

Self-Esteem

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 2nd, 2010

Welcome again to a new year – a time for reflection, re-evaluation, re-organization, renewal and re-adjustment of priorities. In that context we may well ask, “What do we think of ourselves,” and “How do we feel about ourselves” in relation to the Lord or to the world around us?

Here is a major challenge to our faith. Hardly anything could be clearer in the New Testament or in the teachings for the New Church than that the two principal evils in all of human life are the love of self and the love of the world. Between these two, the love of self is the worst and is the direct opposite of love to the Lord. It is so bad that those who are driven by this love ultimately find themselves in the lowest hell, directly opposite to the celestial heaven.

Yet we know from experience that there is a healthy kind of self-love generally referred to as self-respect, or self-esteem. And we know that when we suffer from a low sense of self-worth or self-esteem we have a great deal of difficulty relating to other people in what we would call normal ways, and that we can have a lot of trouble believing even that the Lord cares for us.

How can we reconcile these two realities? How can we get the sort of self-confidence that we need to function well in this competitive world without becoming really selfish, or self-absorbed? Our doctrines have a great deal to say about this, yet sadly experience shows that the teachings are not very well understood. Some, for example, seem to think that the teachings about self-denial and self-sacrifice preclude any attention to one’s personal needs, and that if we are really “good” we will simply set aside all our personal wishes for the sake of others – no matter how demanding they may be. Generally speaking this gets old pretty quick, with the result either that we come to think of ourselves as failures in the eyes of the Lord or that we just can’t believe in Him anymore. Then again, it’s a popular saying today that we can’t really love others until we learn how to love ourselves first, and there is at least one verse in the Gospels that *could* be interpreted that way. Unfortunately this tends to fly in the face of all the other teachings – unless we define self-love in a particularly generous way. We’ll consider that in a few minutes.

First, let’s think about what the doctrines really teach about self-love. In one representative passage we read,

“The love of self consists in *wishing well to one’s self alone*, and not to others except for the sake of one’s self – not even to the church, to one’s country, to society, or to a fellow-citizen; and also in doing good to these solely for the sake of one’s own reputation, honour, and glory; and unless the love of self sees these in the good which it does to them, it says at heart, ‘Of what consequence is it? Why should I do it? Of what advantage will it be to me? And therefore does not do it. From this it is evident that he who is in the love of self, does not love either the church or his country, or society, or a fellow-citizen, or anything good, *but himself only*” (NJHD 65).

Here we see that the evil of self love is that of loving self *alone*. And it is true by definition that this is the nature of that love. But it is also true – and critically so – that hardly anyone lives for

the sake of self alone. Since the Lord provides good loves for every one of us from earliest childhood on we are all generally *mixtures* of good and evil, that is to say, complicated combinations of self-love and love for others. Sometimes we act from the one love, sometimes from the other, and sometimes we vacillate so quickly between the one and the other that it seems as if the loves themselves are mixed up. The point is, hardly anyone is so consumed by self-love as to be all bad. And even when our selfish loves are dominant it is important for us to remember that they are all inspired and nurtured by the Hells, so that if we will reject and turn away from that influence *we can be relieved of our self-love by the power and presence of the Lord.*

Still, self-respect is another thing altogether, and it is pretty important that we sort this out and distinguish it from the pure love of self.

The apostle, Paul, touches on this in the context of his argument against sexual misconduct, but the idea may be applied generally to the discussion of self-respect. He said, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, *which are God’s*” (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

No matter what you think of Paul personally, or his teachings, the truth of this particular saying is clear. The Lord Himself said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) but He also said, “YOU are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). The reason this works is that we are created in His image and likeness, and what He creates He fills with His spirit. In fact we have no life that is strictly our own; it is all HIS life IN us, which we are privileged to feel *as if it were our own*. To be sure, we can take this life and abuse or profane it, but when we do so we should be aware that we are not just hurting ourselves, we are hurting HIM who has put HIS love and wisdom into us. In effect, then, when we treat ourselves with respect we are treating the Lord who made us also with respect – as long as we are living according to His Word.

With this in mind let’s look at the two great commandments as listed in Mark 12:29-31: –

Jesus said, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Now what is it to “love your neighbor as yourself”? Does this mean, as some say, that we cannot love the neighbor until we first learn how to love ourselves? Not really. The point is that we must love others in the same manner that we love ourselves, which is to say that we must NOT put ourselves first but, as it were, *get in line with everybody else*. For what defines our relationship with ourselves AND others is our primary love for the Lord, a love that we are to express “with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.” And this love is such that it forever seeks first the good of others. As note in the ECHO this month,

“Love to the Lord cannot possibly be separated from love towards the neighbour, for the Lord’s love is directed towards the whole human race whom He wishes to save eternally and to join so completely to Himself that not a single one of them

perishes. Anyone therefore who has love to the Lord possesses the Lord's love and so cannot help loving the neighbour" (AC 2023).

Of course, this means that we cannot abuse ourselves any more than we might abuse someone else, since in doing that we would restrict our ability to be useful, not to mention happy and fulfilled, two of the Lord's most important goals for all of us. But it also brings up a key aspect of the doctrine of charity as we know it in the New Church. We read,

"It is commonly said that each person is his own neighbour, that is, each person should take care of himself first. But the doctrine of charity shows how this should be understood. Everyone ought to see to it that he has the necessities of life, for instance, food, clothing, somewhere to live and many more things which the civilized life he leads demands. This too not only for himself, but also for his own, and not only for the present time but also for the future. For unless anyone provides himself with the necessities of life, he cannot be in a position to exercise charity, being himself in want (or need) of everything" (NJHD 97).

The point, as explained further in our third lesson this morning, is that what we do for ourselves we should do in order to be useful to others. We should provide ourselves with food, clothing, shelter "and many more things," some of which might even be considered luxuries, so that we have the means to give to others. It's like building a house: –

"He who looks upon himself as his neighbour in the first place, is like him who regards the foundation, and not the house or habitation, as the end; when yet habitation is the first and ultimate end: and the house together with the foundation, is only a means towards the end" (Ibid 98).

Still, the foundation is first in time. And the house that we are building is our spiritual body, the incarnation of whatever love and wisdom we can receive from the Lord. So we should build it properly and with care, using the best possible materials, *and then look after what has been built.*

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount the Lord said,

"Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock" (Matt. 7:24-25).

The teaching here is sometimes overlooked as we skip to the final verses about the other house that collapses. And why do we dwell on the negative? If we hear the Lord's sayings and do them our house will be strong and it will weather all the storms of temptation that assail it. This is not a suggestion or a possibility, it is a promise given with authority – Divine authority, "for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Ibid, v.28).

Needless to say, this gives us no license to be arrogant or to despise others in comparison to ourselves. But it should help us with our self-respect and self-confidence. Again, it's not really about US, it's about what is the Lord's IN us. And while we will never fully understand what the

Lord gives us (indeed, we may puzzle over it and frankly misunderstand a lot of it), since He is IN us primarily through the knowledge and affection we get from the Word, and we all have the ability to absorb that knowledge and affection, by building our confidence in HIM we can build our self-confidence and self-esteem. Here's how it works, as explained in the book about Divine Providence: –

“As the Divine Providence of the Lord has for its end a heaven from the human race, it follows that it has for its end the conjunction of the human race with Himself... It has also for its end that man should be more and more nearly conjoined to Him (see n. 32, 33), for thus he possesses heaven more interiorly. Further, it has for its end that man by this conjunction should become wiser (see n. 34-36); and that he should become happier (see n. 37-41), because it is from wisdom and according to it that he has heaven, and by means of wisdom has happiness too. Finally, it has for its end that a person should appear more distinctly to himself to be master of himself, and yet to recognise more evidently that he is the Lord's (see n. 42-44)” (DP 45).

To simplify, what this means is that the more we love the Lord the better we feel about ourselves! Specifically, “The more closely anyone is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more clearly does he recognize that he is the Lord's” (DP 42 & 158).

Wow! What a powerful truth! And the wonderful thing about this is that while it enhances our self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of empowerment, at the same time it keeps us gracious and humble – genuinely humble, not pretentiously so. For when we know that we are the Lord's then we know how important it is to accept correction and ongoing instruction. There will always be more to learn, not just about some things but about everything. ***Neither self-confidence nor self-esteem requires that we be certain of anything – except that the Lord loves us and will look after us if we attend to His Word.***

In summary, then, what is self-esteem, and how is it different from self-love? Well, having self-esteem is having positive thoughts or a good opinion of one's self. It is to respect or favor one's self. But this is not necessarily self-centered. Rather, as we have seen, it can and should be a form of respect for the good that is IN us from the Lord, thus for the Lord Himself, and it really helps us (by providing for ourselves) to be useful to others. It all depends on the ruling love, which is to say, the end result we have in mind – and this, too, changes gradually as we undergo the process of regeneration. Let us therefore be patient with ourselves, even as we try to be patient and caring for others, that we may allow the Lord to work through us, blessing us and others at the same time.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:13-20
Children's talk on What it's Like to Be “the Light of the World”

Psalm 27 or 30
New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine #97-98