

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 3 October

Children's Talk: Seeing and Hearing

We are talking about the five main senses that we have. Does anyone know any of the five senses? Sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Last week Mr. Smith talked about taste and smell. Today we are going to talk about sight and hearing. Can you point to the thing you use to see? Can you point to the thing you use to hear? The Lord gave us eyes and ears so that we could see and hear things around us. Seeing and hearing help us understand the world around us, especially seeing.

I want to show an example of that. I have a bag here. In this bag I have something that I want you to guess what it is just by hearing it. Can anyone guess what this is? Now how about when I take it out and you can actually see it. Just hearing is hard. Seeing gives a much clearer picture.

The same thing is true of listening: I can move my mouth and tell you to do something. But can you do what I'm telling you just by seeing my mouth? No, you need to hear the words too. Hearing and seeing work together to help us understand and listen to what other people need.

But there is a different kind of sight and hearing, sight and hearing that help us listen and see from the Lord. This kind of hearing and seeing shows up in the story of Hagar. Hagar had been forced to go live in the wilderness with her son. She could not see any water to drink, and so she and her son began to cry:

Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept.

And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. (Genesis 21:16-19)

It says God heard their cries, but isn't the Lord always listening? Yes, but He heard their sorrow and their pain, and paid attention to it. It then says God opened her eyes, so she could see the water. But she wasn't closing her eyes before, was she? Opening her eyes means that the Lord helped her see things that she had not noticed before.

Seeing and hearing are not just things we do with our eyes and ears. We also use our heart to listen to what is loving, caring, compassionate, and good in others and in the Lord; and we use our minds to understand things that we had not noticed before. If we don't try hard to understand people and the Lord, and listen for what matters, we are like people who are blind and deaf.

So notice with your thoughts, and listen with your heart, and pay attention to the little things that help us be better people.

The Five Senses, Part 2: Sight and Hearing

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

3 October, 2021

This week we continue to explore our five physical senses and what we can learn from them about our spiritual senses. Last week the focus was on smelling and tasting. Just as these senses help us get a feel for what is around us and decide what to take in, we can develop a sense for what our spiritual environment is like and choose what good things to take in. This week we turn to sight and hearing. These two senses are in some ways more focused than the other two: while we can learn a lot through smell and taste, sight and hearing are the two primary ways we take in rational information. Appropriately enough then, as we explore these two senses we learn about how we take in truth and what we need to do with it.

We even use sight and hearing in this way when we talk casually. If I say, "I see what you mean," I'm not saying that I literally can see what you say with my eyes; I mean that I understand what you are saying. If I say, "I hear you," it doesn't just mean I've been listening, it means I get you and am paying attention to the meaning within your words. The Teachings of the New Church indicate that these metaphors are not coincidental. They actually reflect the true spiritual source of sight and hearing. Each sense has such a spiritual source, and here is how the senses of sight and hearing are explained:

The love of seeing, arising from a love of understanding, has the sense of sight; and the things that give it pleasure are symmetries and qualities of beauty. The love of hearing, arising from a love of listening and complying, has the sense of hearing; and the things that give it pleasure are harmonies. (*Marriage Love* §210)

So our ability to see things ultimately comes from a deep love of understanding things. Our ability to hear comes from a deep love of listening and obeying. This reality is reflected both in our daily experience of life and in the stories of the Lord's Word.

There are countless references in the Word to both seeing and hearing, but I want to go one that gets right to the heart of it. The context is that the Lord had just told a parable, specifically the parable of the sower casting seed on all types of ground, and although the seed is all the same, its success depends on where it lands. Afterwards in private, the disciples asked the Lord why He taught people using parables. His response refers to seeing and to hearing, but each in two very different ways:

Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

"Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,

So that I should heal them.’ (Matthew 13:13-15)

There is a lot going on here, and on the surface there seem to be some contradictions. How can someone both see and not see or hear and not hear at the same time?

We find that this is possible in our conversations with each other. We can fully comprehend another person’s point, and yet completely fail to see where they are coming from. We can listen attentively to someone’s words and yet miss hearing what is actually behind those words. We see and we hear; but we neither see nor hear in the ways that matter. Take for instance your reaction to a poorly spelled and grammatically atrocious comment that you encounter online. How many of us would dismiss the worth of the comment for lack of proper grammar? We have seen the words themselves, but are blind to the meaning intended by the person who wrote them. Or take a couple arguing, and the one devastatingly takes down the other’s argument point by point: the other’s words have clearly entered their ears, but they have heard only words, and have not heard the heart behind them (*Secrets of Heaven* §9407).

Just as we can see and hear other people without truly seeing or hearing them, we can also see and hear the Lord but not truly see or hear Him. On the external level we can cast our eyes over the pages of His Word day in and day out, and listen closely to sermons every single Sunday, without ever actually having faith in what He is trying to teach us or obeying what He is telling us to do. Seeing and hearing truly require faith and obedience, not just understanding and paying attention.

There is a deeper level here too, however. Even in a certain kind of faith and obedience there can still be an element of blindness and deafness. This goes to what is in a person’s heart, or in other words, that attitude and love from which he has faith and obeys. If we look back at the quote from Isaiah, it said that they would see and hear without understanding or perception specifically because, “the hearts of this people have grown dull.” A dull heart can neither see nor hear, no matter how exposed it is to genuine faith and how many opportunities it is given for authentic obedience. This is because seeing and hearing are determined by the observer. This is not unlike physical sight and hearing: although we perceive sight and sound as phenomena occurring out there in the world, they actually take place within our minds, in response to outer stimuli (*Secrets of Heaven* §§1953-1954). Anyone who is colour-blind or tone-deaf can tell you this. The problem lies not in the light or the sound but in the receiver and the perception of it.

Jesus teaches clearly that if our spiritual sight is faulty we will not be able to see anything true. He said,

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6:22-23)

If the thing with which you see is dark, it doesn’t matter how bright the environment is; to you it will all be darkness. Likewise, if our hearts remain selfish, it does not matter how faithful, intelligent, attentive, obedient, pious, and even charitable we are outwardly: inwardly there will still be darkness, until we sort out our hearts. We do this by shunning evils, looking to the Lord, and practicing charity.

This comes from the generally principal that who we are shapes how we experience life. One succinct phrasing I have run into is that, “we do not see things as they are; we see things as we are” (cf. *Secrets of Heaven* §920). We should not be too quick to assume that our sight of things is a full picture simply because it seems true to us. We have all experienced days that seemed terrible, not because of the day itself, but because of our mood, which converted every minor incident into a tragedy and ignored every positive as a fleeting or hollow mirage. Likewise we have days when nothing seems to bring us down and the sun shines regardless of incidents and inconveniences. Seeing and hearing, whether physically or spiritually, is not objective.

Jesus made clear to His disciples how amazing the opportunity is to change or shift how we see and hear. Having told them that He spoke in parables so that others might see and hear but not really see and hear, He told them,

But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Matthew 13:16-17)

The blessing that the Lord refers to here is not the fact that they literally saw the Lord in the flesh or heard teachings from His own mouth. It is a blessing equally available to all of us who have not seen or heard the Lord in the flesh. The teachings of the New Church explain that it is a reference to faith and obedience, as we already have seen:

Here 'the eyes which see' means intelligence and faith, for it was not the mere fact that they saw the Lord and also His miracles and works that caused any one of the disciples to be blessed but the fact that they could grasp things with their understandings and had faith, meant by 'seeing with the eyes', and that they were obedient, meant by 'hearing with the ears'. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2701:3)

Many extraordinarily intelligent and motivated people have wanted to understand and unlock the mysteries of the universe; miraculously, we actually get to do it, not by some vision from on high, nor through intense study, but by faithfully and humbly learning from the Lord and doing what He teaches. In these simple actions of the heart we can discover what all the philosophers and scientists have desperately sought to experience. We do not need to be uniquely intelligent or exceptionally motivated to have faith in and obey the Lord, and so both see and hear Him.

I want to end by looking just a little at sight and hearing individually, and think of how we can practically do more of it. First, with sight, in the Word we hear of people’s “eyes being opened.” This does not mean that they simply opened their eyelids and saw; it means that a new kind of sight was given to them, so they could see spiritual realities. In their case it was often visions or angels. But what can we do to have the Lord “open our eyes” to the spiritual reality around us? I’ve already mentioned the most important part of working on ourselves, shunning evil and turning our hearts to the Lord. But we can also learn something from how the most ancient people saw the physical world around them:

...They did indeed apprehend with their senses the external things that belonged to the body and to the world, but they paid no attention to them. In each object apprehended by the senses they used to perceive something Divine and heavenly. For example, when they saw any high mountain they did not perceive the idea of a mountain but that of height, and from height they perceived heaven and the Lord....

Whatever he saw with his eyes was for him heavenly, and so with him every single thing was so to speak alive. (*Secrets of Heaven* §920)

How amazing would it be to see, everywhere that you looked, some heavenly idea, from the majestic beauty of the peaks of the Berg all the way down to a pebble on the roadside. Everything is an opportunity to see the Lord, if our hearts are in the right place.

Having the Lord open our ears is, I think, a more subtle proposition. It takes listening for something deeper and from the heart, both in ourselves and from others. One story in the Word that illustrates this is when Pharaoh's daughter heard the infant Moses crying in the bulrushes and took pity on him. This story is explained as an illustration of listening from the promptings the Lord gives us to care for others in distress:

...When anyone looks with charity on someone in distress, as Pharaoh's daughter does here on the child crying in the box made of rush, a feeling of compassion is aroused. And since the feeling is stirred by the Lord, it is an alerting by Him. Indeed when people who are perceptive have feelings of compassion they know that they are being alerted by the Lord to offer help. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6737)

How amazing would it be if all of us went through life with our spiritual ears perked up, first to hear the cries for help from others, and secondly to hear the impulse from the Lord to offer aid. Don't just listen to understand or feel compassion; listen to be able to jump into action and do something. This is the kind of hearing that comes from a love of obedience.

Our physical senses are attuned to the physical world. In just the same way our spiritual senses are attuned to the spiritual world. We have the opportunity to hone our senses so that we can better see and understand and have faith in the Lord, and better see His presence in the world that surrounds us at all times; and we have the opportunity to listen more closely from the heart, striving to hear the faintest call for support from others, and jumping to obey as soon as we hear the Lord's call. In these actions we find blessing, as the Lord said,

Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. (Matthew 13:16)