

## How Unbelievers Can Get to Heaven

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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Jesus said, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters (abroad)” (Luke 11:23),

- but He also said, “He who is not *against* us is *for* us” (Luke 9:50).

People who believe in what is called “universal salvation” are convinced that everyone not only can but will be saved and go to heaven, no matter how false or mean their lives have been in this world. They feel sure that a loving God could not possibly condemn anyone to an eternal life in hell and so they believe that even the worst people ultimately can and will be taught the qualities necessary for heavenly life (after death if necessary), and that gradually, eventually, they will come to see the light and accept it so that they are willing to be reformed.

This is not the teaching of the New Church.

The teaching of the New Church, however, is both merciful and reasonable on this subject. It shows that every person can be saved if he or she is willing, that no one is condemned by the Lord but rather by his own rejection of what the Lord offers, that there are many valid reasons why people do not accept the Lord in this life but do so easily in the next, and that although we can not be reformed after death, still we can continue to learn and grow there if we have cultivated the willingness to do so.

The basis of this teaching is solidly Scriptural and rooted in many things the Lord Himself said in the Gospels, notably in our lesson and leading verse from Luke. Another beautiful example is the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew, chapter 25, where we read specifically about those who will inherit the kingdom. And who are they? The whole point of the parable is that they are the ones who have loved and served other people, for in serving others, as the Lord said, they have served HIM, even though they didn't know it.

So the teaching of this church is that even when people don't know the Lord, “yet because they live in the good of charity, and in what is just and equitable as to civil life, and in what is honorable and becoming as to moral life, they are such that the Lord can be with them; for the Lord's presence with people is in (such things) ... for these are the good (states) which follow in order, and are the planes in people on which conscience is founded by the Lord...” (AC 2915).

The book, Heaven & Hell, puts it very succinctly in a chapter on this topic. We read,

“There is a general opinion that those born outside the Church, who are called heathen, or gentiles, cannot be saved, because not having the Word they know nothing about the Lord, and apart from the Lord there is no salvation. But that these also are [i.e., can be] saved, can be known from this alone, that the mercy of the Lord is universal, that is, towards every individual; that these are born human equally with those within the Church, who are few in comparison, and that *it is not their fault that they do not know the Lord*. Anyone who thinks from any

enlightened reason can see that no man is born for hell, for the Lord is Love Itself and His Love is to will the salvation of all. Therefore, He has provided a religion for everyone, and by it an acknowledgment of the Divine and an interior life; for to live in accordance with one's religious belief is to live interiorly, since one then looks to the Divine, and so far as he looks to the Divine he does not look to the world but separates himself from the world, that is, from the life of the world, which is exterior life" (HH 318).

Note, there is a big difference between "looking to the Divine" and being a Christian. One is a very general, often abstract concept while the other involves the idea that God manifests Himself most fully in the Human form of Jesus Christ. Even so, both convictions take us outside of ourselves to an authority that commands respect and co-operation. And this is the beginning of a healthy spiritual life, which is the meaning of the word, "salvation."

But let's be clear that no religious or spiritual beliefs in themselves can establish the heavenly kingdom in anyone! Lots of people no doubt love their religious doctrines for selfish reasons. And by the same token many people despise and even fear religious doctrines for healthy, justified and unselfish reasons. So the New Church teaches that we are not judged according to quality of the teachings we know but rather according to integrity of our hearts. Once this is established (through commitment and practice) if there is an intent to do right because it is right, then even if we are misled for a very long time, ultimately when the truth is revealed we can accept it gladly, and we do!

On the other hand, where there is no such intent there is no basis for instruction – and no hope of salvation. We read, "Good in a person's life is the ground itself for the seed, that is, for the truth, but evil in his life cannot possibly receive it. Although those immersed in evil are taught in a thousand different ways, indeed even if they are fully taught, the truths of faith with them still do not advance beyond the memory and do not penetrate through to the affection, which is in the heart. Consequently in the next life truths present in their *memory* are dispersed and cease to have any real existence" (AC 2590). This is why people go to hell, and why those in hell can never be reformed and saved. They refuse. They aren't interested. They are incapable of being educated because of their commitment to the selfish life.

Actually, when we think about it we can *all* be thankful that God doesn't judge us according to our beliefs, for no matter how much we may know it is still insignificant compared to what we don't know. So again we read, "It should be recognized that very few truths exist with people, and if they do, that they (the truths) have no life unless there is what is good within them; and if they have what is good within them, then they are saved, but on account of mercy" (AC 2261). In this connection what our doctrines teach about ignorance is very important (and for those of you who have agnostic friends, remember that the word, agnostic, comes from the Greek meaning "I don't know"): –

"A state of ignorance or lack of knowledge in no way rules out holiness when there is innocence in it, for holiness dwells in ignorance that is innocent. With everybody apart from the Lord, holiness is unable to dwell anywhere else than in ignorance. If it does not dwell in this it is not holiness. Among the angels themselves, who possess a supreme light of intelligence and wisdom, holiness still

dwells within ignorance, for they know and acknowledge that of themselves they know nothing and that whatever they do know comes from the Lord. They also know and acknowledge that all their knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom are as nothing in comparison with the Lord's infinite knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom, thus that all of theirs is lack of knowledge. Anyone who does not acknowledge that there is an infinite number of things he does not know compared with what he does know cannot possess the holiness present with angels that goes with ignorance or lack of knowledge. This holiness that goes with ignorance does not consist in knowing less than others but in the acknowledgment that from oneself one does not know anything at all, and that the things one does not know are infinite in comparison with the things one does know. But above all it entails regarding factual knowledge and intellectual concepts as being of small importance compared with celestial things, that is, things of the understanding as being of small importance compared with those of life" (AC 1557).

Now there are two main reasons why good people don't know about the Lord. The most obvious is that they have not been taught about Him. The majority of the world's 6 billion people still have never had any serious instruction in the Gospels. This isn't their fault, and the Lord doesn't hold them responsible for it. He knows that anyone who really loves the truth will happily receive it when the barriers to such knowledge are removed. And wonderfully, those of all religions are taught in the spiritual world in ways adapted to their former beliefs, so that they learn without any fear of losing something precious to them (HH 515-516).

But lack of information is not the only barrier to knowledge. Our teachings reveal, and experience confirms that there are many people who reject the Christian religion (and the New Church, too!) because they do not see what good it does. In fact, some are so turned off by the evil and hypocrisy of church members that they become terribly cynical about the whole business, even to the point of being fearful of it (HH 325, AC 2597). The same thing can happen when the teachings are misinterpreted or misrepresented, either innocently or deliberately. People say, "Well that makes no sense to me! I just can't believe it!" And so the Lord finds other ways to work with them according to what does make sense to them – if they are willing to accept it. Unfortunately, as long as they are in this confused and contradictory world there may be little hope of them ever really hearing, that is, really understanding the truth of the Word.

Of course none of this absolves us of our responsibilities, which relate directly to the two problems just mentioned. After all, if people can be given the benefits of a healthy spiritual life in this world not only will they be happier and more fulfilled, they will be better influences on everybody else, which will improve the quality of life for everyone – here and in the here-after.

The first responsibility that comes with knowing any truth is to live according to it. This is hard! You could even say it's a full time job. But as you can easily see it's not just something we need to do for ourselves; it's something we need to do for the sake of others, lest they see the contradictions in our lives and reject the teachings for themselves. Of course, nobody should expect us to be perfect; we will all make mistakes. But unless our good intentions are real and apparent we can forget about any hope of helping people learn the truth as we understand it.

That said, our second responsibility is to share what we know. And this must be done, as the

angels do it, in ways accommodated to the needs and receptive states of those we hope to reach.

For the most part people who are settled in their thoughts and convictions will not be open to radically new ideas, and that's OK – sad, but OK. As long as they concern themselves with what is good and just and honorable and right as they understand it the Lord can work with them. If they act on bad information they may indeed do great harm to others, but the Lord will honor their intentions and ultimately help them to see the light. As for the victims of their mistakes we can only pray that the Lord will open their eyes to more interior truths despite their injuries.

But this is where our efforts can bear real fruit: – when people do suffer from the evils or falsities perpetrated by the hells, whether in the name of religion or any other selfish interest, their injuries and needs may lead to receptive states **provided we can present the truth with integrity and real concern for those people**, and not just with zeal that they should think as we do. And we know that there are millions of such people “out there,” many thousands even within a few miles of here. These people need what we have to offer – not that it is ours in the first place but the Lord has given it to us because He knows that we have the ability to use it and to share it if we put our hearts into it – in fact because He knows that **we need to do these things**.

The Gospel of John from beginning to end is a compelling argument for salvation by the Lord alone. For example we read, “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (3:17). So Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (14:6). There are many other similar statements. But we should never forget that the Lord also told His disciples He had “other sheep which are not of this fold” and that they, too, would hear His voice and become part of His flock (John 10:19). Indeed He prayed – in John 17 – not just for His disciples but “also for those who will believe in Me *through their word*” (v. 20). So we read, “It is a Divine truth that apart from the Lord there is no salvation; but this is to be understood to mean that there is no salvation except from the Lord” (HH 321). And He works through many, many indirect means.

In summary, unbelievers whose unbelief is caused by legitimate doubts and fears, who hold back humbly and sincerely because they just don't get it, may not really be against the Lord at all. Indeed, they may joyfully receive the Lord when His goodness and truth are at last made clear to them. So the Lord said – distinctly and definitively – “He who is not against us is for us.”

Remember, “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them” – by whatever means He could. With some that *means* will be the New Church; with some it will be the Old Church; with some it will be some other religion, and with some it will be their simple integrity and genuine charity apart from any formal religious ties. **But be careful. Think this through**. Often – too often – the rejection of religion is just an excuse, a neat, convenient way of pointing the finger at someone else and avoiding the personal responsibility for careful investigation, self-examination, self-discipline and the authority of anyone greater than self.

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 1:1-19, with a talk for children on “evolution” & the creation story  
Luke 9:46-56 & Arcana Caelestia #2915.