

A SPIRIT OF OPTIMISM

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, August 15th, 2010

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6).

So ends the 23rd Psalm, one of the most loved and comforting passages in all of Scripture, full of hope and confidence based on a recognition of the Lord’s love and power. But can we really believe it? Can we really feel so positive and optimistic, or is this just an exercise in wishful thinking?

Today we are continuing our summer series on preparation for heaven, and, as promised, we are looking now at the attitudes or affections that we need to cultivate in order to be happy in heaven.

Optimism clearly is one of these attitudes, that is, a disposition to trust the Lord no matter what, and to think the best not only of our neighbors but of our own ability – with His help – to live according to His Word. This isn’t always easy; after all, we’re born with a disposition to be self-centered and worldly minded, focused on our own immediate needs and problems. But if we really believe we *can* overcome these tendencies the Lord will help us, and if we really *don’t* believe it, well, then the teachings about how we *should* feel will just make us feel guilty, and worse than ever.

Remember, the Lord said, “Whatever you ask in prayer *believing* you will receive” (Matt. 21:22).

So now the question is, how can we GET that belief? How, when so many things seem to go wrong in our lives, can we GET that positive outlook? We’ll come back to this in just a few minutes.

The Lord’s Encouragement

First, let’s reflect on the Lord’s encouragement about this. Time after time He reassured His disciples and built them up even though He knew all their shortcomings. He knew that many things would be impossible for them on their own, but quickly added, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

For example, He told a paralytic man to “Be of good cheer,” saying, “Your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2), and he was healed. He told the woman with an issue of blood the same thing, adding, “Your faith has made you well” (Matt. 9:22), and she was healed. He picked a bunch of simple fishermen to preach His gospel all over Israel and told them they would have to stand before governors and kings on His account but not to worry, that the Spirit of God would speak for them, and it was so. He told the woman caught in adultery, who was about to be stoned, that He did not condemn her (John 8:11), and He taught forgiveness of a sinning brother until seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22). That’s a lot! He rescued Peter on several occasions and also told him, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32). These are just a few of many examples of the Lord’s positive approach with all sorts of people.

Of course it is necessary sometimes to be aware of evil, especially the evil in ourselves as we turn to the Lord in the work of repentance and reformation. At such times, we are taught, it is critical that we be highly focussed and specific in our view of evil, otherwise it can overwhelm us. But our

teachings are equally clear that such examinations are to be carried out infrequently, perhaps three or four times in a year at most, and this in conjunction with the powerful, protective sphere of prayer, reading from the Word, and the holy supper. For the rest of the time, that is, most of the time, we are to look to the goodness of the Lord and to the goodness of life, and strive in every way to receive that goodness in a positive, affirmative spirit.

Sure, there are depressing aspects of life, even in the doctrines, but they are always balanced by uplifting circumstances. For instance, we read in our lesson from the Writings, “Evils cannot be taken away from a person....” The impression is that we are hopelessly locked into a life of sin and misery, cursed as it were by our heredity, our environment and our own persistent passions. “**But**,” the teaching continues, “...But a person can be **withheld** from them, *and kept in good*.... This is effected by the Lord” as we co-operate with Him. Thus evils and sins are removed ... successively ... by the Lord by means of regeneration (NJHD 170).

Here is our first clue about how to get and keep a spirit of optimism: just do what the Lord teaches, whether you feel like it or not. Doing provides the basis for an influx of more positive feelings, and keeps bad spirits from dragging you down. On the other hand just sitting around thinking about how miserable you are reinforces the negative feelings and invites even more of the same influence.

New Church Teachings Specifically

There are many other examples of negative teachings in the church being balanced by extremely positive teachings. One that challenges our sense of justice is that the accumulated evils of parents and grandparents are passed on as hereditary inclinations to evil in their children. It seems so unfair. Yet the Lord assures us that the evils of our own nature are most perfectly balanced by the states of good and truth that we receive from Him and that are stored up within us throughout our lives. The evils are, after all, just inclinations, we do not need to confirm them by acting on them. Besides, it is equally true that the good loves acquired by parents in the course of their spiritual growth are also passed on to their children *as inclinations to good and truth* (AC 3469:3, CL 202).

Again, we are taught that if we act against one commandment from purpose or confirmation we act against them all (CL 528). This can be a frightening, almost immobilizing truth, but the teaching is followed immediately by its corollary which is that if we conscientiously abstain from any one evil because it is a sin, and still more if we abstain from several, we abstain from them all, for when we do this the Lord holds us in the purpose of abstaining from the rest (CL 529), and the Lord judges us according to our purpose, not our deeds alone.

Many people are bothered by the fact that the Lord permits evils in the world – in ourselves and in others. But, we read, “Evils are permitted for the sake of the end, which is salvation” (DP 275 ff). So the Lord said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

“Be of good cheer . . .” What a challenge! Yet the Word insists that it is both possible and necessary as a function of spiritual life. It is in fact a key element of charity toward the neighbour. “Where charity does not exist self-love is present and consequently hatred towards all who do not show favour to self. As a result they see in the neighbour nothing except his evil. Or if they do see anything good they either perceive it as nothing or else place a bad interpretation on it . . . *But those*

who have charity hardly notice the evil in another person, but instead notice all the goods and truths that are his; and on his evils and falsities they place a good interpretation.” Thus, “those who have the faith of charity . . . notice the goods, and if they do see evils and falsities they excuse them, and if possible endeavour with that person to correct them.” (AC 1079).

All this is just another way of saying that it is the nature of charity to forgive, and “to forgive is to regard anyone not from evil but from good” (AC 7697). Then again, to him who forgives, much is forgiven, for he makes himself receptive of the Lord’s work in his own heart. Forgiveness is the remission, or sending away of sins *from active thought and feeling*, so we also read, “It is a consequence of the remission of sins to look at things from good and not from evil” (NJHD 170).

How far can we go with this? Well, we can’t just *ignore* evil. Nor can we simply gloss it over. The Lord does not intend that we should think of evil as if it were good. In fact He said in Isaiah, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (5:20). Good is good, evil is evil, and the two must not be confused. Indeed “he who does not know evil loves it, and he who neglects to think about it is continually in it” (DP 101:2). Still, what advantage is there in thinking about it *all the time*? Social studies show and the Heavenly Doctrines also explain that what we think about contributes significantly to what we become, and what we talk about confirms our thoughts.

So What Can We Do?

Anybody who thinks about evil too much becomes a pessimist. But the teaching of the Word is that we should be optimists. True optimism isn’t a disregard for evil or a failure to recognize it. Rather it is an affirmative attitude in spite of the evil. It is “a disposition to hope for the best; a tendency to look on the bright side of things” (American College Dictionary). Spiritually speaking, the bright side is the Lord’s side, for His wisdom actually is the light of the spiritual sun shining everywhere. Note, objects standing in the light cast a shadow of darkness behind them, but if we look from the sunny side we don’t see the shadows, we see the light. In the words of the “Arcana” we “think nothing else than good of the neighbour and speak nothing but good ... “ (AC 1088).

“Optimism” comes from the Latin word, “optimus,” meaning “best.” As noted, an optimist hopes for the best. But theological or spiritual optimism is more than just hope, it is the certain knowledge that although the Lord permits evil, perhaps even the worst possible evil, still He only provides the best. So there is a difference between His foresight, which anticipates the evil we or others generate, and His providence, which responds to that evil with good, and this without fail, every single time (AC 3854, 5155, 6298, 9296:2, 9304, 10781).

The Word is full of stories of the Lord making the best of bad situations. In the Old Testament, for example, the children of Israel were constantly turning away from Him and He was constantly rescuing them. In the New Testament practically every miracle was a correction of some evil. The story of the man born blind is a good illustration. When the disciples saw him they immediately became absorbed in the problem of his blindness asking whose fault it was. But the Lord took an entirely different view. He said, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but (he is blind) that the works of God should be revealed in him” (John 9:3). Then He gave him his sight and at the same time opened the spiritual eyes of many who accepted Him because of this miracle. The story of the resurrection of Lazarus also is particularly pertinent. When Lazarus died and lay in the grave for

four days naturally his sisters and friends began to grieve and lament. Here was an evil, a death from sickness, and they were consumed by that evil. But the Lord looked at the good in the situation and welcomed the opportunity to make the very best of it by using it to demonstrate His power even over death. He even said, “I am glad for your sakes that I was not there (when Lazarus died), that you may believe” (John 11:15). And not only they but many others also believed because of it.

We worship a marvellous and merciful God. The fact that there is evil in the world is not His doing. Still, we do not have the power of God to correct evil. So how can we look at life as He does, with a view literally to making the best of it? How can we respond to the leading of His providence in the most positive way?

To a large extent it’s a matter of perspective. Remember, “The Divine Providence regards eternal things, and not temporal things except so far as they accord with eternal things” (DP 214). And given that we cannot see into eternity (let alone 3 months or even 3 weeks ahead with any certainty!) what recourse do we have but to trust the Lord, and, trusting Him, seek whatever good, whatever benefit, whatever blessing we can find in every circumstance?

They say the optimist sees the donut, while the pessimist sees the hole; the optimist sees the glass half *full*, while the pessimist sees it half *empty*. The optimist looks to the goal in hard work and “keeps his eyes on the prize,” while the pessimist just sees all the hard work and problems. Remember the story of the Exodus when the Israelites came to the Red Sea, where, surrounded by wilderness on both sides, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit they feared the worst. But “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward.’” So they did and the waters were parted before them. Believe, and do, and go forward. They did and so can we.

One of the things our doctrines teach continually is that *everybody can* go to heaven (DP 322). But despite the Lord’s power, even He can’t make people go there, so even He can’t make the best thing happen for everyone. Still He works at this constantly and it is His joy to do so. Why won’t we follow do as He says?

Many times the Lord said His disciples would suffer persecution and grief in the world. He did not promote false hopes. He did not call evil good, or ignore it, or refuse to deal with it. In fact, that is why He came – to deal with it! Sometimes, it is true, He rebuked people, and in the case of those confirmed in evil He even condemned them, but always, always out of zeal for the good. If we at least try on a daily basis to look on the bright side we will be living our religion as if we really believed it, for the belief will be confirmed a thousand times in how we think about our own lives and how we act with other people. And not only will we hope for what is best we will be the best we can be, looking at everything from good and not from evil, actually extending the Lord’s work as He promised in the gospel, bringing light and confidence to others (Matthew 5:16), so that they are inspired to do their best and we, together, really do help His kingdom to come – “as in heaven, so upon the earth.”

- Amen

Lessons: Mark 3:1-19
with a children’s talk on the Lord healing, gathering and calling His disciples.
Psalm 37:1-11
Arcana Caelestia #8478 & 8480, selections