

The Distinctive New Church Doctrine of Charity

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“So (Jesus said), which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” And (the lawyer) said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’”

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:36-37).

The doctrine of charity for the New Church is unique in the Christian world and yet at the same time profoundly common sense. Who doesn't know, for example, that aiding and supporting a person in his disorder really just enables him to remain in that disorder? No one, for example, in his right mind would willingly put a pistol or a knife in the hands of a known criminal. And yet many people seem to believe that they should aid and support the poor no matter how they got that way, no matter what they might do with the money. We've all heard the reasoning, and perhaps even reasoned within ourselves the same way: – it's not up to us to determine how someone responds to our help; our job is simply to help, to be kind and generous. The benefits to the other person are (a) that he has a chance to improve his lot in life and (b) he can experience the love and care of others, and so perhaps learn and grow from that example. Besides, it's our duty under the Golden Rule, “since there, but by the grace of God, go I,” etc.

But in the famous parable of the Good Samaritan the Lord says something that strikes to the heart of the matter in a way that is often misunderstood or unappreciated. Remember, the story is told in response to the question, “And who is my neighbor?” And the answer given by the lawyer and fully endorsed by the Lord was NOT the man who fell among thieves, but the man who helped him – the Good Samaritan. So the neighbor is defined in that parable NOT as the one who GETS a benefit but as the one who GIVES it, the one who is or does good.

This turns our worldly ideas of “doing good to the neighbor” inside out. What it means is that the good we do should be for the sake of good itself, or the good IN a person, not just the person regardless of his state.

This is explained at some length in the Heavenly Doctrines (NJHD 84 - 90), parts of which made up our third lesson this morning. For example, we read,

“It is generally believed to-day that everyone is equally the neighbour, and good is to be done to anyone who needs help. But Christian prudence demands that a person's life should be carefully checked and charity exercised accordingly...”
(NJHD 85).

Does this mean we have an open invitation to criticize the people around us? No, not really; the emphasis is on the good, and the key is, having seen some good - whether *in* the person or coming *out* of something he or she has done - our responsibility is to *focus on that*: - to use it, to work with it, to help it, to compliment it, or do anything we can to enhance and develop it, not for our own sake but for the sake of the good itself of society as a whole and the happiness or well-being of that individual.

So we read further,

“The distinctions in the neighbour, which anyone who belongs to the church certainly ought to know, depend upon the good present in each individual. Because all good proceeds from the Lord, it is the Lord who is in the highest sense and in the fullest degree the neighbour, the source of good. It follows from this that anyone is the neighbour to the extent that he has the Lord with him. And because everyone receives the Lord, that is, good from Him, differently, therefore no two people are the neighbour in the same way” (NJHD 86).

Of course discernment, another word for good judgment or “checking carefully,” implies the recognition of evil, falsity or disorder so that we can do our best to moderate its influence or at the very least avoid being contaminated by it. Furthermore, we should never condone evil, which means that if it comes within the sphere of our responsibility there are times when we are obliged to take action against it.

But in doing so we don't take action against the person. The point is to support the person *in doing what is good*. So, rather than having a critical attitude we can have a positive attitude, an honest willingness to help and co-operate even with those people who may annoy us, each according to the good that is in him – or her.

Now let's be careful here. Our natural tendency when hearing things like this is to think about how it applies to other people: – how they should be more caring and supportive, especially toward those who are victims in our eyes. But the teaching is for all of us, and speaks to any tendency we have to assume the worst of others.

An interesting illustration of this principle appears in the well known teaching of Matthew 18 where we read, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother “ (v. 15). In the original language the phrase “go and tell him his fault” is just two words, and the verb generally means to reprove or to accuse, but also, happily, to examine. So one perfectly good way of translating the phrase would be “go and discuss it with him.” It doesn't *have* to be an accusation. Indeed, the idea of a brother, like a neighbor, is that of one who is in good, and who therefore can be approached from the good of love. Only when he refuses to listen is it necessary to turn to rational arguments, and that of course is done by means of truths pertaining to the case. This is what is represented by “the mouths of two or three witnesses” by whom “every word may be established” (v. 16).

A specific example of the principle might go this way: – a supervisor in business becomes aware that one of his employees is wasting time or in effect stealing time from his company to do personal work. The first responsibility of the supervisor is to think of the good that this employee does in spite of that problem. Then he must also think of his welfare and future as an employee, making sure he doesn't hurt himself and lose his job because of this problem. Finally, the employer must think of the good of the company and all the other employees whose future may be hurt by this weakness in the chain of responsibility. And so he must think of the use the whole company performs to society.

What should he **do**? First of all he must find a positive way to see and tell the truth about the

situation. In other words, he must find a way to see and tell the truth *from good*, that is, with good at heart and in his mind. This is the part where he discusses the issue privately. In that discussion the supervisor must give every possible incentive and encouragement for the person to fulfill that good and be successful – if not according to his present job description then according to another that may suit him better. If he cannot hear that concern or feel that support, then other witnesses need to get involved – more information needs to be gathered and a more public judgment made.

Or take another example: suppose a person has a drug or alcohol problem, or has a tendency to be mean or gossip. Obviously you can't condone such behaviour or do anything that would support or contribute to it. But you can overlook the evil in regard to the person's spiritual state, realizing that there may be a hundred hidden causes for this behaviour, many of them unknown or baffling to the person herself, and knowing also that some genuine affection for the person – that is, the good in the person – may go a long way toward relieving some of the pain and sadness that may be her experience of life. This is what it means to play the part of Shem and Japheth in our story of Genesis – to take up a garment of good interpretation and lay it on the shoulder, that is, apply it with power, walking backward, that is, looking at the past with understanding, and covering – not denying, not enabling, but forgiving, even as the Lord forgives and covers for us.

But in addition to the simple, one on one charity that we should have toward individuals there is another level of charity that often qualifies how we relate to those individuals. This, too, is a distinctive New Church concept, but equally common-sense as the first. In simplest terms it distinguishes the neighbor, that is, the good to be served, into levels or degrees that are defined in two ways. The first is by numbers, with larger and larger aggregates of individuals composing more and more significant objects of charity which take priority over the individual members of those groupings. It is in this sense that the good of one's community, state or country may require greater allegiance and support than the good of any one person – so much so that individuals may have to suffer and even die for the sake of the larger group. Every soldier knows this principle, and certainly every general who has to send soldiers into harm's way. And of course the Lord Himself exemplified it, giving His life for the salvation of the whole human race.

The second way the neighbor is distinguished by degrees is as we rise from what is good on a material plane to what is good on a moral and finally a spiritual plane. Of course not everyone recognizes these higher levels of human life, but for those who do they take on greater and greater importance – higher and higher priority – as they ascend. So, for example, it may be more important to tell the truth than it is to protect one's self from physical harm, because our eternal life depends on it, and that is far more important than natural life. Likewise it is more important to do what is spiritually good for others than it is to do what benefits them naturally – again, because their eternal life depends on it. (True, the principle can be abused if we focus on trying to compel OTHERS. This is how things like the Christian inquisition or the witch hunts of the 1700's or the Muslim Jihad can become so disorderly and offensive. But when we focus on compelling ourselves nothing but good can come out of it.)

Finally, in the doctrine of genuine charity there is the matter of distinguishing the end from the means used to accomplish it. This also is explained in detail in the Heavenly Doctrines, and in general it goes like this. The end and the means always work together – so much so that a terse quotation from the True Christian Religion sums it up neatly: – “He who loves (or wills) the end

loves (or wills) also the means..." (TCR 13 & 43, etc.). But the love of the means may be what we call "tough love," that is, tough to administer, and tough to bear on the receiving end. It is not always pleasant. For example, a child must learn to have an orderly life: that is the end (or goal); but he may object strenuously to being compelled at first to do so – to make his own bed, to keep his room tidy, to do his chores, to avoid bad habits, and so on. Yet this is necessary or he will never learn to compel himself. On an adult level (pardon me, but I can't resist the illustration), we may not want to come to church or even read a book of the Writings, but until we compel ourselves to do so we will never get the benefits that the Lord provides through these means – means that He Himself teaches are important.

Note that the end is the ultimate or long term objective, whereas the means come first in time. This is reminiscent of the age old debate about which comes first, faith or charity. The answer is that faith – which includes judgment, discipline and self-compulsion – is first in time, but charity – which includes justice, mercy and heavenly freedom – is first in end. Ideally the two things work together, but given the fact that we are born into selfish and worldly loves, and have to grow INTO heavenly loves, this is the path we must follow. So it is useful to know and remember that genuine charity is not just love; there are many different kinds of love – romantic love, friendship love, the love of knowledge or wisdom, and so on. Genuine charity is an affection for the truth, and a willingness to preserve, protect and support that truth as the means toward the end of genuine good – in ourselves, in others, in our communities and in our nation.

This is not something abstract. It is not merely theoretical. Yes, it is an internal attitude first of all; it is a spiritual quality. But the spirit must act or it does not live, and while we are present in this world the spirit acts through the body. So if we are going to have genuine charity we are going to have to *force* ourselves if necessary to act accordingly, to look for the good on every level, and to do whatever it takes to preserve, protect and support it. When we do this we will almost always find that it inspires respect, not to mention confidence and hope, and that from this fountain good things will begin to flow – if not in anyone else still in ourselves, and we will feel a lot better, and our attitude will help others, whether we realize it or not.

Good, the Writings say, protects from evil. And truth protects from falsity, so it is important to exercise prudence and judgment in all matters, but remember, there is no protection of anything heavenly by truth that has been separated from its good. So if thought is the form of truth in the human mind, and truth is the form of good, then it is the thoughtfulness that springs from real concern for the real welfare of real people (on every side of every issue) that above all protects and preserves what is of the Lord, that is, the Church, among us.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 9: 12 - 29 (story of Noah's drunkenness)
Children's talk on overlooking the mistakes of others

Luke 10:25-37

New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine #85, 86 & 91