

# One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

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## Children's Talk: Vicarious Guilt

What is guilt? What does it mean to feel guilty? What makes us feel guilty?

Guilt is when we feel bad or embarrassed about something wrong or bad. So is guilt a good feeling or a bad feeling?

That's a complicated question. Oftentimes guilt, although it feels bad, is good: guilt tells us that we have done something wrong and we need to stop doing it. But sometimes we feel guilt when we have done nothing wrong, and that is when guilt is not a good thing.

The Lord talks about this kind of guilt by talking about grapes:

The word of Jehovah came to me again, saying, "What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying:

'The fathers have eaten sour grapes,  
And the children's teeth are set on edge'"? (Ezekiel 18:1-2)

The Children of Israel had a saying: when a father eats sour grapes, his children will feel it in their teeth. What they meant was, when a father does something wrong, his children should feel guilty.

Now let's see if this makes sense. If I eat this grape, and it turns out to be sorry, do you think my father, who lives thousands of miles away, will feel it? No! Only I will. I ate the grape, so I'm the one who tastes it. It has nothing to do with anyone else.

If that is true of grapes, it is also true of guilt. I only need to feel guilty about the bad things I do, not anyone else. That can be hard. Have you ever felt guilty about what someone else did? Have you ever been with a friend who said something mean about someone else, and it made you feel embarrassed and ashamed? The Lord is saying you don't have to feel bad (unless you also said mean things). Or with parents, have your parents ever said or done something that you thought was embarrassing and then you felt bad? But why? You are not your parents.

This is something that even adults have a hard time with. I have a hard time remembering that I don't have to feel bad if I'm not the one who did something wrong. But it's important to remember because I can only fix the bad things I have done; I can't be responsible for everyone else too. If I do good things, I need to feel good about it. If I do bad things, I should feel bad and try to fix it. But what other people do is something that I can't control. The Lord says this with words like righteousness, which is goodness, and wickedness:

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 18:20)

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Sometimes in life it feels like we go forward one step only to fall back two, cancelling out any progress and even putting us in a worse position than when we first began. It makes you question if there was any point in going forward in the first place. It's a disheartening feeling. Not only is it disheartening, it is dangerous and damaging to our spiritual wellbeing. When it happens it is crucial that more than ever we look to the Lord and once again find a way forward, rather than descending into resignation or despair.

The Kings of Israel and Judah provide a stark example of this destructive cycle. You may remember that after Solomon, the kingdom split in two, with the southern tribe of Judah and the Northern tribes of Israel each having their own royal lines. The leaders of both kingdoms were, for the most part, unspeakably corrupt and evil. Then, at last, a king arose who turned back to the Lord, named Hezekiah:

And he did what was right in the sight of Jehovah, according to all that his father David had done. He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan. He trusted in Jehovah God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him. For he held fast to Jehovah; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which Jehovah had commanded Moses. Jehovah was with him; he prospered wherever he went.... (2 Kings 18:3-7)

Hezekiah represents a complete turnaround for the people of Israel. You would be forgiven for thinking that at last they'll go back to following the Lord and return to the glory of the kingdom under David and Solomon. But alas, it was not to be. The very next king went right back to the sins of the previous kings, and then some!

He did evil in the sight of Jehovah, according to the abominations of the nations whom Jehovah had cast out before the children of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; he raised up altars for Baal, and made a wooden image, as Ahab king of Israel had done;

and he worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He also built altars in the house of Jehovah, of which Jehovah had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My name." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of Jehovah. Also he made his son pass through the fire, practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft, and consulted spiritists and mediums. He did much evil in the sight of Jehovah, to provoke Him to anger. (2 Kings 21:2-6)

In other words, Manasseh was absolutely horrible, more so than any of the previous kings. He undid all the good that Hezekiah had done and never looked back. If Hezekiah represents a turn to the Lord, Manasseh represents a complete and utter rejection of the Lord; a rejection so complete that Hezekiah might as well have never tried to turn people back to the Lord.

This experience of one step forward, two steps back can be devastating for a number of reasons. It seems to negate the progress that had been made and render it pointless. But it also seems to put us into a more dangerous and damaging position, spiritually speaking. Jesus himself warned of exactly that in a parable about an evil spirit:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, "I will return to my house from which I came." And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. (Luke 11:24)

Having removed the evil spirit, it returns with seven more and the person in question is left in an even worse state than ever before. The Teachings of the New Church call this "profanation," and it is what happens when a person makes forward progress spiritually but then returns to their previous sins.

We can see why this would be worse than where the person began, or to put it another way, why we're talking about two steps back, not just one. For one thing if you have not put much effort into growth, then it isn't that depressing that you haven't grown at all. But when you have seen real growth, going backwards wipes

out all your gains and puts you back to square one. Or it certainly feels that way. I know that I can easily get in the mind-set of being on a “streak” even in spiritual matter. I can count the number of days that I haven’t slacked off or avoided a responsibility; but as soon as I do I feel like I’m back at square one and starting over again from zero. The thought of getting back to where you were is overwhelmingly daunting, so much so that it’s much harder to start. And the more you stay in that place of inaction, the further back you slide and the more daunting starting over seems.

That’s true in just one instance of backsliding. Repetition makes it even worse. It’s like a piece of metal that can be easily be bent back into shape. But the more times it is re-bent, the more stressed the metal becomes and the less able it is to hold its shape. The more we backslide in our personal foibles, the harder it is to overcome them, and the more likely we are to do so again. Once a good habit has been broken it takes concerted effort and time to build it back up again. Prevention is easier than cure.

These are some of the dangers of profanation, but it causes real damage as well. When a person is stuck in some evil, they will always to some extent lack freedom over it. Because they don’t have freedom in that area of life, they are less culpable. But when someone has overcome an evil and has control over it, they are in far greater freedom, and to choose to return to evil from that position of greater freedom is far more devastating to your spirit and brings you deeper into the evil than before, since again, it is done from greater freedom. I suspect we see a reflection of this in relapse, in which a person who has been sober for a long time relapses and suddenly descends further than ever before into their addiction. Spiritual relapse is similar.

So far I've talked about the danger and the damage of going backwards spiritually. This probably has not been the most encouraging talk. This is after all a serious topic. The Lord wants us to be especially careful not to return to the evils we have left behind. But, that being said, the Lord does offer a way out, one that is specifically built upon past successes. Remember how we began with Hezekiah and Manasseh, and how Manasseh negated all the progress made by Hezekiah? I said then that Manasseh undid all the good that Hezekiah had done. And in a sense that is true: none of Hezekiah's reforms survived Manasseh's reign. But in saying that he undid all the good of Hezekiah, there is an implication that Hezekiah's good came to nothing, that it might as well have never happened, and that is not the case. In spite of all the evil of Judah and Israel, the Lord preserved a remnant that would become the nucleus of a restored kingdom. That remnant did not come from nowhere: it needed to be preserved generation after generation through kings like Hezekiah, or later Josiah who restored the Law of the Lord. Every time a good king came along, something good was preserved, and although seemingly snuffed out, it could then recur in later generations again.

The same thing is true for us, of all the good that we have ever done or experienced. Whenever we have a positive experience of goodness or truth, that goodness or truth is stored up within us to eternity, no matter how far we may fall from it outwardly. Just as a remnant of the people of Israel were restored, these states of good and truth within us are called remnants in the Teachings of the New Church:

But what are remnants? Not only the goods and truths which one has learned from the Word of the Lord from early childhood onwards and so had imprinted in his memory, but also all resulting states, such as states of innocence from early childhood; states of love towards parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, and friends; states of charity towards the neighbour, and also of compassion on the poor and needy; in short, all states involving good and truth. These

states, together with the goods and truths that have been imprinted in the memory, are called remnants, which the Lord preserves with a person and stores away in his internal man, though the person himself is not at all directly conscious of this. Here they are separated completely from the things that are the person's own, that is, evils and falsities. The Lord so preserves all of those states with the individual that not even the least of them perishes. (*Secrets of Heaven* §561)

This passage allays the fear that all our progress is lost when we backslide. Any step forward is worth taking, because it can never be truly undone.

Not only do these good things remain, they become the foundation from which we can once again move forward. Take for example a person who has reined in their envy, put aside jealousy, and found ways of letting go of resentment of other people's success; but then in time, they hit a rough patch in life, and return to being more resentful than ever before. Especially given that they have done everything "right" and yet still others prosper while they are stuck with second best. This individual may feel that their previous growth was not worth it and any future growth is hardly worth the effort. Yet the fact that at one time in life, even if it were months, years, or even decades ago, they had succeeded over the hells of envy, means that they can do so again. Any step forward they make will draw on and be strengthened by the steps forward they made ages ago. If we return to the one step forward, two steps back metaphor, then on the one hand, going two steps back isn't good; but if you had never taken that one step forward, then you'd be even further back still. Going forward spiritually is always worth the effort, in spite of the fear that you are only setting yourself up to fail.

When you've gone back to old habits it's so easy to just say, "I used to be better, but I couldn't make it stick, so why bother?" The Lord invites us to see it differently, to realize that we can rather say, "I used to be better, which is proof that I can be better again." Rather than seeing our backsliding as a complete failure, rather

than seeing it as a reason not to get up again and face our evils head on, perhaps we can see them as confirmation that we can do this right, that we can in fact be in a better place spiritually speaking. There is hope for all of us yet, regardless of how far we have fallen. As the Lord says in Ezekiel,

But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord Jehovih, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:21-23)

*Amen.*