

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 24 May 2020**

Children's Talk: The Lord is Reaching Down to You Wherever You Are

- For the last 2 weeks we've been talking about how the Lord works with us.
 - 2 weeks ago we talked about the puzzle and how the Lord can help us to find more puzzle pieces and figure out how to understand how things in our lives fit together a bit better.
 - And last week Mr. Glenn talked about how the Lord is always in control, even in the rolling of dice.

- This week I want to talk about how the Lord works with us, even when we've messed up.
- We can sometimes think that the Lord only likes us and will only work with us when we're doing well—when we've been good and done what we're supposed to and are feeling proud of ourselves.
- But the problem is we all mess up.
 - We all do things that aren't so smart.
 - We all do things that we know we shouldn't do.
 - We all do mean things sometimes.
 - And then what?

- We're going to read a story about a person who had intentionally done some big selfish things.
 - The story is about Jacob.
 - You might remember that Jacob tricked his older brother Esau to steal lots of money from him.
 - And he also lied to his father and tricked his father into giving him a blessing that was meant for his brother Esau.
- And so we're going to pick up the story when Jacob was running away from Esau because Esau was so mad at him.
- Genesis 28:10-17 (NKJV)
 - 10 Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. 12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

 - 13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. 14 Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

 - 16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." 17 And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

- That's a pretty amazing dream!

- Even though Jacob was not a very nice person yet and had a lot to learn, the Lord still was there to be with him and help him.
 - And the Lord said that He would be with him wherever he went.
 - And it's the same for us—the Lord is always with us to try to help us, even when we've done bad things.
- Jacob thought that that particularly place was special and so he said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. This is... the house of God, and... the gate of heaven!"
 - But, really, any place where we find ourselves can be a place where the Lord is and can be the house of God and gate of heaven.
- Now let's talk a bit about what Jacob saw in his dream.
 - He saw a ladder or a staircase, set up on the earth, with its top in heaven and with angels going up and coming down on it.
 - And I love that picture because it's a picture of how the Lord is not just way up in heaven, waiting for us to figure out how to get up to His level: He and the angels are also coming all the way down to our level to help us go up from there.
- The things that Jacob did were still selfish and bad and he still had to deal with the consequences of those selfish decisions.
 - He ran away from them for a while but eventually he had to face them.
 - But the Lord was willing to work with Him along the way.
- This lockdown thing is weird and hard.
 - Some days are pretty good and some days are pretty bad.
 - I would guess that you've had some days when you've done some mean or selfish things or said some mean or selfish things.
 - I know that I have a whole bunch of times.
 - And when we mess up it can feel like it's not worth trying anymore.
 - So when you're feeling that way, I want you to picture the Lord making a ladder from heaven all the way down to where you are to help you get up.
- Or you know how helicopters sometimes have rope ladders hanging down from them for people to climb up on?
 - Picture a rescue helicopter suddenly flying into view and dropping a ladder down for you so that you can climb higher up towards the Lord.
- The Lord is in charge of everything and He can work with you and He wants to work with you, even when you mess up.
- He'll still be there to help you get up again, if you're willing to turn to Him and try to climb up.
- *Amen.*

Misconceptions of Providence, Part 3: “It’s All God or It’s All Me”

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
24 May 2020

Intro: Is Life Like a Roller Coaster Ride?

- People like to compare life to a roller coaster ride.
 - For example, one popular quote says, “Life is like a roller coaster. You can either scream every time there is a bump or you can throw your hands up and enjoy the ride” (Unknown).
 - It may be overused but it’s a fun analogy because sometimes life is like a fun ride, other times it’s slow, boring, and predictable like one of those kiddie roller coasters, other times it feels like you’re clicking upward towards some terrible, terrifying drop, other times you’re flinging around all sorts of different directions and you have no idea where you’re going to go next.

- But is this analogy accurate?
 - A key characteristic of a roller coaster is that we’re *not* in charge of where it goes.
 - And when some people talk about life being like a roller coaster, that’s their exact point.
 - “Think of life as a roller coaster. We *ride* the coaster, we don’t *drive* it. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be to try to make the roller coaster go the way you want it to? Not only would you not be able to steer it, you would miss the experience of just riding it, with all of its highs and lows.” (Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, Kessler, David. *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us About the Mysteries of Life and Living*. p.164)
 - Is life more like a car that we can steer where we want it to go or is it more like a roller coaster that takes us where it wants to go, regardless of what we might choose?
 - If it really is like a roller coaster then our decisions are meaningless.
 - This point of view is called hard determinism or fatalism.
 - People who hold this perspective say that whatever we do is simply what we were always going to do.
 - It might feel like we’re making free choices but every single thing that we do is just the result of previous actions beyond our control.
 - We are just carts riding on a predetermined track.
 - We are merely dominoes in an infinite line of dominoes, knocked over by dominoes before us, and inevitably bound to knock into other dominoes that also don’t have any choice but to fall in the way that they were always going to fall.

- You might be able to pretty quickly dismiss this idea and say, “No, that can’t be true.”
 - But how do you reconcile some of the ideas we’ve been talking about in the past weeks of this series with the idea of our choices mattering?
 - The New Church says that God is involved in the smallest details of what happens (*Secrets of Heaven* §6482).
 - The Lord said, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:30).
 - And if He’s involved in the smallest details, then how can our decisions matter?

- If He's actually involved in tiny details like which surfaces we touch and whether we touch our faces and then whether we get infected and infect other people—if the Lord is involved in all of that—then what difference does it make what choices we try to make?
 - And so some people decide that it's all fate and they're going to stop trying to figure it out or fight—what will be, will be.
 - Enjoy the ride, stop getting frustrated trying to steer something you can't steer.
- Other people go the other way, they say, "Maybe God is involved in all the little details but, practically speaking, He doesn't tell us what to do and so it's up to us to figure it out."
 - They treat it as though it's irrelevant whether or not God is involved.
 - "It doesn't matter, we still have to do what we need to do, regardless of whether God is involved or God even exists—same situation."
 - And a lot of people end up operating this way.
 - Do you think about the Lord's Providence in the way you make your business decisions?
 - Do you think about the Lord's Providence in the way you decide what to spend your time on, on the weekend?
- What I'm trying to do get to with this sermon is therefore what?
 - We have all of these beautiful teachings about Divine Providence and therefore what?
 - What difference does it make in your life to know that God is involved in the smallest details of your life?
 - What is the impact of these teachings on how you live your life or think about your life?
- There are probably many good ways of understanding this but here's what I've got for today: these teachings can change the *meaning* of the circumstances in which we find ourselves and the *meaning* of the decisions that we have to make.
 - We can tend to oversimplify things in the way we make sense of them.
 - This thing that happened was all God's doing.
 - Or God wasn't involved at all in this thing that happened; it was just chance.
 - Or we can take responsibility for it all—the reason that this worked out well or worked out terribly is all because of me.
- Like we talked about 2 weeks ago, we need a bit higher resolution image of things.
 - And the teachings of the New Church give us that.

Our Role vs. God's Role

- Let's talk about what the teachings of the New Church say about our role vs. God's role.
 - The word they use to talk about our role is prudence—our best efforts to figure out things and make decisions for ourselves is our prudence.
 - And that is contrasted with God's Divine Providence.
 - Our role and God's role in our lives.
- The teachings of the New Church say that our prudence compared with God's Providence is like a speck of dust compared to the whole atmosphere (*Secrets of Heaven* §6485).
 - Well that's rude!

- Another passage says that “our own prudence is nothing—it only seems to be something” (*Divine Providence* §191).
 - So that sounds an awful lot like hard determinism or fate where the Lord is doing everything and our decisions are meaningless.
 - But that passage goes on to say that our prudence seeming to be something is as it should be.
 - This is the paradoxical solution that the teachings of the New Church provide: the idea that everything is really from the Lord, but the Lord also makes it seem like things are from us and that appearance is really important to the whole system.
 - *Divine Providence* §210
 - [I]f it did not appear to a person that he lives of himself, and thus that he thinks and wills, speaks and acts as though of himself, the person would not be human.
 - We would not be human beings without it seeming to us that we direct our own lives.
 - And so the passage goes on to talk about the implications of this for how we live our lives.
 - This gets to some of the “therefore, what?” that I was talking about earlier.
 - *Divine Providence* §210 (continued)
 - From this it follows that if a person did not manage all the concerns of his function and life as though by his own prudence, he could not be led and directed by Divine providence. For he would be like someone standing with hands hanging limp, mouth open, and eyes closed, holding his breath and awaiting influx.

If you wish to be led by Divine providence, therefore, use prudence as a servant or assistant who faithfully manages the goods of his lord.
- It’s all God *but* part of what God chooses to do in the way that He runs things is to make it seem like we run our own lives *and* he makes it so that the decisions that we make are meaningful.
 - Why are things not just deterministic?
 - Because God chooses to make our decisions meaningful; that’s why.
 - Without the Lord everything would be random or deterministic and therefore meaningless.

Examples

- Let’s now grapple with these ideas using some examples.

“God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

- Have you ever heard the saying, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.”
 - It sounds sort of true, doesn’t it?
 - It sounds encouraging—“Rah! Rah! You can do it; you can get through it!”
- But try saying that phrase to someone who has had a traumatic experience that they’ve been permanently scarred by and have never really come back from it.
- Or say it to someone who has attempted suicide.
 - “God won’t give me more than I can handle? Thanks. That’s *really* helpful.”

- Let's figure out what's wrong with this idea.
 - Like many problematic ideas, part of what makes it seem true is that there are some true ideas mixed into it.
 - It is true that the Lord can and will help us get through spiritual temptations.
 - This idea is expressed Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:
 - 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NKJV)
 - No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.
 - The Lord can help us get through temptations and difficult things but that doesn't mean that the Lord has put us in that situation and we have to, therefore, just stay there and suffer endlessly.
 - We are allowed to think to ourselves, "I need to get out of this situation!"
 - The very next verse in Paul's letter says, "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14).
 - Run away!
- If we think that everything is fate and controlled by God, then we can think that our roller coaster has driven us to this terrible thing we're going through, and we have no choice but to ride it out.
- Or, if we think that the responsibility for our lives is all our own, then we can blame ourselves for whatever terrible circumstance we're in or at least we can blame ourselves for not being better able to cope with whatever circumstance we're dealing with.
 - Maybe the Lord is guiding everything but part of what He's doing is also helping us use our prudence to figure out how to get away from that situation.
 - There's a great discussion of this in an article by a minister named Dandridge Pendleton.
 - First, he says that nowhere in the teachings of the New Church do they say that the Lord won't allow someone to experience more than they can bear.
 - He says that, yes, we are taught that the Lord brings good out of temptations but then he says this:
 - It should be well noted that in none of these teachings is it said, nor implied, that a man is to simply endure whatever external circumstances may come upon him during his lifetime, nor that these are the circumstances under which he is necessarily to remain in seeking that spiritual development which the Lord would have him achieve. Too often, the conviction that every external circumstance provides an opportunity for our spiritual development is held in such a way as to mean that whatever the nature or scope of that circumstance, we are to stand and fight, regardless, and that if we feel compelled to remove ourselves from the burden, we are somehow not measuring up to our capabilities.

We should bear in mind that while every natural event, or circumstance, can and should serve our inner development, this inner development does not necessarily come only by *surmounting* the circumstance. If we are to develop a balanced spiritual perspective, it is just as important that we come to realize our limitations, as it is for us to develop our strengths. It is true that every such circumstance does provide an opportunity to learn; but what we are

intended to learn may just as well be to say “I *can’t*” as “I *can*.” (Pendleton, Dandridge. “Doctrine of Permission” *New Church Life*, 1980: pp.114-115)

- What does it mean if you can’t handle what life or God or whatever throws at you, or if you have some kind of breakdown and can’t cope with some or all of life?
 - Is it God’s fault?
 - Is it your fault?
 - Maybe it’s neither and it’s a chance to learn that you can’t do it all or to learn that you have to let go of certain things or a chance to finally learn that of course you can’t do it on your own and you need to find other people who can help you.
 - Or maybe it’s just that life is really, really, really hard sometimes.
 - Or any number of other possibilities.
- Let’s shift a little bit now to talking about success and failure.

Success and Failure

- A lot of people define success and failure in terms of money and influence.
 - If you’ve got a lot of money or power or fame then you’re successful and if you don’t, then you’re a failure.
 - And again there’s all sorts of bad ways to interpret these situations, explaining it in terms of God being responsible for it or explaining it in terms of us being responsible for it.
 - Don’t have as much money or success as I want?
 - It’s God’s fault.
 - I’m doomed.
 - He’s punishing me.
 - Or it’s my fault.
 - I’m not more successful because I’m too stupid, or I missed the opportunities that God gave me.
 - Or maybe I did selfish things, broke commandments, broke promises and I’ve had to live with the consequences—it’s all my fault.
 - We can also run into trouble if we do have lots of money and success.
 - Then I can say that God’s responsible for that in a prosperity Gospel kind of way to say that God has chosen to shower His blessings down on me and my wealth is a sign of God’s favour.
 - Or I can take credit for it all myself and say that my success is all due to my intelligence, hard work, and taking the opportunities that were in front of me with both hands... *etc.*
 - But the teachings of the New Church offer a different perspective; they say that “honours and riches may be blessings, and that they may also be curses” (*Divine Providence* §216:2).
 - They explain that
 - *Divine Providence* §217:2
 - [T]hey are blessings in the case of people who do not place their heart in them, and that they are curses in the case of people who do place their heart in them. To place one’s heart in them is to love oneself in them, and not to

place one's heart in them is to love the uses, and not oneself, in them.
[And] advancements and riches lead some people astray, and not others.

- And there are even passages that say that some good people are not given position and material success, because they would lead them astray.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §7007:3
 - [H]igh rank and wealth bring worldly but not eternal happiness. This being so, that happiness may be experienced both by those who are not upright and by those who are upright; and if the upright are denied it, it is in order that such things may not divert them from what is good.
- So, if we do or do not have lots of apparent success, position, power, money, stuff, etc. we can conclude that... we have no idea why we do or do not have those things.
 - And we can also conclude that maybe having or not having those things are not really the point and that the point is to not be setting our hearts on those kinds of things—whether we happen to have them or not.
 - As Jesus said,
 - Matthew 6:19-21 (NKJV)
 - 19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- Maybe it's easy to see that money and power are not the real point—that's a pretty familiar idea in religious circles.
- But it also applies to a lot of our other measures of success or failure.
 - What does success or failure of a mom during lockdown look like?
 - It is very easy to get sucked into buying into the idea that success is a day when your kids eat healthy food, have only minimal screen time, do all their school work, also spend a lot of time outside, bond with you as their mom and feel loved and cared about by you, and, of course, don't fight with their siblings.
 - Well, what if you have a day, or a week, or seemingly every single day when you fail on one or all of those measures?
 - Is it God's fault for doing this whole pandemic disaster thing?
 - Is it your fault for not being a good enough mom?
- Have you failed?
- Has God failed?
- Maybe those external measures of success are not the actual point.
 - Maybe the whole point is that we can keep trying to figure out what to do.
 - We can keep turning to the Lord as the only true source of goodness and guidance in our lives and we can keep using our minds to try to figure out what to do.
 - That might be letting go of things, it might be trying doing things a different way, it might be making hard decisions, it might be getting more sleep.

How the Lord Gives Us Freedom

- Let's talk about how the Lord gives us freedom, using something that the Lord said in the Gospel of John:
 - John 8:31-32 (NKJV)
 - 31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
- How do we have freedom?
 - How can our decisions be meaningful and productive?
 - By abiding—living—in the Lord's Word.
 - If we're trying to live according to what the Lord says, then we'll know the truth and that truth—that perspective from the Lord will set us free.
- The people who were listening to Him didn't understand what kind of freedom He was talking about so He clarified it: He said,
 - John 8:34-36 (NKJV)
 - 34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.
 - That gets to the point—that gets at what the Lord is most concerned about.
 - He wants to free us from the slavery of sin.
 - Regardless of how much money or power or happy looking children or whatever we have or don't have, the thing that the Lord is always, always, always working towards for us is to free us from the slavery of selfishness.
 - To free us from envy, conceit, greed, lust, desire to control others, hatred, revenge, manipulation, deceit.
 - That's what the Lord cares about is to free you and me and everyone from all that garbage so that we can instead experience contentment, humility, enjoyment of what we have, clean love of a married partner, a love for serving other people and influencing them in a positive way, honesty, love for other people, and love for the Lord and the trust and peace that come with it.
 - Treasures of heaven.
 - In every moment, regardless of what all has happened around us or within us, regardless of our weaknesses and past mistakes, regardless of our personalities or flaws, the Lord is offering us the freedom to choose heaven instead of hell.
 - You're not just on a one track roller coaster with no options but to ride where it takes you.
 - There is a lot that's out of your control, including where you started on the track and some amount of what track you've already covered, but the Lord has given you the ability to freely choose to switch tracks, to turn towards a track that leads more directly to the Lord.
 - Yes, it's all Him doing it in a sense.
 - He built the whole roller coaster—the cart you're in and all the possible tracks you could go on, and He also built the lever that you can use to switch tracks.
 - But He built that lever and He made it so that it has real effects.
 - You can use your prudence to try to figure out how to better follow the Lord.
 - Things are not doomed or fated or a lost cause.

- We can see the truth of this in relationships.
 - It can feel like, if we want to have good relationships—with our spouse, with our children, with our parents, friends, co-workers, whoever—then we need to never mess up.
 - We need to always be kind, understanding, boundaried, patient, brave, *etc.*
 - And we can feel like if we mess up and shout or say mean things or be passive aggressive or whatever that then things are done.
 - But there's a really helpful idea to combat this thinking and it's been really important to me.
 - I've heard it from relationship researchers Drs. John and Julie Gottmann and others who have found that, in good relationships between parents and children and in marriages, having a good relationship is not about never messing up but about repairing the relationship when you do mess up (Benson, Kyle. "Repair is the Secret Weapon of Emotionally Connected Couples" <https://www.gottman.com/blog/repair-secret-weapon-emotionally-connected-couples/>).
 - What a freeing and empowering idea!
 - We can apologise. We can say something we need to say differently. We can do a better job of standing up for ourselves or do a better job of empathising with the other person.
 - We can mess up and we can repair.
 - And this is true in our spiritual lives too.

Conclusion

- To try to bring this all together, I want to read one last thing that the Lord said about freedom.
 - John 15:14-17 (NKJV)
 - 14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. 17 These things I command you, that you love one another.
- For a long time people did really know what the Lord was doing.
 - But now, with the help of the Bible combined with the teachings of the New Church, we can have a clearer sense of what the Lord in His Providence is doing in our lives and in the world.
 - He has made these things known to us.
 - There are plenty of things that are outside of our control.
 - We did not choose many aspects of our lives.
 - But the Lord did choose each of us and appointed us that we would be able to use our prudence—our lever in our little cart—to make decisions, and that we would be able to go and bear fruit—to go and do useful things for other people and keep trying and messing up and repairing things and gradually getting better at loving one another.
- *Amen.*