

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 31 October

Children's Talk: First or Last

Why do people like to be in charge and boss other people around? Why do people like to be the front of the line? Why do people want to play something new first? It's exciting. It's fun. It makes you feel special and important.

Jesus had something to say about always wanting to be first, and how it isn't always the best thing to look for. He used the example of a wedding feast:

When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honourable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, "Give place to this man," and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, "Friend, go up higher." Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:8-11)

So Jesus is saying first of all that always wanting to be first is not such a good thing. We need to give other people a chance to be first: to be in charge, to be in front, to do something new. After all, if we enjoy those things, surely we can be happy for other people to enjoy them too.

But then Jesus said something interesting: He didn't just say to put yourself last and then stay there forever. He pointed out that the person who goes to a lower seat will be invited to a higher one. And this is true! If we put other people first and think of them before we think of ourselves, other people will notice that, and appreciate that, and give us a chance to have all those things that we give them.

It's not that it's bad to be first, or be in charge. It's just that we need to make sure we are thinking of other people too. Even when we are in charge, let's say of a game that we are playing with younger kids, or making sure that other people are following the rules, our attitude can be that it is all about them, not us. The point of being in charge isn't that we get power. It's that we can humbly help others, especially when we have a skill or maturity that they don't have.

So remember to practice humility first; and from humility, when you are given a chance to lead and be in charge, you will be able to serve other people.

Religion and Politics, Part 2: Heavenly Leadership

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

31 October, 2021

Government is not always the most pleasant of topics. Very few of us look forward to contentious discussions of politics around the table. We do feel a responsibility (or burden, perhaps) to care and be involved and get out there and vote. But it seems more like a necessary evil than a privilege. Yet government is not in itself the problem. In fact, governance, or leadership, is a sacred responsibility that plays a crucial part in how the Lord helps us as people organize our communities. Today we will explore how this works, and hopefully learn how we can better see and strive for the ideal here on Earth.

The first place we'll look is how government works in heaven. It may come as a surprise that even angels need to have laws and those who enforce them. Surely, angels are wise enough and loving enough to behave themselves? Yet Jesus seems to teach the idea that even in the Kingdom of the Lord there will be rulers. It came up when the mother of two of His disciples asked that they might be made two of those rulers. Jesus' response is instructive for us if we want to understand heavenly governance:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.

And He said to her, "What do you wish?"

She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."

But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

They said to Him, "We are able."

So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. 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. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:20-28)

There are three ideas to take away from this passage: the first is that when asked about ruling in His Kingdom, the Lord did not say that such a thing would not happen. Second, He indicated that only a person who was willing to undergo a certain level of challenge would qualify. Third, He put forward that attitude that must exist in heavenly rulers.

First, the fact that there is, indeed, government in heaven. The implication of this fact is that government does not simply exist to keep the bad elements of society in line. Even in a country in which every citizen was good and law-abiding (i.e., heaven), there would still be governors making and enforcing laws. In the Teachings

of the New Church there is a book called *Heaven and Hell* that describes many details of life after death. One whole chapter is dedicated to Governments in Heaven, which opens with these words:

Since heaven is differentiated into communities, and the larger communities consist of some hundreds of thousands of angels (50), and since all the people in a given community are involved in similar good but not in similar wisdom (43), it follows of necessity that there are governments, for order needs to be kept, and all matters of order seen to.

The actual governments in heaven vary, though. There is one kind in the communities that constitute the Lord's heavenly kingdom and another in the communities that constitute the Lord's spiritual kingdom. They even vary depending on the particular function of each community. However, in the heavens there is no government except the government of mutual love, and the government of mutual love is heavenly government. (*Heaven and Hell* §213)

As the passage makes clear there is immense variety in the form the government takes. In some communities of heaven the government is more like a consultation in which the less wise seek guidance from the more wise. In other heavens there are more clear rules to be followed. But regardless of the form, all government in heaven is based around helping a community organize in such a way that everything is guided by wisdom and love. As much as we give the government grief, we ought to recognize the ways that our governments do accomplish this kind of benefit to society. That does not mean we should ignore incompetence. But to the extent that a government does provide organization and allows society to function wisely and lovingly, government is far more than a "necessary evil." It is in fact a necessary good.

Second, when Jesus addressed James and John He indicated that only a person who was willing to undergo a certain level of challenge would qualify to govern in that Kingdom. He asked them,

Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? (Matthew 20:22)

The imagery of drinking the cup that Jesus drank and being baptized with His baptism both represent temptation, and rebirth through temptation. To be a heavenly leader one must be willing to undergo intense spiritual battles and through those battles allow the Lord to transform them into someone worthy of the position. They must be refined in the fire.

From all this it can be seen what the governors there are, namely, that they are such as are preeminent in love and wisdom, and therefore desire the good of all, and from wisdom know how to provide for the realization of that good. Such governors do not domineer or dictate, but they minister and serve (to serve meaning to do good to others from a love of the good, and to minister meaning to see to it that the good is done); nor do they make themselves greater than others, but less, for they put the good of society and of the neighbor in the first place, and put their own good last; and whatever is in the first place is greater and what is last is less. (*Heaven and Hell* §218)

Leadership is not a reward for good behaviour or an opportunity to build oneself up. In fact, the higher up the ladder a leader climbs the more work they have to do to put others first. It is only in facing down pride, vanity, selfishness, and every other personal evil that one can prepare for a role that requires putting others ahead of oneself. These foibles can only be conquered through the difficult and trying process of temptation. From the growth that comes with going through temptation one can then have the right character to be able to practice love and dispense wisdom for a community of others.

This leads directly to the third point: that government in heaven has nothing of dominance in it. Jesus made this clear to the ten other disciples who resented that James and John might be elevated above them:

Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. (Matthew 20:26-27)

A servant does not command his master, nor can a heavenly governor dictate to other angels. Nor is there any desire to do so.

...there is not in what [those in heaven] say any trace of an order given to another; for no one wishes to be the master and consequently regard another as his slave. Rather, each wishes to minister and be of service to another. (*Secrets of Heaven* §5732)

Amongst angels, although there are positions of governance and leadership, there are no commands given, no dictates to be blindly followed, no orders that must be obeyed under threat of violence. Each leader is followed because of the respect and trust he has earned from the others in his community.

It is true that we do not live in heaven; nor are our leaders always heavenly ones. But there are a couple of ways that understanding how government in heaven works can also help us down here. First there is the influence, however small, that we have in making our governments just a little more heavenly. As I hope has been made clear from the previous passages, this means not just focusing on external policy, but to the extent possible looking to the character and moral values of politicians. Someone who is willing to go through difficult personal growth, to put the good of others first, and sees himself as a servant to all is a heavenly leader. That is true regardless of the type of government he takes part in, or his level of power. As King David put it,

He who rules over men must be just,
Ruling in the fear of God (2 Samuel 23:3)

Aside from that though, there is understanding how each of us can take part in heavenly government. When we talk of “government” we automatically think of members of that official organization that rules a country. But government is something that we all take part in, in the sense that each of us has influence on others in our families, communities, and country. The mentalities that apply to politicians equally apply to each of us when we exercise that influence.

As a mother or a father, you are in charge of the governance of your home. Will your government be heavenly? To make it so means to keep at the forefront that those in your care come before you, and shunning the desire to control for the sake of control. Even when rules have to be enforced the underlying motivation should always remain on what is best for the well-being of the children.

As an employee you are in charge of the governance of a small piece of a larger company. What would it take to make sure that governance is heavenly? First in dealing with those lower down the chain, have their best interests at heart, and shun the desire to abuse even a minor position of power over another person. Looking up the chain of command, seek advice and guidance from those who are wiser, putting aside pride for the sake of the greater good. Seek out those who are not only skilled, but also people of good character and integrity, and support their leadership.

In your communities, it can be harder to see how to bring in heavenly leadership. But even in small ways, such as taking part in WhatsApp groups, greeting neighbours in passing, checking in on those who are vulnerable, and contributing to community functions, all allow us to be part of the governance of a community. When we act towards our communities first and foremost as servants we are bringing in heavenly government.

At the end of the day we cannot make the government exactly as we'd like it or as it ought to be. But in the areas that we have some influence we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to bring in heavenly government, that is, government that looks to the greater good and is entirely rooted in service and humility. In this we take part in the Lord's universal government of love and wisdom, love and wisdom that suffuse the entire universe, regardless of the political climate of the age. The Lord's Kingdom is an everlasting one, and it is within our reach at any moment.