

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 24 October 2021**

Children's Talk: When People in Charge Are Doing Wrong

- Who are some people who are in charge of you? (Your parents, your teachers, your grandparents)
 - Also people in government (president, mayor of Westville, laws and police officers).
- Here's a tricky question: what do you do if the people in charge of you aren't doing what's right?

- The Children of Israel found themselves in this situation.
 - Samuel had been their judge.
 - And he was really good—he obeyed the Lord and did what was right.
 - But when he got old, he put his sons in charge of the people and his sons were not good.
 - 1 Samuel 8:1, 3 (NKJV)
 - 1 Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. 3 But his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice.

 - Samuel's sons were not treating people fairly.
 - And they were using their positions of power to get people to give them money.

- So the Children of Israel came up with a solution but it wasn't a good one.
- 1 Samuel 8:4-7 (NKJV, modified)
 - 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, "Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."
 - 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." So Samuel prayed to Jehovah. 7 And Jehovah said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them."

- Their solution was to try to do what other nations around them were doing and have a king.
- When really they should have asked the Lord what to do.
 - "Lord, these leaders are not doing the right thing; what should we do now?"
- But instead they thought they could figure it out on their own.
 - And that's why the Lord said that they had rejected Him—they were not looking to the Lord to be their leader; they were hoping that some king would save them.

- But the Lord lets them have a king and it does not go well for them.
 - They have a bunch of bad kings and only a few good ones and even the good ones often cause problems for the people too.

- When someone in charge of us is not doing something good, we should keep coming back to the Lord as the one who is really in charge.
 - Sometimes parents or grandparents or babysitters or teachers who are in charge do do things that are not good or that seem unfair to us.

- But, if someone in charge is doing something bad, that doesn't give us permission to do bad things too.
- If someone in charge is being unfair, that doesn't mean that we should be unfair too.
 - That won't make things better.
- Maybe the person in charge would let us get away with doing something unkind but that doesn't mean that it's fine for us to do it.
- The Lord is still in charge and He should still be in charge of our behaviour.
 - We should say, "Lord, You're the One that I want to be in charge here: what do *You* want me to do?"

- The world is a better place because of every single person who has their own conscience—who is trying hard to listen to the Lord and do the right thing.
 - That makes things better, even when people in charge are doing some things that are not good.
 - I want to live in a world where lots of people around me have a conscience and are trying hard to do the right thing.
 - Each of you can be one of those people and can make the world a better place to live in for everyone.

- *Amen.*

Religion and Politics, Part 1: Seeking the Lord's Justice in a Corrupt World

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
24 October 2021

Intro

- There are municipal elections coming up in less than two weeks and so it seemed like it might be useful to talk about how we might approach political decisions from a religious perspective.
- I have tended to avoid preaching about issues relating to government because I haven't wanted to just stoke the fires of frustration and anger at the government.
 - Corruption, public money being stolen or wasted, people in positions of power with seemingly very little appetite for actually serving the people, people seeming to get away with all sorts of dishonesty and seeming to have no shame—it can be so infuriating and depressing to keep seeing example after example of these kinds of things both locally and worldwide.
 - If you're already talking about these things with people at work and at braais with mates, then what's the point of talking about them in church too?
- But, after having the chance to reflect on these issues more and after getting very useful input from other people, I feel strongly that there really is a lot of value in having some perspective from the Lord's Word on these topics and I hope that some of the teachings and passages that we're going to go through today will help you as you vote and as you think about the state of South Africa and the world in general.
- We'll begin by talking about the ideal—what does the Lord's Word say about how the civil state and people involved in government should be.
- Then we'll talk about what we do when things are not in that ideal state.

The Ideal

- Let's talk about ideals of government.
- When I was a teen I enjoyed discussing with my friends about what the best form of government was but now that doesn't seem particularly fruitful to me.
 - Maybe a pure libertarian state would be good work but it's never going to exist so what's the point in considering it?
- In a similar way, it might seem like discussing the ideals of what government could and should be from a New Church perspective is not a particularly useful thing to do.
 - But I find that the principles from the Lord's Word are actually quite pragmatic, not just useful for some far-fetched or far-off future: they're useful right now, even when things are nowhere near the ideal.
- Here's how the teachings of the New Church explain the need for civil government in the world:
 - *New Jerusalem* §312
 - Good order cannot be maintained in the world without officials who are required to observe everything that is orderly and everything that is disorderly and to reward people who live properly and penalise people who live improperly. If this is not

done, the human race will perish, since everyone has by heredity an innate desire to rule over others and to gain possession of their goods, which gives rise to hostility, envy, hatred, vengeance, guile, cruelty, and any number of other evils. So we need to be kept under restraint by laws. Those of us who do what is good need to receive rewards that accord with our love of honours and of financial gain. Those of us who do what is evil need to receive punishments that affect those same loves (namely, loss of honour, wealth, and life). Otherwise the human race would perish.

- To summarise: because people can be selfish and terrible there need to be laws in place to punish people for doing terrible things and to reward people for doing good things.
- And the basis of those laws should be some of the 10 Commandments.
 - *Married Love* §351
 - [C]ivil laws of justice... mean such injunctions as are found in the Ten Commandments, namely, not to commit murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, and not to bear false witness. These injunctions are civil laws of justice in all countries of the earth, for without them no state would survive.
- Now let's talk about what people working in government should be like.
 - *Doctrine of Charity* §161 (see also *New Jerusalem* §323)
 - [People]... holding the highest positions in kingdoms, commonwealths, provinces, cities, societies,.... [e]ach one of them in their own position, if they look to the Lord and shun evils as sins, and if they honestly, justly, and faithfully carry out the work of their exalted function, they are continually doing a good of use to the community and to the individuals in it, and become charity in form. And this takes place when the good of the subjects or citizens affects them; and when this affects them, it moves them to enact, together with those who are wise and God-fearing, laws of use, to see that they are kept, and to be first in living subject to them; also, to appoint over the groups of people under them officials, who are intelligent and at the same time of good will, through whom, under their supervision, judgment and justice may prevail, and the general good always be promoted. They will regard themselves as the highest in rank of those serving others, and not as the head, for the head directs all things of its body from love and wisdom in itself; and Love and Wisdom in itself is the Lord alone, by whom they, too, will be directed, as a servant.
- This reminds me a lot of what the Lord said to His disciples who were each trying to be the greatest.
 - Matthew 20:25-28 (NKJV)
 - ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."
- Imagine what the world would be like if all of our government officials were motivated by a genuine desire to serve and to make things better for everyone!
 - When that isn't what happens it can be heartbreaking.

What to Do When Things Are Not As They Should Be

- Now that we've got some picture of how things are meant to be, let's talk about what we do when this is not how things are.
- The best way to encapsulate what we need to do is this: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and His justice...." (Matthew 6:33).
 - Keep working to do what's good and honest and right, even in the face of evil, dishonesty, and injustice.
- A fair question in response to that is "Why?"
 - "Why is it worth still trying to still do the right thing when so many people around us and in positions of power are not?"
- Some people would answer that we should keep trying because things will get better.
 - Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."
 - The Lord, in His Divine Providence, does bend things towards better outcomes but I'm not sure that we should expect to see things getting better in our lifetimes.
 - There was an original quote that King was paraphrasing.
 - The original quote included this: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways." (Read "The Truth About 'The Arc of the Moral Universe'" - <https://bit.ly/3C8sLS8>)
 - That feels accurate.
 - From our point of view, they may look an awful lot like they're getting worse.
 - And there will certainly be times when we need to keep going in spite of not being able to see any sign that things are improving.
 - If we base our willingness to try to do what's right on seeing a certain better outcome, then we're likely to be regularly disappointed and we may give up on doing good at all.
- And so it seems better to have an approach where we keep on trying to do what's right, even if we can't see any evidence of our efforts making any difference.
- Why should we do that?
 - Maybe it's enough to do it just because the Lord told us to and we're trying to do our duty.

We Can Make Things Worse

- Another way of looking at it is that it's good to keep trying to do what's right because it's certainly better than any of the alternatives.
 - Maybe it's hard to see evidence that we can make things *better*, but we can certainly find plenty of evidence that we can make things *worse*.
- For example, if we decide that, because the government is corrupt, then it's fine for us to be corrupt in our business dealings too, then we are definitely going to be making things worse.
 - The teachings about what's right and wrong don't only apply when other people are following them too.
 - We have a responsibility to try to keep the Lord's commandments, regardless of what the person next to us or the world at large is doing.

- As another example of how we can make things worse, some terrible things have been done by people who nihilistically decided that the world was too corrupt and cruel and so they went to get vengeance.
 - Just because things are unfair and bad does not mean that the right thing to do is to burn it all down.
- We need to be really careful of a desire for vengeance in political affairs.
 - Just because someone has treated us badly or has done some bad things does not actually give us permission to hate them and get them back for what they did.
 - It is good to want justice and fairness but that's not actually the same thing as vengeance.
- We have to learn from the Lord what real justice looks like.
 - The world these days can have a pretty confused idea.
 - Justice is often used to mean that a person is getting punished—"That person needs to be brought to justice!"
 - And these days people talk about "social justice" causes and those are not necessarily in line with the Lord's definition of justice.
 - In the Old Testament judgment and justice often come together as a pair.
 - Judgment has to do with truth and things being fair; justice has to do with goodness and looking to the good of other people and society.
 - We are meant to seek first the kingdom of God, and *His* justice.
 - Our God always approaches people and situations with truth and with goodness, with judgment but also endless mercy.
- Vengeance is diametrically opposed to the Lord's justice.
- Politics and things being unfair can get our blood boiling.
 - I'll mention a few groups that might get you going, depending on your political feelings.
 - I'll start by just listing the leading three political parties in South Africa:
 - The ANC.
 - The DA.
 - The EFF.
 - Do you have some feelings about those groups?
 - Here are some other groups that you might have feelings about:
 - Billionaires.
 - People lobbying for conservative causes.
 - People lobbying for liberal causes.
- You're not actually allowed to hate any of the people in those groups.
 - You're not justified in taking vengeance on them or treating them as less than human.
 - Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice.
- Another thing we might be inclined to do is give up on the Lord being able to do anything useful and so instead we find our own solutions to the problems.
 - This is like the Children of Israel deciding that what they needed was a king.
 - Yes, the corruption and bribery of Samuel's sons was a real problem that needed to be dealt with but putting a king in charge of them was not the right solution.
 - And there are lots of examples in history in which people trying to solve a legitimate problem but their solution ends up causing way worse unintended consequences.
 - We need to be careful.

- We are allowed to use our brains and to try to come up with solutions.
 - This is true in political situations and also in our business dealings.
 - We are supposed to be active in the world, just not “of the world” (John 17:14-18).
 - We are allowed to strategise and plan.
 - We are meant to be as wise as serpents; we’re just also meant to be as harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16).
 - But our political and strategic thinking should not be compartmentalised away from the rest of what we believe and do.
 - Our thinking and planning and strategising should be done in the light of what the Lord teaches.
 - We need to make sure that we are seeking *first* the kingdom of God and His justice, and then trusting that all those other things of good plans and strategies will be added to us.

Our Individual Decisions Do Matter

- On a more hopeful note, the Old and New Testaments and the teachings of the New Church are clear that our individual moral or immoral decisions do matter.
- They matter for our spiritual welfare but they also matter to the society that we’re in.
- Listen to these teachings about what makes for the general good in society:
 - *Doctrine of Charity* §§130-131
 - The general good consists of these things: That in a society or kingdom there should be
 1. What is Divine among them.
 2. What is just among them.
 3. What is moral among them.
 4. Diligence, skill, and uprightness among them.
 5. The necessaries for life.
 6. The necessaries for all kinds of work.
 7. The necessaries for protection.
 8. Sufficient wealth, because these three kinds of necessaries are procured with it.

The general good is from these things, coming not from the things themselves, but from each of the individuals there, and through the goods of use which they each perform—as what is Divine is indeed there by means of ministers, and what is just by means of governors and judges; as what is moral is there by means of what is Divine and what is just; and as necessaries are there by means of all kinds of work and commerce; and so on.

- The only reason there are good things in society and things that work is because of many, many individuals doing their bit.
 - And you are part of that.
 - The world is a better place because of your efforts to do your job well.
- I talked to a couple of different people when I was working on this sermon, people who I see as working pretty hard to make the world a better place in various ways.
 - They all acknowledged that it’s hard to not get burnt out—it’s hard to not feel hopeless about the state of the world.

- And yet they also have enough conviction that they should keep going anyway.
- And there's a blessing in that.
 - The Lord said, "Happy are they who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).
- One person I spoke to simply said, "What alternative is there, than to keep on hungering after justice?"

Conclusion

- Last week Joel preached about optimism and pessimism.
 - If I were to ask you, "Are you optimistic about the future of South Africa?" I would guess that most of you would answer, "No."
 - And if I were to ask you if you were optimistic about the state of the world and its future, I would guess that you would again answer, "No."
- In Joel's sermon, the point he eventually arrived at was that we do need to notice evil things in the world but "Noticing evil should never be done for its own sake, it should always be done for the sake of love and the potential goodness that can come from it."
 - We can definitely apply that principle in the area of politics.
 - When we read or watch the news, we should be trying to view it from the perspective of the Lord's love and His efforts to help people and make them better.
- And we can try to bravely carry on trying to do what's right, even if we can't see things getting better, because that's what the Lord has called us to do and that's what the Lord Himself did and we're just trying to follow His example.
 - Luke 6:35 (NKJV)
 - But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.
- *Amen.*