

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 18 April 2021**

Children's Talk: The Lord Made You Want to Learn

- What's your favourite video game right now? (Minecraft? Fortnite?)
 - Have you ever thought about *why* you like those games?
 - You might say, "Because it's fun!"
 - Yeah, but *why* is that fun for you?
- It's because of how the Lord made you.
 - The Lord made you with a mind that is hungry to *know* things and hungry to know how to *do* things.
 - It's fun to figure out how to do different things in those video games because the Lord designed you to want to figure things out.
 - It's fun to get better at fighting or building or whatever in the video game because the Lord designed you to want to get better at doing things.
- Here's a Psalm where the person who wrote the Psalm is talking to the Lord about how the Lord made him:
 - Psalm 139:13-18 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ¹³ For You formed my kidneys;
You sheltered me in my mother's womb.
 - ¹⁴ I will confess You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows this very well.
 - ¹⁵ My bone was not concealed from You,
When I was made in hiding,
I was embroidered in the lower parts of the earth.
 - ¹⁶ Your eyes saw me rolled up,
And in Your book the days were written, all of them;
They were formed,
And not one of them was missing.
 - ¹⁷ And how precious are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How numerous is the sum of them!
 - ¹⁸ If I should number them, they are more multiplied than sand;
I awake, and I am still with You.
- So the Lord carefully made every detail of you—your body and also your mind and how it works.
 - And the Lord is always thinking about you and how to help you and how to help you move forward.
- Why did the Lord make you with a mind that loves learning things and figuring things out?
 - Because the Lord wants you to be happy and He knows that you will be most happy if you can find ways of being useful to other people.
 - The more you know, the more you can be useful to other people.
 - And you've probably experienced this with computer games, even.
 - Isn't it fun to tell someone something about a computer game that they didn't know before so that then they can do that for themselves?
- That's what the Lord wants for you—for you to be able to have the joy of helping other people.

- Part of the trick, is to learn when to switch from learning more to trying to use what you already know to help other people.
 - Learning new stuff is kind of like eating food.
 - We need food to survive and to be able to do the things we need to do and to be able to help other people.
 - But we also need to learn when to stop eating more.
 - It would be ridiculous to eat a full meal and then say, “Well, but there’s more food in the cupboard, so we’d better keep eating.”
- There’s always going to be more to learn and more to get good at—whether it’s computer games or math or whatever.
 - Just try to remember that there is a time for learning and there’s a time for using what you’ve learned to try to help other people.
 - There’s a time for breathing in and there’s a time for breathing out.
- So enjoy learning things and getting better at things and remember why the Lord designed you this way and ask Him to help you remember to try to use what you’re learning to help other people.
- *Amen.*

Education, Part 2: An Opening of the Path

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
18 April 2021

Intro

- It's so much fun to watch a child learn.
- Whether it's your own child or grandchild, or a friend's child, it's just so amazing to watch them learn more and more words, or learn how to walk, or learn how to read.
 - To see their joy and pride in being able to do something that they couldn't do before is so infectious.
- And you have this sense that you're witnessing something miraculous.
 - It really is miraculous—it really is something that only the Lord can make happen.
 - As parents and teachers and other adults involved in a child's life, we have our part to play, but, if we're paying attention and honest, it's very clear that we can't take credit for what they learn or how they grow—that all happens thanks to what the Lord is doing inside of them.
- Today, in our second sermon on education, I want to share some ideas from New Church teachings about what's going on inside a child as they are learning or being educated.
 - What is the Lord doing?
 - And then I want to talk about some of the implications and applications of those ideas.

A Way of Thinking About Education

- The teachings of the New Church have lots of fascinating things to say about the human mind and how it works.
 - We don't need to understand all of that for today but one basic idea is that there are different levels to the mind and that, when things are working as they were designed to, then the highest levels of our mind flow into and bring order to the lower levels of our mind.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §1495:2
 - The proper order is for the heavenly [or celestial] dimension to act on the spiritual dimension and adapt it to its own purposes. The spiritual dimension should act on the rational and adapt this to its own purposes. And the rational dimension should act on the factual and adapt this to its own purposes.
 - So things are meant to flow from the highest dimensions or levels of our minds down to the lower levels of our minds.
 - The same passage goes on to say this:
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §1495:3
 - This is indeed the order that we follow in earliest childhood, when we are learning, but the appearance is exactly the opposite: we seem to proceed from facts to rational thinking, from this to spiritual ideas, and finally to heavenly concepts. This is the way it appears because this is how a path to the heavenly dimension — the inmost dimension — opens up. All instruction is simply an opening of the path. To the extent that the path opens (or to put it another way, to the extent that the receiving vessels open), these entities flow into one another in sequence, as noted.... These heavenly and spiritual things

are constantly presenting themselves, and they also are preparing and forming for themselves appropriate vessels, which are then opened up.

- “All instruction is simply an opening of the path.”
 - There’s a deep thought to ponder on for a while.
- “All instruction...”
 - That means that any time a child learns something it’s because a path has been opened to something much deeper within them.
- Let’s take an example: think of a baby learning the word “Mama”.
 - On the most basic level it’s associating a certain sound with the particular sights, sounds, smells, *etc.* of a certain person .
 - But it obviously goes much deeper than that and “mama” as a concept is a container for so much more.
 - Eventually a baby will grow into a child that has much more knowledge about what “Mama” can mean.
 - They’ll learn that there are other mamas than just their own mama.
 - They’ll learn other words for the same concept like “mother” and “mom”.
 - And that child will grow into a teenager and young adult who has much more developed rational thoughts about motherhood in general and the role of mothers in society.
 - And they’ll also learn some more spiritual ideas of how society can and should play something of a maternal role for the people in it.
 - And eventually they might connect with that deepest celestial dimension of their mind where love from the Lord flows into them.
 - And they might connect with the Lord’s love of nurturing people and providing for them and helping them feel loved.
 - That deepest love from the Lord is actually what caused the baby to learn the word “Mama” in the first place.
 - It looked like the person had to gradually build up to that level of understanding but the spiritual reality was that it actually worked from the highest level downwards.
 - All learning works that way.
 - “All instruction is simply an opening of the path.”
- I don’t know about you but I find that a really intriguing idea to consider.
 - And it does seem to explain some of the magic of watching children learn.
 - Children seem to learn a whole lot more and whole lot more quickly sometimes than actually makes sense given the input they’ve received.
 - One example is in learning languages.
 - Linguists have studied how children acquire language.
 - And there’s plenty of healthy debate about it but a number of prominent linguists would say that you can’t explain how children learn language by just talking about what language they’ve been exposed to or taught.
 - There are a just so many weird quirks and exceptions in any language that a child would use but children seem to be able to intuitively learn to follow these rules, exceptions, and quirks in a way that is hard to explain.
 - And so some linguists argue that there must be something innate in children that allows them to learn language as quickly and easily as they

do. (“FAQ: Language Acquisition”. Linguistic Society of America. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/faq-how-do-we-learn-language>)

- The New Church would say, “Yes, there is something innate in children from the Lord that allows them to learn things. All instruction is simply an opening of the path to deeper things that drive the whole process.”

What Are the Implications and Applications of This?

- So that’s the concept of what’s going on inside a child when they’re learning that I wanted to share with you; now I want to talk about the implications and applications of this idea.
 - I want to play with and look at this idea of education being about opening pathways in a bunch of different ways.

The Lord is the One Doing the Educating

- One implication of this teaching is put well by Peter Buss, Sr. in an address he gave back in 2004.
 - After citing the passage we’ve just read he said,
 - That is an essential principle of our educational philosophy. We don’t teach. We open the way for the Lord to teach through the souls of our students. (“The Soul and its Truths”. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org)
- This principle that education is not being something that *we* do on our own but rather something that *the Lord* is doing with each child and we are trying to assist is a really healthy principle to keep in mind.
 - With our own children the question should not be so much, “What do *I* want for *my* child?” but “What does *the Lord* want for *His* child and how can I help?”
- Our role with children is something like John the Baptist’s role:
 - Luke 3:4-6 (NKJV)
 - 4 “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.
5 Every valley shall be filled
And every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight
And the rough ways smooth;
6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”
 - We have a role to help prepare that way or path of the Lord for children—try to make it as straight a shot for them as possible.
 - Identify the mountains and valleys that might get in the way.
 - Help them navigate the crooked and rough places along the way.
 - So that they can see the salvation of God for themselves.
- We need to follow the Lord’s command when He said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them....” (Mark 10:13-16).
- There are a whole variety of ways of doing this work.
 - Some of them are the more obvious things of bringing children to church, when possible.
 - And reading the Word with them.

- The things that form the best vessels or containers in the lowest levels of our minds for higher things to flow in are the stories and teachings from the Bible.
- It really is good for children to learn and think about stories and text from the Bible.
- We can also help children have a path to the Lord by sharing a view of the world with them that has the Lord in a central role.
 - If you're talking with a child about some cool animal or beautiful, intricate thing in nature you can talk about from the perspective of "isn't it cool that the Lord created it that way?"
 - If a child knows someone who is going through something hard you can pray for the Lord to give them the strength to get through it.

This Doesn't Mean Everything Has to Be Overtly Religious

- But this does not mean that we need to try to make everything overtly religious for children.
- The teachings of the New Church also say that it's good and useful for kids to learn a bunch of random pointless stuff.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §3470:2
 - At first children learn very many things, including things that are trivial—games and so on—not to make them wise but to prepare the way for them to receive the useful things that lead to wisdom. Once they have received useful things that lead to wisdom, the trivial things are separated, indeed they are put away.
- So it's ok if your kids are obsessed with some rather pointless stuff.
 - You probably liked learning about some pointless stuff too when you were their age.
 - Actually, you probably still like knowing about some rather pointless stuff.
 - We each have our preferred kinds of pointless information that we like to take in.
 - One example is following sports.
 - Do you know who won the tennis or the soccer or the rugby or the cricket or the formula 1?
 - How is that knowledge any more important and useful than knowing how to craft an enchanting table in Minecraft?
 - The point is that we enjoy knowing those things and the same goes for children.
- Learning and knowing those things, in themselves, is pointless but children get good practice by learning trivial things so that, when they encounter genuinely true and useful things, they are ready to learn and receive those things.
 - Maybe their obsession with learning all the lyrics to some irritating song will one day help them be good at listening to the exact words that their married partner is saying to them.
 - Maybe their delight in learning about lots of different super heroes and their powers will help them one day with figuring out how to work most effectively with a diverse group of people.

What Paths Are We Opening For Children?

- Another application of this principle that all instruction is an opening of the path is to think of all of things that we educate children in and expose them to as being a whole bunch of paths that we put in front of them.

- We can think of this in a positive way.
 - We give them the chance to try instrument lessons, that makes a path for them to travel down in which they could get better and better at music.
 - We take them to different places.
 - We read them different books.
 - If they learn another language that is a path into interacting with a whole group of people in a very different way.
 - Each thing they learn is truly the opening of a path, another opportunity that could be explored.
- I find it's interesting to think about which pathways were opened up for you and which ones were not.
 - Because it's amazing how much the things that different families and cultures value and know about or don't value and don't know about can affect a person's life.
 - Some families learn how to swim from very young and spend their lives in and out of the water; other families never learn how to swim and so have a very different relationship with water.
 - Which paths were never opened for you?
 - For some people it's technology—they never really had someone open that pathway for them and so they struggle with it and rely on others to sort it out for them.
 - Technology was a path that was opened for me so I'm fairly capable with technology and I also am fairly confident and knowledgeable about how to figure out more technology if I needed to.
 - On the other hand, the pathway of mechanical things was never really opened for me and so I am rather hopeless at sorting out most things mechanical—vehicles, machines, plumbing.
 - I have no idea how they work and no confidence that I could figure out how they work.
 - Which paths are lacking in your life?
 - Which paths will be lacking in your children's lives?
- We might want to give our child every opportunity and experience possible.
 - And so we might want to push them to learn as much as possible, as quickly as possible, and to gain as many skills as possible, as quickly as possible.
 - We want to put them on the path to mastery and success and so send them where they can have access to as much as possible.
 - In Biblical times that place would have been Egypt.
 - Egypt was a place of much knowledge and learning.
 - And a place with lots of food and resources.
 - The Children of Israel went there and, for a time, it was a beautiful land of plenty for them.
 - And later on they were very productive—they built impressive supply cities for Pharaoh (Exodus 1:11).
 - But they also were enslaved by cruel Egyptian taskmasters.
- The desire for more and more knowledge and skill and experience can enslave us and can enslave our children.
 - Some of the pathways in our children's lives will not be paths to good things but will be paths to unhealthy and hellish things.
 - We can't actually keep that from happening.

- This is part of why it's so important to try to make sure that they also have good, strong pathways connecting them to the Lord as well, so that He can lead them out when they get enslaved by the Egyptians.
- And we can also try to help our children stay on a better path by being careful about the pathways that we are creating and reinforcing for our children.

What Pathways Are We Creating and Reinforcing For Children?

- Modern neuroscientists also use the imagery of pathways when talking about how people learn things or come to associate certain things in their minds.
 - They would say that people are making and reinforcing certain neural pathways when they're learning something or coming to develop a certain habitual behaviour.
 - And I don't think that's a coincidence.
- The adults in children's lives can have a big influence on what neural pathways are created and reinforced in their minds.
- For example, if every time a child is upset and crying, they're told to shut up and cheer up, then a pathway will be formed in their minds between feeling upset and responding by trying to bury and hide that feeling rather than express it.
- Or, if a child wants to tell the adults around them about the fun things that they're thinking about, but all the adults are too busy looking at their phones or doing other things to pay attention, then the child will learn that their thoughts and opinions don't matter.
- This is a really crucial part of good New Church education that we might overlook.
 - What messages are embedded in our behaviour and the way we interact with children and the way we interact with other adults when the children are watching us?
- If we want the children we're interacting with to learn the Golden Rule then we'd better work hard to treat them the way that we want to be treated.
- If we want children to believe that the Lord knows them and loves them then we'd better work hard to know them and love them.
 - And to communicate with our actions as well as our words to each child we interact with, "You matter. Your feelings matter. Your thoughts matter. I care about you."
- And when they mess up, how do we respond?
 - What message is embedded in the way we respond to them?
 - Are we telling them that they're bad and disobedient and deserve to be disliked?
 - Or are we responding with a message of, "Yup, you messed up. That behaviour is not ok but I still love you and we'll keep working on this together."
- We can create some really helpful pathways in our kids minds that connect even difficult things to heavenly and loving things.
 - Or we can create pathways in our kids that connect them with scary hellish things.
- My wife and I are reading a parenting book right now and the central idea of the book is that parents need to start by working on themselves to be able to parent their kids well (*Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting* by Dr. Laura Markham).
 - Here's a short excerpt:
 - Parenting isn't about what our child does, but about how we respond. In fact, most of what we call parenting doesn't take place between a parent and a child but

within the parent. When a storm brews, a parent's response will either calm it or incite a full-scale tsunami. Staying calm enough to respond constructively to all that childish behavior—and the stormy emotions behind it—requires that we grow, too.
(p.xx)

- This is the last application and perhaps most important application of this idea of all instruction being about opening of paths.
 - You need to be aware of what paths are open and closed in you.
 - If you want to help children have the right paths open within them, then the best way to do that is to make sure you have the right paths open within yourself.
 - You might feel like you want your children to know about the Lord but you also feel very awkward talking about the Lord with your children.
 - You might need to put some work in on that path.
 - If you're like me, then you also have certain hellish paths open in you.
 - Children do or say certain things and then I'm on a highway to hell in the way that I would instinctively respond to them.
 - And if I don't change that then I will be recreating that pathway of how to respond to that situation in my children.
 - That needs some work.
 - I need to figure out a different path to go on—a different way of responding.
 - I need to pray to the Lord in the moment to help me take that different path.
 - And I need to keep working on it.
 - And, if I can manage to keep doing it, that work that I do inside myself to try to shut off pathways to hell and open up pathways to the Lord and His love and care for children, might be the most important work for me to do to be able to provide New Church education to the children that I interact with.

Conclusion

- This sermon started out being about educating children and ended up with working on educating ourselves.
- This is one of the realities of education: anyone involved in educating others is also still in the process of being educated themselves.
 - We have a lot to learn from children and about ourselves as we try to raise children.
- But the Lord will help us to get on the right path and help the children we interact with to get on the right path too.
- I want to end with a Psalm about how the Lord will help us and will help the next generation find the right paths.
 - Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10, 12-13 (NKJV)
 - ⁴ Show me Your ways, O Jehovah;
Teach me Your paths.
 - ⁵ Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You are the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.
 -
 - ⁸ Good and upright is Jehovah;
Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.
 - ⁹ The humble He guides in justice,

And the humble He teaches His way.

¹⁰ All the paths of Jehovah are mercy and truth,
To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.

....

¹² Who is the man that fears Jehovah?

Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.

¹³ He himself shall dwell in prosperity,
And his descendants shall inherit the earth.

- *Amen.*