

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 30 May 2021**

Children's Talk: The Pain and Blessing of Knowing That Things Could Be Better

- How do you get better at doing something?
 - By doing it.
 - And by learning about how to do it better.
- When you're working on getting better at doing something there's always going to be this time when you know that you could do it better but you can't do it better yet.
 - This could be in playing a sport or playing an instrument or something in school.
 - A lot of kids are writing exams or tests at the moment.
 - When you get a test back and it doesn't have 100% on it, that's an indication that there's still more that you could learn.
- How does it feel to get a test back that has a not perfect grade on it?
- Or how does it feel to play a soccer game but know that you could have played better?
 - It's painful, isn't it?
 - It doesn't feel good, does it?
 - But what I'm hoping you'll be able to see today is that there's also something good about being in that place of not being as good as you could be yet.
- Jesus was once talking about which people were blessed or deeply happy.
 - This is one of the things He said:
 - "Happy are they who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6, Kempton Project Translation).
 - Happy are the people who are hungering and thirsting for something—happy are the people who want something that they don't have yet.
 - In this story the Lord is talking about people who hunger and thirst for justice—they really want things to be fair and right in the world.
 - And so they're working hard to try to make things better.
 - But people who are doing that kind of work also spend a lot of time seeing all the ways in which there is not justice—all the ways in which things are not fair and right in the world.
 - But still they hunger and thirst for justice and still work to try to make things better.
 - And the Lord says that they are blessed or happy.
- When I was growing up, my brothers and I played a lot of computer games and there often would be cheat codes.
 - You could type certain keys on the keyboard and then suddenly you would have the coolest vehicles, you would have infinite gold and so could buy whatever you wanted, etc.
 - That would be fun for a while.
 - But usually we got bored of playing with the cheat codes on and would go back to playing the harder way.
 - Why?
 - It was more challenging and so it was more fun.

- Imagine if you had cheat codes for real life.
 - You could immediately have whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it.
 - You want to be the best soccer player? Boom! You're now the best soccer player without having to practice.
 - You want to always know the answers on exams? Snap! Now you always know the answers without having to study.
- Now what?
 - What do you do with your time now if you can have anything you want immediately with no effort?
 - You would probably get bored pretty quickly.
 - There's actually a blessing in being not as good as you could be yet.
 - There's a blessing in having to work hard to get better.
- There's a story of a rich young man who comes to the Lord to find out how he can get to heaven.
 - And he tells the Lord how he has kept the Lord's commandments from when he was young.
 - Then it says, "Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him...." (Mark 10:21).
 - He saw the young man where he was and loved him.
 - And then the Lord told him what he needed to work on to get better:
 - "Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me'" (Mark 10:21).
 - Listen to how the young man felt when the Lord told him how he could be better:
 - "But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:22).
- We also can feel sad when we realise that we're not as good as we could be.
 - Especially if we're working on being a good person.
 - Maybe you're working on keeping your temper and not shouting at people or hitting people when you're angry at them.
 - Maybe you're working on being more patient with people who you find annoying.
 - Or maybe you're working on not saying rude words.
 - Anything you're working on, I would guess that you can picture being better at it than you are.
- Even though it's painful to not be as good as you could be, know that there's also a blessing there.
 - You can see how you could get better and you want to get better—those are both blessings.
 - And the Lord sees you where you are and loves you and He will also help you get better.
- *Amen.*

Being Born Again

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
30 May 2021

Intro

- This is one of those cases where maybe the Children's Talk is enough for everyone.
 - I'll say some other things and include some other ideas but the basic point is going to be the same.
 - It's painful and uncomfortable to be in the place of knowing that you could be better but you're not there yet.
 - But that's a very useful place to be because that's how the Lord can gradually make you better.
 - That's the point.

Being Born Again and Regenerating

- For the adult sermon, we're going to talk about the goal—or the end point—in terms of being born again because that's a term that the Lord used for it.
- And this is a term that you also run into out there in Christianity.
 - You may even have been asked if you have been born again.
 - It's used by many Christians to mean a key turning point where a person goes from being damned to being saved, through accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour.
- Now, you might be thinking, "In the New Church, we don't believe in that—we don't believe that salvation happens in that instantaneous kind of way."
 - Yes, well done. Well spotted.
- But we do believe in being born again we just don't often use that terminology.
 - We use a different phrase for it: regeneration.
 - People might say, "How's your regeneration going?"
 - Or, "I'm working on my regeneration."
 - And do know what re-generation means? Again being born.
- So, being born again and being regenerated are both terms for the process of being recreated as a new person.
 - And that's what I'm hoping we can better understand today.
 - And in case you're thinking that you already know how this works, keep listening because I found that my understanding on this topic has shifted and yours might too.

Being Born From Above

- Let's start with what the Lord actually said about being born again.
- Jesus was talking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus and He said this.
 - John 3:3-8 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ³ Jesus... said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
 - ⁴ Nicodemus says to Him, "How can a man be born, being old? Can he enter a second time into the womb of his mother, and be born?"

⁵ Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone be born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The spirit blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so is everyone who is born of the spirit.”

- Unless we are born again we cannot see the kingdom of God.
 - There is a change that has to happen in us for us to be suitable for heaven.
 - A fun detail in the text is that the word that’s translated here as “again” more often actually means “from above”.
 - It’s just as accurate—if not more accurate—to translate Jesus as saying, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless someone be *from above*, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
 - This helps us understand what kind of birth or rebirth the Lord is talking about.
 - He says that we have to be born of the water and the spirit—we need to be reborn from a spiritual origin or “from above” rather than just being born of the flesh.
- Ok. So where are you on this journey?
 - Have you been born from above?
 - Have you become someone different because of the Lord?
- It can be hard to know how to answer a question like that.
 - Many of you might say, “Well, I hope that I’m regenerating.”

Reformation and Regeneration

- The teachings of the New Church explain in much more detail the states or stages that we go through in the process of being reborn.
 - *True Christianity* §571
 - There are two states that we all inevitably enter into and go through if we are to turn from an earthly person into a spiritual person. The first state is called *reformation*, the second is called *regeneration*. In the first state we look from our earthly self toward having a spiritual self; being spiritual is what we long for. In the second state we become someone who is both spiritual and earthly. The first state is brought about by truths (these have to be truths related to faith); through these truths we aim to develop charity. The second state is brought about by good actions that come from charity; through these actions we come [more deeply] into truths related to faith.

As the second state begins and progresses, a change takes place in our minds. There is a reversal, because then the love in our will flows into our intellect and leads and drives it to think in agreement and harmony with what we love. Then our actions come from charity and our words come from faith; we develop a sense of the goodness that comes from charity and a perception of the truth that is related to faith; and we are in the Lord and in a state of peace. In brief, we are [regenerated or] reborn.
- From this passage we can see that there are a series of states or stages that we go through in the process of being spiritually reborn.

- The first state is one where we are just an earthly person with no knowledge of spiritual things.
- Then we learn some truths of faith and these truths help us to look toward having a spiritual self and we work on developing charity or a love for other people. We start to try to do what's good and right because we know that it's good and right. This state is called reformation because our minds and how we think is being reformed by the Lord's truths, priorities and worldview.
- After a while we start doing good things from charity or a genuine love for other people and unselfish love from the Lord starts to take the lead in us.
- Eventually we get to the point where we are in the Lord and in a state of peace from Him and it sounds like we intuitively perceive the truth and almost automatically do what is loving and good.

The Four Stages of Competence

- This all reminds me of a framework for thinking about how people learn or acquire a skill that you may have heard of before called "The Four Stages of Competence" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence).
- The four stages are
 - 1. Unconscious Incompetence
 - 2. Conscious Incompetence
 - 3. Conscious Competence
 - 4. Unconscious Competence
- I know that that can all kind of run together if you're hearing it for the first time so let's go through it, using the example that was used when I first learned about this: potty training.
 - Unconscious Incompetence is when we're totally incompetent but don't even know enough to realise that we're incompetent.
 - This is like when a person is entirely earthly and has no concepts of anything spiritual.
 - In potty training, this is when a baby poops in its nappy and has no concept that there's anything else that it could do—Unconscious Incompetence.
 - Conscious Incompetence comes once we've learned something.
 - This is the beginning of reformation where we've learned some truths of faith and can start to aim towards being spiritual and loving.
 - This is a painful stage of learning anything.
 - The stage where we know that we could be doing better but we can't do better yet.
 - In potty training, this is when the child understands that they should be trying to go on the potty but mostly they still poop in their nappy.
 - But when they do, they notice and they're upset by it—Conscious Incompetence.
 - Conscious Competence is when you are getting the hang of the new skill—you can do it most of the time, if you're really concentrating and remembering all the things that you're consciously working to remember to do.
 - You can start to have a sense of accomplishment and progress in this stage.

- In your spiritual life this is when you've learned some important truths and had some good practice in living according to them so that you're pretty good at keeping yourself from messing up and instead doing what's right.
 - For example, maybe you've noticed that you have a tendency to assume that people are against you and so you're always ready to defend yourself and fight back.
 - But you've learned that the Lord says that we are to love our enemies.
 - And so you've been working on catching yourself when you're feeling defensive and before you lash out you say a little prayer asking the Lord to help you see a different way of responding.
- In potty training, this is the couple of weeks when the child spends a fair amount of time on the potty but they're starting to be able to pay attention to the signals from their body and they usually get to the toilet in time, as long as they're paying attention and not overly distracted by something else—
Conscious Competence.
- Unconscious Competence is when you can do a skill without even thinking about it.
 - It's second nature.
 - When you're playing an instrument at this level of mastery you're no longer carefully thinking about which notes you need to play and in what sort of careful rhythm, you're thinking about enjoying the music and how to express yourself through the music.
 - In the realm of spirituality this is regeneration—this is when you naturally do what's loving, wise, and right without having to really think about it.
 - In potty training, this is the stage that you are presumably at at this stage in your life.
 - You don't need to really think about going to the toilet; you just do it without thinking—Unconscious Competence.
- So now we've got some more detailed ideas about the states and stages of being born again; where do you think you are in the process?
 - You'll probably find that, in different aspects of your life, you feel more or less competent.
 - There might be some areas in your spiritual life that you've been working on for a while and you don't always get it right—you do still mess up sometimes—but you are much better at handling that issue than you used to be.
 - You're consciously competent in that area of your life.
 - You have been reformed to some degree in that area.
 - And there might be some areas of your life where you just feel so incompetent!
 - You feel like, "How long have I been working on this stupid issue and I still fall into the same old traps? I still can't do the right thing, even though on some level I know what I should be doing."

It's a Gradual Process and Every Single Person Can Be Saved

- But, in case you're feeling too down on yourself, you should hear these two teachings from this same chapter of *True Christianity*.

- *True Christianity* §580
 - The variety [in how the Lord regenerates different people] is in fact infinite, just like the variety of faces and minds [of the human race]. Despite the variety, however, absolutely all of us are capable of being regenerated and saved in a way that suits the state we are in.

 - And this one:
 - *True Christianity* §586
 - We can be regenerated only gradually. Each and every thing that exists in the physical world serves as an illustration of this fact. A seedling does not grow up into a mature tree in a single day. A home is not built in a single day. We do not become full grown in a single day; reaching wisdom takes us even longer. The church is not established—let alone perfected—in a single day. We will make no progress toward a goal unless we first make a start.

 - So that's really important.
 - You're not hopeless; absolutely all of us are capable of being regenerated.
 - It can only happen gradually.
 - And it's going to look different for you than for the people around you.
 - Those are some comforting and really useful teachings.

 - And now let's talk about some teachings that might make us feel *less* comfortable.
 - *True Christianity* §580:3
 - It is our own fault, not the Lord's fault, if we are not saved. It is our fault because we have not cooperated.

 - Are we cooperating with the Lord enough?
 - This is a place where I wonder if New Church people can get a bit complacent.
 - Because of those teachings about how it's a gradual, lifelong process not an instantaneous one we can lose our sense of urgency about it.
 - "We'll get there eventually."
 - But that other passage said, "We will make no progress toward a goal unless we first make a start."
 - A while ago a friend of mine shared the parenting idea with me that the way someone can be a good 16 year old is if they've learned how to be a good 15 year old; and the way they learn how to be a good 15 year old is if they've learned how to be a good 14 year old, *etc.*
 - And that goes all the way down to the youngest years.
 - A 16 year old is able to do the work that they need to do because of the foundation that was laid when they were 2 and 3.
 - And so I ask myself what is the spiritual work that I need to be doing as a 30-something?
 - It's different than the work I was doing as a 20-something.
 - And I'm not ready to do the spiritual work that a 50-something is doing but the way that I'll be ready to do that work when I get there is if I do the work of a 30-something and a 40-something in the time between now and then.
- We need to be working hard to cooperate with the Lord as best we can right now and not lose our sense of urgency.

- I also wonder if we also lose our sense of what's possible with the Lord's help.
 - We can become fundamentally different people.
 - Who could you become if you really handed over control of your life to the Lord?
 - We can become unselfish and healthy and loving and wise human beings.
 - It's possible.
 - Yes, it's going to take a long time to get there.
 - And yes, we're going to mess up along the way.
 - With false starts and plenty of times when we know better but don't do better because we lack self-control or times when we have a good intention but don't have the wisdom to carry it out in an effective way.
 - We are going to poop our spiritual pants a number of times but we also can be learning from those experiences.
 - Our hearts can be changed. Believe that it's possible.
- I'll give you one example.
- I have wrestled for years with how to balance work and home responsibilities.
- And I will probably continue to wrestle with these things for a long time.
- But recently I experienced a small shift of heart that felt like a step in the right direction.
 - I have a tendency to view tasks as weights that I have to pick up and carry.
 - And so, if someone asks me to do another thing, then my emotional reaction is often to feel like I'm already holding a lot of weight and I'm being asked to carry yet another thing.
 - In that way of holding things, life does not feel particularly fun or sustainable.
 - But recently I was asked to do something and the Lord helped me to see that I didn't have to see that task as another weight to carry.
 - I could see it as something that I wanted to do.
 - I *wanted* to help those people.
 - Yes, I would have to give certain things up to help those people but I *wanted* to.
 - And so I didn't have to feel resentful of spending the time to do that task, I could instead just enjoy having the chance to help people.
- I fully expect that I will continue to view things that I am asked to do as weights that I have to carry for a long time but this little experience felt like a glimpse of the kind of new heart that the Lord is hopefully working to give me.
- And it feels like I was only able to get to this realisation by being consciously incompetent in this area for years.

Conclusion

- So, if you're feeling spiritually incompetent, join the club.
- I like thinking of a church congregation in that way.
 - We may be rather incompetent spiritually but at least we're trying to be conscious of that fact.
 - And it's uncomfortable and painful to be conscious of our own incompetence but it's also so useful.
 - And it will naturally lead us to try to become more spiritually competent.
 - We will long to be spiritual; we will aim towards having genuine charity in our hearts.
- We will have to wander in the spiritual wilderness for 40 years but there is a promised land that we can get to eventually.
- We need to be and we can be born again or born from above, with the Lord's help. *Amen.*