

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 13 June 2021**

Children's Talk: When You Have the Upper Hand, Respond With Love

- I've got a weird question for you: If you've been fighting with someone, would you rather have a gun or a packet of chips?
- You might remember that last week we read a story where the Syrian army surrounded the city where the prophet Elisha was and his servant was very scared, until Elisha said, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them" and then he prayed to the Lord to open his servant's eyes so that he could see that there was an even bigger angel army all around them (2 Kings 6:16-17).
- Now let's read what happened next.
 - 2 Kings 6:18-23 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹⁸ So when the Syrians came down to him, Elisha prayed to Jehovah, and said, "Strike this people, I pray, with blindness." And He struck them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.

¹⁹ Now Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, nor is this the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." But he led them to Samaria.

²⁰ So it was, when they had come to Samaria, that Elisha said, "Jehovah, open the eyes of these men, that they may see." And Jehovah opened their eyes, and they saw; and there they were, inside Samaria!

²¹ Now when the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, "My father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

²² But he answered, "You shall not kill them. Would you kill those whom you have taken captive with your sword and your bow? Set food and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master." ²³ Then he prepared a great feast for them; and after they ate and drank, he sent them away and they went to their master. So the bands of Syrian raiders came no more into the land of Israel.
- So the Lord blinded them and Elisha led them to the capital city of Israel.
 - And he only made them able to see again when they were surrounded by the army of the children of Israel who had swords and bows and were ready to kill them.
 - But did Elisha say to kill them? (No, he said to feed them.)
- Let's talk about times when you might find yourself in a similar situation.
 - There are times when you're in some sort of fight or conflict when you don't feel safe at first but then you get to a place where you're entirely safe and have the upper hand.
- Imagine you're in a water fight and you're all running around and trying to spray each other and then you refill your gun and run after someone and you corner them and their gun has just run out of water and yours is full.
 - What do you do?
 - You could spray them as much as possible.
 - And if they're in a good mood and kind of want to be soaking anyway, then that's just fine.

- But, if you can tell that they're feeling a bit scared or frustrated that they can't fight back then maybe you give them a little chance to run away and only spray them a bit.
 - Or ask them if they would rather stop doing a water fight and do something else.
- Or you can think of a time when you get into a fight with a younger kid and you're enough bigger than them that they can't really hurt you.
 - They might be trying to but it's pretty easy for you to dodge or keep them back.
 - What do you do in that situation?
 - Punish them for trying to hurt you?
 - Make fun of them for not being able to hurt you?
 - Or say, "Hey, should we go get a snack?"
- One more example for older kids.
 - Let's imagine you were having an argument about some fact.
 - You say it's this way.
 - They say it's that way.
 - You argue for a bit.
 - And then you look it up and it becomes clear that you were right.
 - What do you do then?
 - Do you say, "See, I told you so. I was right! You were wrong!"
 - That's like the king in the story saying, "Shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"
 - No.
 - Respond with love.
 - Change the subject.
 - Say, "Let's go get a snack."
- If you can learn to do this, you'll feel better.
 - The other person will feel better.
 - And it will be the best approach to avoiding another fight in the future.
- *Amen.*

What is the New Church? Part 2, Being Different

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
13 June 2021

Intro

- We're doing a sermon series titled "What is the New Church?"
- Normally I would do a sermon about some of the key teachings of the New Church that distinguish the New Church from other Christian churches.
 - And sermons like that are valuable.
 - It's good to gain a clearer understanding of what makes the teachings of the New Church new.
 - It's good to be reminded of some of the core, foundational teachings of this church.
- But in this sermon I don't want to do that: I want to make the question more personal.
 - I don't want to ask, "What makes the New Church different?"; I want to ask "What about the New Church makes *you* different?"
 - Or, "How are *you* different because of the New Church?"
- Because the New Church could have all sorts of amazing new teachings in the books on the shelf but those teachings will have no impact unless there are individual people who are reading those books and thinking differently and living differently because of them.
 - So I want to talk about what it would take for an individual New Church person to get to the point where they are comfortable and confident in being different from other people in the world around them.

A History of Striving for Distinctiveness

- To get into this topic I want to start with some history.
- In the early days of the New Church, in the late 1700s, just a few years after Emanuel Swedenborg's death, there were various groups of people in England reading the books published by Swedenborg.
 - And, as one historian tells it, the first big controversy among the early readers of the teachings of the New Church was about the issue of whether the New Church movement should be pursued in existing church organisations or if it should be pursued by starting a new, separate church organisation (pp.64ff *The New Church in the New World: A Study of Swedenborgianism in America* by Marguerite Beck Block. Download it for free here: <https://bit.ly/35cPWvx>)
- There were the Non-Separatists and the Separatists.
 - The Non-Separatists believed that New Church teachings could bring about a rebirth of spirituality in the existing church organisations.
 - The Separatists believed that the only way to build and protect the New Church was to create an entirely new and separate church organisation.
 - Our congregation down here in South Africa exists in the form that it does today as a result of that separatist movement.
- In the late 1700s, the teachings of the New Church and the New Church movement spread to the United States and gradually various congregations and groups developed and were part of an umbrella organisation known as "The General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America".

- Within that organisation there was a whole range of different understandings of what the books written by Swedenborg were and how they should be interpreted and applied.
- There was a group within the General Convention that came to be known as “The Academy Movement”.
 - The thinking of this group had been influenced by the thinking of the separatists from England.
 - They had a vision of living in a world where every thing that they thought about and did was informed and guided by the teachings of the New Church.
 - The core principles of this Academy Movement were
 - that every word of the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg was Divine revelation
 - and that the New Church was distinct from “the Old Church”
 - And from those foundational ideas they also had other principles
 - Like that New Church people should have a distinct and exclusive social life
 - and that New Church people should be raising their children with distinctive New Church education.
 - (See pp.205ff of *The New Church in the New World*.)
- This Academy Movement group broke away from the General Convention in the late 1800s and eventually became the organisation known as the General Church of the New Jerusalem.
- That same debate about those Academy principles that was happening in America also took place among some British readers of the teachings of the New Church who had settled in Durban, South Africa.
 - These South African New Church people eventually decided to join the General Church and, in 1919, the bishop of the General Church travelled to South Africa to officially receive that group as a congregation for the General Church.
 - We’re now known as New Church Westville but the official name of our organisation is still “The Durban Society of the General Church of the New Jerusalem”.
- So that’s how we got here.
 - We are descendants of a separatist movement within readers of the teachings of the New Church, emphasising the importance of distinctiveness, education, and the belief that the teachings of the New Church are divine revelation.
- With a history like that, it makes sense that we—especially people who grew up in the New Church—have this sense that it’s important for New Church people to be different from other people.
 - And there can be this odd combination of pride and embarrassment to be part of the New Church.
 - “Yeah, we’re the New Church!”
 - And “Yeah, we’re kinda weird.”

Where Do Your Opinions Come From?

- Over the years, readers of the teachings of the New Church have been different from the general population in a whole variety of ways.
 - In re-reading some of the history I was reminded that there have been readers of the teachings of the New Church who have believed strongly in vegetarianism; others believed in complete abstinence from alcohol; other in complete abstinence from sex; others believed that it was very important to learn some Ancient Hebrew; others have

believed in no sex before marriage; others have believed that any form of birth control is an abomination.

- Now, I would guess that you have a range of responses to those various conclusions that New Church people have come to.
 - You might agree with some of them and strongly disagree with some of them.
 - That's certainly the response that I have.
- So you have opinions about these things—about vegetarianism, about alcohol, about birth control—but what are those opinions based on?
 - Have you studied what the Bible and the teachings of the New Church have to say on those topics and come to your conclusions because of that?
 - Or maybe has it not even occurred to you to think about what the Lord's Word might teach about those topics?

- My point is not to make you feel bad about this reality; it's unavoidable.

- We all are going to have many, many opinions and things that we believe that we have never really examined properly.

- It's definitely true for me too.

- There are plenty of topics that I have opinions about—even strong opinions—but they're not based on what the Lord's Word says or thinking that I've done for myself but they're just the opinions that I have or they're just based on what my parents or other people have told me.

- And so what should we do to improve this situation?

- Here, I want to share some passages with you from the teachings of the New Church.

- The first one is talking about how we can be in a mindset where we just confirm whatever beliefs serve our selfish purposes but the Lord can help us to get beyond that.

- *True Christianity* §758

- If our rational faculty is earthly in nature, it is capable of supporting any notion it wishes to. It is capable of giving support equally to something false and to something true.

If our rational faculty is spiritual in nature, though, it is quite the opposite. How do we develop spiritual rationality? We turn to the Lord and he gives us a love for what is true.

- This next passage is talking about how each of us needs a body of teaching to be able to understand the Lord's Word and be enlightened by the Lord through it.

- *Sacred Scripture* §59

- The first task [of people who seek enlightenment when they read the Word] is to put together a body of teaching for themselves from the literal meaning of the Word. That is how they light a lamp in order to go further. Once they have put together a body of teaching and lit the lamp, they see the Word in the light of that lamp.

However, people who have not put together a body of teaching for themselves first look to see whether the theological perspective offered by others and generally accepted does in fact agree with the Word; and they accept what agrees and dissent from what does not. That is how they form their body of teaching, and through their body of teaching, their faith.

- So, we need to take what other people have told us and examine it critically to see whether it actually does fit with what the Lord teaches in His Word.
 - And then accept or reject things based on that.
- That process of questioning what other people have told us and thinking critically about it takes time but it does very useful things.
 - Listen to this passage talking about the value of doubt:
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §7298:2
 - [I]t should be recognised that it is in accordance with the laws of order that no one should become convinced of the truth instantaneously, that is, should instantaneously be made so sure of the truth that he is left in no doubt at all about it. The reason for this is that when truth is impressed on a person in that kind of way, he becomes so fully convinced of it that it cannot be broadened in any way or qualified in any way. Truth like this is represented in the next life as that which is hard, not allowing good into itself to make it pliable.

This goes to explain why in the next life as soon as some truth is presented through plain experience to good spirits, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed a truth, gather reasons in support of it, and so introduce that truth into their minds by the use of reason. This enables their spiritual vision in respect of that truth to be broadened, seeing even into the ideas that are opposed to it. They therefore see and perceive with their understanding every characteristic of the truth, and from this are able to let in the influences coming from heaven as the situation demands; for truths take varying forms as dictated by circumstances.
- There is no substitute for thinking things through for ourselves.
 - When we believe something—or think that we believe something—because someone else has told us that this is the truth then that idea or belief is rigid and inflexible.
 - If we want to really be able to use those ideas then we need to do the work of questioning and putting things together for ourselves.
 - We will have things that we want to believe and things that we don't want to believe.
 - But we need to try to not jump to conclusions too quickly but instead take the time to really think things through.
 - We can talk to other people and read other people's arguments and sometimes they can put things in a way that makes things finally click for us.
 - But we need to put the effort in.
 - And the benefit of this work is that we end up with a truly developed, flexible, applicable, nuanced understanding of the subject.
 - And we can also emerge from this process with something that we truly believe for ourselves and are willing to take a stand for, if necessary.
 - We become willing to be different.
- This is why I didn't want to have this sermon be me telling you how you should be different as a New Church person.
 - I do believe that if you really take the teachings of the New Church to heart you will be different.
 - But there is no substitute for you engaging with the teachings for yourself.

- That's how those people in the early days of the New Church came to their conclusions about how they should be living and what they should be believing.
 - It wouldn't work for us to try to adopt their principles and interpretations unquestioningly.
 - We need to think about the issues for ourselves; we need to read the passages; discuss the arguments; consider the implications and applications, *etc.*

“As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

- At the end of his life, just before he died, Joshua spoke for Jehovah to the Children of Israel one last time.
- Joshua starts by reminding them that their ancestors used to worship other gods than Jehovah.
 - And that then Jehovah called Abram to leave his home and the gods of his father and come to Canaan to serve Jehovah.
- And then He summarises the Exodus from Egypt and the whole conquest of the land of Canaan that they had just completed.
- And then Jehovah says this to the people:
 - Joshua 24:13 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹³ “I have given you a land for which you did not labour, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.”
 - In their case they were benefitting from the cities and vineyards of the enemies that they had just conquered.
 - In our case we are recipients of a rich wealth of teachings from the Lord and the sincere efforts of New Church people in previous generations to grow and spread the New Church.
 - We have been given a land for which we did not labour and we live in the cities of doctrinal teachings that we did not build.
- Joshua continues:
 - Joshua 24:14-15 (NKJV, modified)
 - ¹⁴ “Now therefore, fear Jehovah, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve Jehovah! ¹⁵ And if it seems evil to you to serve Jehovah, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah.”
- You get to decide which god you will serve.
- You can serve the gods which your fathers served.
 - You can try to adopt the beliefs and practices of previous generations without thinking about them.
- Or you can serve the gods of the land and culture that you're living in.
 - There are many gods that are worshipped in the culture around us.
 - Gods of material success and reputation; gods of power; gods of selfishness.
 - Gods that tell us that we are the ones who should get to determine what is right and wrong.

- These gods are praised in the music, TV, movies, books, and videos that we listen to, read, and watch.
 - We can worship these gods if we so choose.
 - And we will end up worshipping these gods if we don't make a conscious effort not to.
 - We should try to resist the urge to just have the world dictate our values and beliefs.
 - As Paul said to the early church in Rome:
 - Romans 12:2 (NKJV)
 - And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.
- So there are different gods that we could worship.
- And I love how Joshua strongly urges the people to serve Jehovah but then also leaves it in their hands to decide what they're going to do.
 - And then he makes a statement about what He is going to do: "But as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah."
 - What are you and your house going to do?
 - Who or what will you serve?

Conclusion

- At the beginning of this sermon I asked you "What about the New Church makes *you* different?" Or "How are *you* different because of the New Church?"
 - Because the only reason way that the New Church has been any different is because of individual people in the history of the New Church being made different by working to understand and live according to the new teachings in the teachings of the New Church.
- When Joshua had just taken over the leadership of the Children of Israel, Jehovah told him what He needed to do:
 - Joshua 1:8-9 (NKJV, modified)
 - ⁸ "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for Jehovah your God is with you wherever you go."
- We too need to meditate day and night in what the Lord teaches.
 - The goal is not to just be different for the sake of being different: the goal is to be faithful to what the Lord teaches and that will make us different.
 - If we do that work to really interrogate what we believe from other people and other ideas we encounter in the world and we try to humbly be guided by the Lord in His Word in all that we think and do, then we will be made different by the Lord and we will also be able to be strong and courageous no matter what happens.
- Amen.