

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for  
Sunday, 22 May 2022**

# Children's Talk: Ask the Lord for Help When You Feel Stuck

- In the story for today there's a person who is paralysed—do you know what it means to be paralysed? (Can't move.)
  - We can sometimes feel mentally or spiritually paralysed—we don't know what we should do.
  - In the story the person who is paralysed is healed, because of a Roman soldier who had faith in the Lord.
  
- Matthew 8:5-13 (NKJV)
  - <sup>5</sup> Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, <sup>6</sup> saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, dreadfully tormented."  
<sup>7</sup> And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him."  
<sup>8</sup> The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>9</sup> For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, "Go,' and he goes; and to another, "Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."  
<sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! .... <sup>13</sup> Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.
  
- There are some really interesting and useful things about this story.
- This centurion didn't know very much about Jesus.
  - Other people who had been following Him around for a while knew a whole lot more but Jesus said that this centurion had the most faith of anyone that he had met, even within Israel.
  
- Let's think about what the centurion had that other people lacked?
  - He knew that he needed help.
    - Sometimes people don't even realise that they have a problem.
    - But the centurion cared that his servant was paralysed and he desperately wanted to get help for him.
  - The centurion also asked for help.
    - And he didn't do it in a demanding way—"You will now help me!"—but in a humble way
    - And he genuinely believe that Jesus could help him—to the point where he knew that Jesus didn't even have to come to his house.
- And so his servant was healed that same hour.
  
- So the next time you're feeling stuck and you don't know what to do, think about this story.
  - Imagine feeling like the centurion and being sure that the Lord can help you, so much that He doesn't even have to come to your house.
  - And the Lord will be able to help you figure out something to do.
  
- Amen.

# Does It Matter If We Believe in the Lord?

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith  
22 May 2022

First preached 19 January 2014

## Intro

- This sermon is titled, “Does it matter if we believe in the Lord?”
  - And you probably can guess that the answer I’m going to get to is, “Yes, it does matter if we believe in the Lord.”
  - But can you explain why?
  
- Along these lines, here’s a little mental trap that I’ve enjoyed using with people who grew up in the New Church.
  - I’ll ask them, “Can you still go to heaven if you don’t believe in Jesus?”
    - They say yes.
      - This is a popular belief among New Church people.
    - It makes sense—think of all the Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims—does God want none of them to go to heaven?
  
  - Next question: “Does believing in Jesus mean that you are definitely going to heaven?”
    - They say no.
    - Aren’t there bad people who call themselves Christian?
  
  - Final question: “Then what’s the point of believing in Jesus?”
    - If you can still go to heaven without it;
    - And believing in Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to heaven;
    - Then what’s the point of believing in Him?
  
- Do you have an answer?
  - It’s an important question to have an answer to.
  
- In the New Church we love the idea that people of any religion can go to heaven.
  - But, if we don’t understand this idea fully, then it can seem like it doesn’t matter at all what you believe.
  - And it can be hard to figure out why it’s worth being Christian rather than any other religion.
  
- It all hinges around what it means to believe in or have faith in Jesus.
  - And once we understand that, then we can understand why what we believe matters.
  
- So our basic outline for today is that
  - We’ll look at a story that will help us understand what faith really is.
  - We’ll go back to that series of questions and see if we can see where we went wrong.
  - And then we’ll look at why having faith in what’s true can make such a difference.

## The Centurion's Great Faith

- I want to start by reading Jesus' full response to the centurion when he said that Jesus could just speak a word and heal his servant.
  - I didn't include the full thing in the Children's Talk.
- Here's what Jesus said:
  - Matthew 8:10-12 (NKJV)
    - <sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard it, He marvelled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! <sup>11</sup> And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>12</sup> But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
- What does the story of the centurion's faith tell us?
  - It's probably hard for us to imagine how shocking it was for the Lord to say that a Roman centurion had more faith than anyone He had met in Israel.
    - From the Israelites' perspective they were the chosen people of God and the Romans were the despised Gentile oppressors.
    - It was unthinkable that a Gentile could have faith at all—let alone have more faith than everyone in Israel.
      - And yet that's what Jesus said.
- This suggests that having faith is not just about having religious knowledge.
  - Because the people that had all the religious knowledge—the Jews—didn't have as great a faith as the ignorant Gentile who knew very little.
- What did he have that the Jews lacked?
  - We can hear it in the words he spoke to the Lord: he said, "I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word, and my boy shall be healed" (Matthew 8:8).
    - He acknowledged the power of the Lord.
    - He believed that, just as he could give orders to his subordinates, the Lord could control things like sickness.
    - And the centurion didn't just see the Lord as a great healer, the teachings of the New Church tell us that it is evident from what he said that he "acknowledged the Lord to be God Almighty" (*Apocalypse Explained* §815:3).
  - The majority of the Jews, on the other hand, did not acknowledge the Lord to be God.
    - In fact, the ones that knew the most about the Word—the chief priests, scribes, and pharisees—were the least receptive of that idea.
    - Even the Lord's disciples had difficulty holding onto the idea (see John 14:9).

## Faith is About Our Heart, Not Just Our Head

- The centurion didn't know much about the Lord or religion but he had confidence in Jesus' ability to help him and He acted according to that belief.
  - That is what faith and belief are really about.
  - There was a professor of comparative religion at Harvard named Wilfred Cantwell Smith who studied the meaning of words about belief in various languages and religious traditions and his theory is that the meaning that these words have today is very different from what they used to mean.

- “There was a time when ‘I believe’ as a ceremonial declaration of faith meant, and was heard as meaning: ‘Given the reality of God, as a fact of the universe, I hereby proclaim that I align my life accordingly, pledging love and loyalty.’ A statement about a person’s believing has now come to mean, rather, something of this sort: ‘Given the uncertainty of God, as a fact of modern life, so-and-so reports that the idea of God is part of the furniture of his mind.’” (quoted in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* by James W. Fowler, p.13)
- These days, when we talk about what we believe, we usually are thinking about the set of ideas that we currently like and they can be largely or entirely theoretical and have little or no impact on how we live our lives.
  - That wasn’t the case for the centurion.
- Smith has studied what the words for belief in various world religions meant and how those meanings have changed.
  - He says that a bunch of them used to mean something more like “set your heart on.”
  - I like the idea of talking about what we set our hearts on when we talk about beliefs.
    - The beliefs that we say we hold apart from what we set our hearts on I think are largely meaningless.
    - A more accurate way of saying it would be something like, “I currently think that....”
    - If saying, “I believe in God” just means “I currently think that God exists,” that’s largely meaningless—it’s just part of our mental furniture.
    - If it means, “I set my heart on God and align my life accordingly,” that’s an entirely different thing.
    - The centurion was setting his heart on Jesus and aligning his life with His.
      - He believed that Jesus had the power to send one of His servants to make it so that his servant would be healed.
      - He was acting as though Jesus were his Commanding Officer.
- When you say that you believe in God do you mean that you believe that God gets to tell you what you should do?
- Faith and belief are about what’s in your head but really they’re about what’s in your heart.

## **Why What We Believe Matters**

- If we understand faith in this way, then we can understand why what we believe matters.
- What you set your heart on and align your life to has a huge impact on your life and behaviour.
  - What about a sincere Muslim man who sets his heart on Allah and aligns his life to the teachings of the Koran?
- Consider this remarkable teaching.
- *Secrets of Heaven* §3263:2
  - As regards the Lord’s spiritual church it should be realised that it exists throughout the whole world, for it is not confined to those who possess the Word and from the Word have knowledge of the Lord and of some truths of faith. It also exists among people who do not possess the Word and therefore do not know the Lord at all, and as a consequence have no knowledge of any truths of faith—for all truths of faith regard the Lord. .... Among Non-Christians remote from the church there are many who know from the light of reason that there is one God, that He has created and preserves all

things; and also that He is the source of everything good, and consequently of everything true; and that being the likeness of Him makes a person blessed. And what is more, they live according to their religion, in love to that God and in love towards the neighbour. From an affection for good they perform the works of charity, and from an affection for truth they worship the Supreme Being. Such people among the non-Christians belong to the Lord's spiritual church. And although they do not know the Lord while they are in the world they nevertheless have within themselves a worship and tacit acknowledgement of Him when good exists within them, for the Lord is present within all good. For this reason also they acknowledge the Lord in the next life without difficulty, and receive the truths of faith better than Christians do in whom good is not so much present....

- It's saying that if a good Muslim acknowledges one God as the source of everything good and lives according to His religion, in love to God and towards his neighbour, then because he has genuine goodness in him, He also has the Lord present with him and believes in Him, even though He doesn't realise it.
- It's not about what you call God or even what ideas you have in your head, it's about whether you set your heart on God, as best you understand Him, and live according to what He teaches.
  - Like Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).
  - Non-Christians often do a better job of doing God's will than Christians.

## Going Back to the Questions

- Let's go back to those questions I asked at the beginning.
- Can you still go to heaven if you don't believe in Jesus?
  - People who've grown up in the New Church would normally answer yes.
  - But the teachings of the New Church actually pretty clearly say no (see *True Christianity* §§2-3, 337ff and many other places).
    - You have to believe in Jesus to go to heaven.
  - But the New Church also teaches that non-Christians can believe in Jesus without realising and if they have sincerely set their heart on following God, as best they understand Him, then they will want to learn about the Lord after death and will believe in Him openly then.
- Does believing in Jesus mean that you are definitely going to heaven?
  - People who've grown up in the New Church would normally answer no.
  - But if you understand believing as not just saying you believe or thinking you believe but actually setting your heart on Jesus and doing your best to take up your cross and follow Him, then I would say that believing in Jesus does mean that you are definitely going to heaven.
- Then what's the point of believing in Jesus?
  - We've already answered this.
  - But we can also see it in the story.
  - The centurion set his heart on Jesus and it meant that his servant was able to be healed.

- If he had prayed to Zeus or some other Roman god or goddess, would his servant have been healed?
  - It seems very unlikely.
- That might seem unfair.
  - We might think, if God loves all people then He should heal people regardless of what they believe.
  - But cutting up a chicken and spreading its entrails around—or whatever Roman worship looked like—simply wouldn't accomplish anything.
  - Whereas going to Jesus Christ—God in Human form—would.
- And what people believe and set their heart on does limit the Lord's ability to help them.
  - When Jesus went to his home town and to the people who had grown up with Him, it says, "He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them" (Mark 6:5) because they didn't believe that He was anything other than a normal person.
  - And if we believe that Jesus was just a nice guy then we won't go to him for help with our issues and He won't be able to help us, even though He desperately wants to.

## **Why Having Faith in What's True Can Make Such a Difference**

- Now that we've sorted out that trap, let's talk about why having faith in what's true can make such a difference.
- The point of believing in Jesus is that He can save you.
  - And not being saved in a fake way—not salvation as a gold star and reward for the people He decides that He likes.
  - Being saved from the hellish inclinations that are inside all of us.
    - No matter what religion you're in, the work is the same.
    - Living a good life doesn't just mean doing a bunch of nice things for people.
      - *Divine Providence* §325:2 explains that living well is "shunning evils because they are contrary to religion, thus contrary to God."
    - If we're not working to keep the commandments and shunning and rejecting our tendencies towards evils, then the good things that we do don't really count.
      - "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:22-23).
        - If we are practicing lawlessness, not keeping the commandments, then we don't know or love the Lord.
    - If non-Christians are living good lives and acknowledging Jesus on the inside without realising it, it means that they are doing the work of rejecting their selfish tendencies towards murder, adultery, slander, theft etc. and that's not any easier for them than it is for us.
- Sometimes New Church people can think, "It would have been a lot easier to just be in some other religion and just believe in God and be good and go to heaven and not know all this stuff and have to try to live according to it."
- But the work is the same.

- In fact, if anything, shunning evils should be easier for us because we are lucky enough to have access to the Word where we can find more information about what really is evil and what really is good—more light that we can shine into the darkness in our lives.
  - If you had the not particularly pleasant job of cleaning out the inside of a big shipping container that was coated in slime and muck, would you rather have a torch and a bucket of water with a brush or a 3 bazillion candlepower bank of lights and an industrial strength power washer?
    - You could use the the torch, bucket, and brush to do the job.
    - And if you were actually committed to doing the work you would get a lot farther than someone who owns huge lights and a power washer but couldn't be bothered to use them.
    - But, wouldn't you rather have good tools to work with?
- Or take a more practical example like trying to have a good marriage.
  - A Muslim couple can have a good marriage, even a better marriage than many Christians.
  - But believing that men are superior to women or that marriage is just a temporary arrangement that ends at death are going to make it harder to build a lasting, respectful, and loving relationship—not impossible, but harder.
  - Or instead you have the option of having all the beautiful teachings of the New Church about marriage at your disposal like that a husband and wife are meant to be equal in the relationship, that trying to control the other person will kill the marriage, that marriage can last to eternity, *etc.*

## **Heavenly Community or Outer Darkness, Wailing and Gnashing of Teeth?**

- Does it matter if we believe in the Lord? Absolutely.
  - Our lives will be and already are hugely affected by what we believe and set our hearts on.
- What we believe about what faith is will also have a big impact on our lives and our relationships with other people.
- After Jesus marvels at the centurion's great faith, He says this,
  - "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (11-12).
- In symbolic language this presents our 2 options when it comes to faith.
  - 1) Sitting down with those from the East and the West and the Jewish fathers or
  - 2) being cast into outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- People from the East and the West are people trying to lead good lives in other religious traditions.
  - When we are also engaged in the hard work of trying to shun evils and turn to God in our lives that puts us in spiritual community with everyone else who is engaged in that work.
  - And that's when you see the most commonality between religions and people in religions is when they're focussed on those life issues and shared challenges.
- If instead we choose to think that belief and faith is just about what we know and not about what we set our hearts on and live then we will fall into greater and greater falsity and spiritual darkness (*Secrets of Heaven* §1839:6-7).

- We may think we understand the truth but we won't.
- The wailing is the sound of the pain that inevitably comes from a life of evil.
- And gnashing of teeth is the sound of endless arguments about faith that come when people are just looking at teachings and ideas and not trying to live them (*Secrets of Heaven* §4424:3; *Apocalypse Explained* §556:18).
- So let's humbly set our hearts on the Lord Jesus Christ and join in spiritual community with people of all religions around the world who are turning to God in their lives and let's share what we've learned from the Lord so far.
- *Amen.*

## **Additional Readings**

### ***True Christianity* §3:2**

For our part, the specifics of faith are these:

- (1) There is one God, the divine Trinity exists within him, and he is the Lord God the Saviour Jesus Christ.
- (2) Believing in him is a faith that saves.
- (3) We must not do things that are evil—they belong to the Devil and come from the Devil.
- (4) We must do things that are good—they belong to God and come from God.
- (5) We must do these things as if we ourselves were doing them, but we must believe that they come from the Lord working with us and through us.

The first two points have to do with faith, the second two have to do with charity; and the fifth has to do with the partnership between charity and faith, the partnership between the Lord and us.

### ***True Christianity* §337**

The Faith That Saves Us Is Faith in the Lord God Our Saviour Jesus Christ

The faith that saves is faith in God our Saviour, because He is Divine and human. He is in the Father and the Father is in Him; therefore they are one. If we turn to Him, we are turning to the Father as well—to the one only God. Faith in any other god does not save us.

We are to believe or have faith in the Son of God, the Redeemer and Saviour, conceived by Jehovah and born from the Virgin Mary, who is named Jesus Christ. This is clear from commands that He, and later His apostles, frequently repeated.

The following passages make it clear that He himself commanded us to have faith in him:

Jesus said, "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that all who see the Son and believe in Him should have eternal life, and I will revive them on the last day." (John 6:40)

Those who believe in the Son have eternal life. Those who do not believe in the Son will not see life; instead God's anger will remain upon them. (John 3:36)

So that all who believe in the Son would not perish but would have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but would have eternal life. (John 3:15-16)

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

Truly, truly I say to you, those who believe in me have eternal life. I am the bread of life. (John 6:47-48)

I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never hunger and those who believe in me will never thirst. (John 6:35)

Jesus cried out, saying, "If any are thirsty, they must come to me and drink. If any believe in me, as the Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow out of their bellies." (John 7:37-38)

They said to Jesus, "What shall we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered, "This is God's work, to believe in the One whom the Father sent." (John 6:28-29)

As long as you have the light, believe in the light so that you may be children of the light. (John 12:36)

Those who believe in the Son of God are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged because they have not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

These things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God and through believing may have life in his name. (John 20:31)

Unless you have believed that I am [he], you will die in your sins. (John 8:24)

Jesus said, "When the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, has come, it will convict the world of sin, of justice, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in me." (John 16:8-9)