

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes  
for Sunday, 15 November

## Children's Talk: What Makes a Person a Person?

I don't have an object or a picture to show you today. What I want you to do is use whatever is around you and your own body. Because we are going to talk about how people are different from everything else that the Lord has created.

After God had created the sun, moon, and stars; the sea, the sky, and dry land; grass and trees and plants; and fish and birds and all the animals on land; there was one thing left to make:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

And God said, "See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food." (Genesis 1:26-29)

So God made people last. And he put people in charge of everything he had created. Why would God do that? What makes people so special? Well, they are in the image and likeness of God. People are like God. That is what separates us from rocks and plants and animals.

Now if we just think about our bodies, that doesn't seem to be the case. We seem like most everything else the Lord made. We have hard, dead bits: touch your hair, or fingernails, or teeth, or feel your bones under your skin. They're kind of like all the other stuff around you, right? Or think of a pet that you have, a dog or a cat or a fish or a bird: they have skin and bones and organs and blood. They move around a lot like we do. Now we could say people are special because we have ten fingers and ten toes and can walk upright, but that doesn't make us any better than rocks or trees or animals.

Being in the image of the Lord is about our hearts, not our bodies. The way we love the Lord and other people is what makes us so special. It's what makes us not animals. We can think about the Lord; we can learn His commandments; we can do what He teaches; we can also think about other people; we can learn what they want or needs; we can decide to do nice things for them. Rocks and trees and animals are amazing and so useful. But they cannot love the Lord or other people the same way. This is how we are like the Lord, and not like anything else: we can love.

# Nature, Part 4: Humanity and Usefulness

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

15 November, 2020

So far in our series on nature we have covered the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms. We've looked at how even something as basic as a rock displays the Lord's order; how plants reveal abundant life from the Lord; and how animals reflect the complex ecosystem of our hearts and minds. Today we conclude by looking at the crowning element of the Lord's creation: people themselves.

All things in creation can be defined by their relationship to people, and specifically, in the uses that they provide to humanity. The Teachings of the New Church proclaim that,

...the uses of all things that have been created ascend in turn from the lowest created forms to mankind, which is the highest in order. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §65:23)

All things in nature point towards humans as their goal and purpose. This truth is a far cry from what is visible to the naked eye. Although secular scientists might speak in terms of evolution and progress, it is a blind and random progress that could just as easily go backwards as forwards. Nature existed before people, and will continue without us long after we are gone. That people have minds that are so radically different from those of animals is a random quirk of evolution. In the secular mind, there was no Divine plan ascending from dead matter, to plants, to animals, and at last to people, the ultimate goal. Yet that is what the Lord tells us is so: that all the natural world has been shaped to provide a place for humans to grow and flourish. There is not a grain of sand that does not in some way contribute to humanity in God's infinite plan.

The first book of the Bible, in describing creation, makes mankind's place in it quite clear:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

And God said, "See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food." (Genesis 1:26-29)

Humanity is to dominate nature and to make use of it. This passage seems to be saying that we are to do with nature however we please, as if the only that nature holds lies in how much it can serve our desires. And there might even be a bit of truth in that; but I don't think the relationship is like that of a tyrant over his subjects, who rules at whim, and on whom there are no boundaries to his basest desires. Rather, the Lord is establishing a relationship more akin to a steward who cares for his masters goods, or a supervisor who lovingly looks out for his workers.

We see this come through in the role that Adam was given in the Garden of Eden:

Then Jehovah God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and guard it. (Genesis 2:15)

Adam's role was, quite simply, that of a gardener: he was to work the garden, and to protect it. It even existed largely for his sake, as he was permitted to eat of virtually everything in the Garden aside from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But although he was given immense authority over the Garden, he was by no means given free rein to exploit or abuse it. Likewise, although everything in nature exists for our use, that does not give us free reign to misuse it or to do evil by means of it.

Our responsibility is to be good cultivators and protectors, stewards really; whose goal is always what is most useful for humanity and the Lord. When we consider the impact we have on nature we have to be able to look beyond asking, "How will this serve me?" and ask instead, "How will this serve the broader community, future generations, and the Lord?" For many generations now we seem to have developed a habit of taking the natural world for granted, as if no matter how much we extract from it the Lord will always provide further abundance. We have reached the limits of this approach and have begun to suffer the consequences. We cannot abdicate the role the Lord has given us of cultivating and protecting the uses that come from the natural world.

The story of creation is not just about, or even mostly about, our relationship with the physical world. Instead, it provides a picture of how we are to subdue our outer, natural selves so that our inner, spiritual selves can become dominant. People all have a kind of animal instinct: we have bodily needs and urges, for food, drink, sleep, and so on. And even in our pursuit of deeper things we are driven by animal appetites: greed, lust, wrath, despair, shame, pleasure, ambition, and all of the impulses that take place in our body and brains (see *Heaven and Hell* §110 and *Secrets of Heaven* §§714, 3646:3). The fact that we have all these impulses has lead many people to conclude that people are no more than animals, albeit animals with highly developed intelligence. And from a purely natural perspective, this people are right. From our birth in this world we are driven along by animal instincts.

But from a spiritual point of view, unlike any animal, we have the potential to transcend those instincts. We can rise above our impulses, and observe them from on high; we can elevate our minds to think rationally about spiritual things, and even to God Himself. This is how the Teachings of the New Church put it, regarding the distinction between the life of a man and the life of a beast:

...that man has the power of thinking above himself, of God, of heaven, of love, of faith, of good, spiritual and moral, of truths, and the like, and that thus he may be elevated to the Divine itself, and he conjoined by all those things to Him; but that beasts cannot be elevated above their own natural, to think of such things... (*Last Judgment* §25)

To give a very basic example: a dog can be a "good" dog or a "bad" dog; but it cannot be a righteous dog or a sinful dog. Its goodness or badness is entirely dependent on how it has been trained through its desire for pleasure and avoidance of pain. You cannot improve a dog's behaviour by teaching it about the Lord, about the difference between right and wrong, about the reality of heaven and hell. It's not

that the dog would reject these if taught; that would imply the sinfulness; it's that these concepts cannot be applied to an animal. An animal cannot rise above this world enough to be able to live in the spiritual one.

That's very different from a person. Because a person has the capacity to lift his mind to think about spiritual things, about right and wrong, good and evil, and the Lord, if he chooses not to, then he is at fault. There are, indeed, many people who do not rise above their animal instincts: they are driven entirely, like an animal, by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. But unlike with an animal, a person who lives this way will fall into sin. They cut off the spiritual side of themselves. They disconnect themselves from the Lord.

This is why it is so crucial that we strive to have our spiritual side subdue the natural and have dominance over our animal passions. Just as Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden and given dominance over the natural world, we have each been given a spiritual self that is commanded to tame our natural instincts. Consider in what areas of your life are you letting yourself be driven by those lower desires? I've noticed lately how easy it is to have a desire to be comfortable hold me back from making vulnerable or courageous choices. It takes real effort to rise above that desire and lean into being vulnerable. Almost any desire we might have can become controlling, and so we need to be prepared to master it and pursue more spiritual goals.

I've found it useful to draw parallels between this inner process and what we saw initially with how it applies to our relationship with the natural world. Remember, for instance, that the fact that all of nature is for the use of humanity does not give people carte blanche to pillage and abuse. This is also true of the earthly bodies and minds we have been given. Through the ages many religious groups have concluded that earthly things are inherently evil, and that to dominate means to deny ourselves all earthly pleasure. This is not at all the case. Many earthly things are amazingly useful. Consider a mother's love for her child. That is a deep, powerful love that can carry families through thick and thin. And yes, at times, it might prompt a mother to fly into a protective rage, at which point it needs to be subdued by a higher spiritual view of right and wrong. But when the spiritual love has dominance, the natural love for children is an amazing support. Prioritize what is spiritual; but don't reject everything that is natural or animalistic.

The other parallel between our relationship to the world of nature and to our own little spiritual worlds is that we are stewards rather than the owners. That nature is not ours is fairly obvious: it is separate from us and communally shared. But that we are also mere stewards of our own inner worlds is harder to justify. The modern attitude is that as long as you don't harm anyone else you can do whatever you please with your mind and body. Spiritually, however, everything we encounter in our hearts and minds has been put there with a purpose, and we as stewards are tasked with cultivating and protecting the good we find there (*Secrets of Heaven* §122-124). The situation is exactly as it was with Adam: he could make use of and enjoy virtually everything in the garden; but that did not give him license to misuse or abuse any of it. The Garden itself remained the Lord's. Likewise, although we have been tasked with overseeing what goes on in our hearts and minds, they remain the Lord's, not ours.

That's not to say we should become self-deprecating or abdicate our autonomy. There is something amazing and awe-inspiring in the fact that the Lord has given His amazing creation into our care. The awesome responsibility we have as stewards of the Lord's creation is summed up well in the eighth Psalm. I see this

as applying not only to the natural world he has created around us, but also the spiritual world within us, that He has graciously given to us to steward:

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,  
What is man that You are mindful of him,  
And the son of man that You visit him?  
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,  
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.  
You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet,  
All sheep and oxen—  
Even the beasts of the field,  
The birds of the air,  
And the fish of the sea  
That pass through the paths of the seas.  
O Jehovah, our Lord,  
How excellent is Your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:3-9)

*Amen.*