someone who is particularly judgmental, and comes from a very judgmental and self-righteous family. They can look at their background and their tendency and say, "this is who we've always been; and so this is just who we are." That flash of judgment that comes to mind so frequently means they are a bad person, and that's that. No matter how true it feels, it is not actually the case! That tendency is inherited; it flows in and is activated by hell; it is not *you*. And because it comes from outside you, it can also be blocked. Now I am by no means going to pretend that is *easy*. But for us to do the hard work of changing we have to be able to acknowledge that our evil tendencies come from outside of ourselves; we are not doomed to repeat them.

The same applies to the good traits and tendencies within us, that we receive from our family of origin and that flow in from heaven. If we think these are innate we are at risk of becoming complacent. If being kind and doing good comes naturally to you, then you don't have to work on anything! But if the only times we are good is when it comes naturally to us, then we have not actually chosen it for ourselves, and it does not actually define us. Take someone who finds it quite easy to be forgiving. For whatever reason he just doesn't hold a grudge and has never struggled with that. That's a wonderful trait to have, and certainly something worth being grateful for. But if he takes pride in it, as if he has achieved something, he is defining himself by

something that is actually really from outside himself. The real test is what he does when he does *not* feel like being forgiving. If he is forgiving the ninety-nine times that it is easy and comes naturally, but then unforgiving the one time it is hard, he's not actually such a forgiving person as far as his identity is concerned. We should not get complacent and coast on the traits the Lord has gifted us. They are a gift given to us freely.

4. We Can be Truly Born Again

So we cannot choose our heritage, we are stuck with it, for good or for ill. But we also cannot take either blame or credit for that heritage. Where does that leave us? We cannot change the influences that have shaped us, but we can change what we do with those influence. We can, in short, be born again, and adopt a new kind of heritage from the Lord.

That can be hard to believe. It was certainly hard for those who first heard it from the Lord:

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

John 3:4 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?"

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again."

As Nicodemus points out this can't mean we get a do-over: we can never go back into the past and be literally born again, and so have a different heritage and a different set of baggage to deal with. But the Lord insists that it is possible to be born again, but in a spiritual way. Through repentance we actually do become new people.

It's important that we don't treat this just like a helpful metaphor. We literally can be born again, spiritually speaking. The Lord can transform us into another person who is not the person we are now, who is not the person we were shaped to be by our heredity (*Secrets of Heaven* §3212). That heritage will always be our heritage; but from the new birth we can no longer be defined by that heritage, and receive a new kind of heritage from the Lord.

The logical next step is, "how do we do that?" and you might be sitting there hoping I'll now give you the answer. And in short, the answer is look to the Lord, and repent. But beyond that, I actually want to end focusing on just trying to adopt a new perspective rather than offering a specific action item. The things in us that we have inherited and received from parents feel like they are intrinsic to us. And it is true that they have shaped us and can never be gotten rid of as our past. But they do not have to actually be *us* unless we want them to be. We should neither become fatalistic in despair nor become complacent out of pride. We can be reborn in the Lord, and be a new person. That possibility is real, and is available to all of us, no matter our heredity.