

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for  
Sunday, 8 May 2022**

# Children's Talk: When Someone Does What's Wrong

- What day is it today? (Mothers Day)
- And so we're going to talk about something that you can do for your mom.
  - And it's not something like giving them a present.
  - It's actually about how you treat other people.
    - And particularly about fights.
    - If you can get better about how you handle fights, that will be a big help to your mom.
  
- Here's the question: when someone messes up, do we need to tell them?
  
- I need two volunteers to come and act something out up here—one person will build a block tower and the other will knock it down.
- This is an example where someone has messed up.
  - Does the other person need to tell them?
    - They might need to tell them.
    - They might not know that they've messed up.
  - But let's say that they *do* know that they messed up.
    - And they say, "I'm sorry that I knocked down your tower."
  - Does the other person still need to tell them?
    - They might *want* to tell them—"I really liked my tower! I spent a long time on it. You always do things like this!"
  - But let's swap things around now.
    - If you're the person who messed up, do you want to be told about all the bad things you did? (No.)
  
- This makes me think of the Golden Rule, when Jesus said, "[W]hatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12, NKJV).

- Now I want to read you a story of when someone messed up badly and how their parent treated them.
- This is sometimes called the story of “the Prodigal Son”.
  - In the story there’s a dad with two sons.
  - What would normally happen is whenever the dad would eventually grow old and die he would give all of the things he had to his two sons.
  - But his younger son doesn’t want to wait: he goes to his dad and says, “Give me all the money you would give me when you die.”
  - And the father agrees and give him the money.
    - We don’t know how rich the family was but, in today’s money, it might have been as much as fifty thousand Rand or maybe even hundreds of thousands of Rand.
  - The younger son takes the money and he goes and he wastes it all.
    - He spends it on selfish things for himself and is just wasteful and careless with the money.
    - Eventually he has absolutely nothing left and is going hungry because he has no food.
- Do you think he knows that he messed up?
  - Luke 15:17-19 (NKJV)
    - <sup>17</sup> “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” ’
- Then he goes back home
- What do you think his father will do when he sees his son coming—tell him all the bad things that he did?
  - Let’s read.
    - Luke 15:20 (NKJV)
      - <sup>20</sup> “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.
- He knew that he had messed up.
  - He didn’t need to be told that he’d done wrong.
  - He needed to know that his father still loved him.
- When someone messes up we might not be able to be loving to them, but maybe we can at least think about how we would like to be treated and keep ourselves from needing to tell them all of the bad things that they did.
- *Amen.*

# Approval

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith  
8 May 2022

## Intro

- When we say “Happy Mothers Day!” to a mom we mean something along the lines of hoping that they will have a happy day of feeling appreciated and valued for their work as a mom.
  - That’s a nice sentiment.
- But the reality is that Mothers Day, for a lot of people, is not just a happy day.
  - It can be a day when people who haven’t been able to be a mother feel the pain of that particularly keenly.
  - For people who are mothers, it is a day to reflect on their journey as a mother and moms will often feel pain and regret for things that they feel they could have done better for their children.
  - Mothers Day is also a day when people think about their relationship with their own mother and, for a lot of people, their relationship with their mom is complicated and not just a simple positive thing in their life.
- So, instead of wishing you a happy Mothers Day, maybe instead I will wish you a useful and reflective Mothers Day.
  
- To assist you in your reflections today, I want to talk about approval.
  - The desire to have approval from your parents is a strong and persistent motivation.
    - We want to make our mom happy and our dad proud.
  - Plenty of fully-grown adults are still very influenced by what they think their parents will approve of or not approve of.
  - And the desire to do things our parents would approve of can persist for people even long after their mom or dad has passed away.
  
- I want to talk about this because—as is the case with many strong feelings or motivations—there are healthy ways in which this motivation can lead and be acted out and there are also plenty of ways in which this motivation can get off track and lead to harmful things.
- It’s also an area where things can get better in our relationships if we can gain the perspective to see more clearly what’s going on.
  - We’ll look at it from the perspective of a child to their parents and also from the perspective of a parent to a child.
  - But also these dynamics can end up playing out in almost any relationship that we have so I hope it will be relevant for you regardless of what your current state is.

## Wanting Approval from Parents

- Let’s start by looking at this from a developmental point of view.
  - Where does this desire for approval come from?
- There are not many stories about little children in the Bible but one that comes to mind is the story of Samuel.
  - Samuel’s mother Hannah had not been able to have children and so she promised the Lord that, if He would give her a male child, she would give him to the Lord all the days of his life (1 Samuel 1:11).
  - The Lord hears her prayer and Hannah conceives and gives birth to Samuel.

- And, once Samuel has been weaned—so when he would still have been quite young, Hannah brought him to the tabernacle and gave him to the Lord.
  - And so Samuel serve in the tabernacle under the supervision of an old priest named Eli.
    - “Samuel ministered before Jehovah, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod” (1 Samuel 2:18).
- If we think of sweet little Samuel, in his little ephod, toddling around the tabernacle, trying to do what Eli had told him to do, we can know that of course he would be hoping to do things that Eli would approve of as his stand-in parent.
  - And you can probably all think of times when some cute little person has done something to try to make you happy.
    - Brought you a flower or offered to share a half-eaten piece of food with you.
- Little children have this sweet, innocent desire to please.
  - This is how one passage in the teachings of the New Church talks describes it:
    - *Married Love* §395
      - All that little children receive they attribute to their parents. They are content with the little things they are given as gifts. They do not worry about their food and clothing, and are not anxious about the future. They do not pay regard to the world and covet many things on account of it. They love their parents, their nursemaids, and their little companions, and play with them in a state of innocence. They allow themselves to be guided; they listen and obey.
- This innocent desire to please in little children is a beautiful thing and we can see how some part of our desire to please other people and be approved of stems from those roots in our childhood.
- The roots of our desire for approval also must stem from our basic human desire to love and to be loved.
  - *Divine Providence* §92:2
    - Love wants to be loved. This is its inner instinct. To the extent that it is loved in return, it is filled with pleasure.
- That’s the set up—the starting point—in each of us.

## **Shifting to the Lord as Our Heavenly Father**

- That’s our starting point but then we start growing up and it gradually becomes more and more clear that we are different people from our parents.
  - We don’t always want the same things as them, believe in the same things as them, or do things in the exact way that they would want us to do them.
  - And that leads to conflict and disapproval.
- To a certain degree, that’s all fine and good.
  - We might not like to feel disapproved of but we need our parents to help us figure out right from wrong, and learn how to be good and useful people in the world around us, and many other things.
  - It’s good that part of what motivates us to do what our parents say is not wanting to disappoint them.

- It's good that a parent can catch the eye of a child who's about to do something naughty and say, "Hey! Uh-uhhh! No." and there's something in the child that wants to obey.
- If children didn't care about being approved of then the only way to make sure that they behave themselves would be to punish and threaten to punish them.
- And sometimes parents do have to give their children consequences for doing what's wrong.
  - *True Christianity* §407
    - Everyone knows that a father who chastises his children when they do wrong loves them; and in the opposite case if he does not chastise them for it, he loves their faults, and this cannot be called charity.
- But, of course, no parents are perfect.
  - Parents can be trying their best but can be overly harsh and demanding or have unfair expectations for their children.
  - Or parents can have skewed sets of values—what they hold to be important is not in line with what the Lord holds to be important.
  - Or parents can just be selfish and self-serving—raising their children to be what they, the parents, want them to be so that they can get what *they* want instead of thinking about what will be best for their children.
  - And parents can also be downright abusive.
- And so, as we grow up, it is healthy and good for us to gradually shift away from our parents being the only people whose values we are exposed to and our parents being the only people whose approval we are seeking.
  - As we grow up we start to care about what our peers think about us, and what our teachers at school think about us, and society in general.
  - That gets to be much more of a cacophony of competing voices and values.
  - In that broader context we should be looking ultimately to the Lord, our Heavenly Father, for approval.
- The teachings of the New Church say directly that part of why we should honour our father and our mother is because our parents have been in the role of the Lord to us (*True Christianity* §305).
  - But that's not a permanent role for them.
  - Our loyalty is meant to ultimately shift to the Lord Himself.
    - This is why Jesus said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37).
    - We need to be aiming to serving higher values than just trying to keep mom or dad happy.
- And that can be a very freeing state to get to where we know what our parents want and what they will approve of or disapprove of but, because the Lord has become our ultimate authority instead of them, we are more free to consciously choose in what ways we do and do not do what our parents would like.
  - Our responsibility is to "seek first the kingdom of God and His justice" (Matthew 6:33) and whether or not we are approved of by our parents is of lesser importance.

## When We Are Disapproving

- So far we've mostly been focussed on being on the receiving end of disapproval; now let's talk about when we are the ones disapproving.
  - How do we do disapproval well?
  - What are the common pitfalls that we should watch out for?

## Watch Out For Contempt

- One of the things that I am actively working on in my parenting is trying to keep contempt out of my disapproval.
- Contempt is looking down on other people—believing that they are worse than us and treating them in that way (*Secrets of Heaven* §3993:8).
  - Contempt can come through in our facial expressions and our tone of voice.
  - And it's that layer that often causes much more harm than just simple disapproval.
- I'll give you an example.
- Our children eat a lot of tomato sauce.
- And I find myself with strong opinions about how the tomato sauce is handled.
  - My children pour large amounts of tomato sauce onto their plates, almost always more than they end up eating.
  - They also leave get tomato sauce on the bottle so that you can't pick it up or close it without getting tomato sauce on your hand.
  - And they end up spilling tomato sauce and wiping tomato sauce in all sorts of places—on the table, on their clothes, on the floor.
- I disapprove of these behaviours.
  - And that's fine.
  - It's probably good that I disapprove.
  - It hopefully means that, by the time my kids leave home, they will be human beings that know how to handle their tomato sauce and are not just tomato sauce fiends causing destruction wherever they go.
  - So, on that level, that's fine.
- But, in my many interactions with my children about tomato sauce, it is very easy for contempt to get in there—in my facial expressions, in my tone of voice.
  - Feel the difference between
    - “Why did you pour so much again? How many times have I told you not to pour too much?”
    - And “Oops! That was a bit too much, hey? Do you need help figuring out how to pour a bit less next time?”
  - Both are expressions of disapproval but one is mean and hurtful and the other is supportive and helpful.
- And the thing is, the contempt never helps.
  - The pain of feeling like I'm looking down on them never makes my kids want to change their behaviour.
  - No, they feel much more defensive and upset—as they should.
  - If I'm telling myself that my disapproval is about trying to get them to change for the better, then I should do what's most effective to accomplish that goal.
    - And a contemptuous, sarcastic tone never helps.

## The Lord's Mercy

- I find it helpful, when trying to fight against contempt in myself to think about how the Lord relates to us.
- It's interesting, the Bible and the teachings of the New Church don't talk so much about approval and disapproval or acceptance but they do talk about the Lord's mercy.
- Listen to these two passages.
  - *Secrets of Heaven* §587:2
    - Jehovah's mercy — the Lord's mercy — involves each and every thing the Lord does for the human race. Humankind's nature is such that the Lord has mercy on us, and on each of us according to our circumstances. So he has mercy on the state of one whom he permits to be punished and on the state of one to whom he grants good fortune. Punishment is an act of mercy because mercy bends all the evil involved in punishment to good ends. To grant good fortune is also an act of mercy because we never earn any kind of good. The whole human race is evil, and left to ourselves we all plunge into hell. To pull us back out of hell, then, is mercy, and pure mercy at that....
  - *Heaven and Hell* §522
    - Divine mercy is a pure mercy toward the whole human race with the intent of saving it, and it is constant toward every individual, never withdrawing from anyone. This means that everyone who can be saved is saved.
- The Lord's mercy is constant and never withdraws.
  - And thank goodness, because I am equally in need of the Lord's mercy as my tomato-sauce-wasting children, and as a money-stealing politician, and as any other human being who I might think that I am better than for some reason.
- If the Lord's mercy never withdraws, then maybe I can work on extending a bit more mercy and understanding towards the other fallible human beings around me.
  - We can still disapprove of behaviour and do what we need to do to encourage change but we can work on our underlying attitude being one of wishing everyone well and believing that we all need the Lord's help.
- Along these lines, someone was telling me about a podcast they heard where people were discussing what works about organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous.
  - Part of what is so remarkable is that someone can have a relapse and tell people in their AA group about it and they will be treated with understanding, empathy, and support.
  - Everyone there knows from personal experience how hard it is to not take that next drink and so nobody is going to be in a position to look down on them.
  - Yes, they would disapprove of the behaviour but that's so not the point.
  - The point is how to help the person figure out what went wrong and how to get back on track.

## What Would You Want Your Parent or Child to Know?

- Parent-child relationships are complicated and hard.
- With all the dynamics around approval and disapproval, affection and lack of affection, past hurts, efforts to connect that are misunderstood or misinterpreted, it can be hard to figure out how to connect.
- In spite of all that it can be useful to think about what you would like to say to your mom or your dad or your children or other key people in your life.
  - There might be circumstances that mean you can't actually say the words to them.
    - Maybe they're not talking to you right now.
    - Or maybe they've passed away.
  - But what would you want to say to them if you could?
- There's a book called *For Parents Only: Getting Inside the Head of Your Kid* (<https://shaunti.com/tb-books/for-parents-only/>) and it's based on a professional survey that the authors conducted where they asked hundreds of teenagers from across America to answer a whole bunch of questions about their lives and their relationship with their parents.
- The last question on the survey was this: "Now we want you to imagine something very difficult. If you were to somehow find out that your parents were going to die tomorrow, what would you most want to tell them today?"
  - There's a page on the author's website where you can read all of the hundreds of responses to this question (<https://shaunti.com/research/survey-verbatim-teens-think-one-thing-wanted-say-parents-book/> or <https://bit.ly/3KVLrbf>).
  - It's quite a powerful read.
- Here are just a few:
  - Dad, Mom, I love you with all my heart forgive me for all my misbehavior and bad attitudes. I just love you so much.
  - I love both of you very much. I realize that you both care about me, and I'm sorry for yelling at you when you nagged on me. You guys can be cool and fun to hang out with sometimes. I wish that sometimes you'd open your mind up and realize that you are not always right, and that my opinion is just as valid as yours. I'm sorry for all the mistakes I've made.
  - Stepmother: I know I've always had jealousy towards you ever since you came into our family. I really regret saying that you should've never married my dad. I'm just really glad that God brought you into my life. Without you, my dad, my sisters and I wouldn't have made it his far. I'm just really sorry. If I could turn back time I would change my attitude towards you guys. I love you both!
  - I know things haven't always been great between us, the important thing is that you tried your best to raise me in the ways that you thought would work. Even though I screwed up all those times you still stuck with it. .... You two have worked hard all of your lives and had very little to show for it. At least you'll finally get some peace.
  - I love you I've always loved you I wish it could have been better but it's been good enough I love you more than I let on and even though we hardly ever agree....Thanks for trying to help even though i wouldn't let you.
  - I love you... and you did good by raising us.. don't worry about me... you did an amazing job instilling good values in me. I might not think or believe the same way you do... but it's good to know that you trust me enough to have my own opinions.

- [I would like to say] how much I love my mom and how much I appreciate her even when I act like I don't. She tries really hard, and I can act like a brat, but she means the world to me.
- Mom- you are the best thing that ever happened to me and you couldn't be a better mom. I love you more than anything in the world. Thank you for everything that you have ever done for me. I'm sorry everything I put you through and I wish I could have been a better daughter. Dad- I will miss you lots. I Love you, but sometimes I feel as if I'm not good enough for you. But I know you love me more than anything. I love all the great memoires that we have, but its also hard for me to forget the bad ones. I will miss you with all of my heart. You could be such an awesome dad.
- I love you even though we have [had] hard times.
- I love you guys and I'll miss you and I'll never forget you.

## Conclusion

- Relationships, hey? Complicated.
- A lot of hard work.
- A lot of confusing times not knowing what to do.
- A lot of trying things, a lot of messing up.
- But somehow they're still worth it.
- I wish for you a useful and reflective Mothers Day.
  - I hope that you're able to feel some of the blessings of relationships today.
  - And if you're feeling more of the hard stuff from relationships, I hope that you can take comfort in the Lord's everlasting mercy and kindness towards you.
    - Isaiah 54:10-11, 13 (NKJV)
      - <sup>10</sup> For the mountains shall depart  
And the hills be removed,  
But My kindness shall not depart from you,  
Nor shall My covenant of peace,"  
Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.
      - <sup>11</sup> "O you afflicted one,  
Tossed with tempest, and not comforted,  
Behold, I will lay your stones with colorful gems,  
And lay your foundations with sapphires.  
....
      - <sup>13</sup> All your children shall be taught by the LORD,  
And great shall be the peace of your children.

- Amen.