

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 23 October

Children's Talk: Letting go of bad habits

Children's Talk

Don't usually want to admit to doing something wrong or bad.

Sometimes the mistake sits inside of you and you feel a burning feeling of guilt.

You are afraid of anyone finding out.

How do you get rid of that feeling? Or how do you stop doing something bad?

The Children of Israel had a ceremony that has a little to do with this.

Read story.

What would they do to the goat?

Recite their sins over it and then send it off into the wilderness.

We have a goat here.

What are some of the evil or bad things that you have or could do?

I'm going to write them onto this goat.

Notice how when I put them out here, we could see them; we could talk about them; they couldn't hurt you anymore.

Even though it is scary, when we put our evils outside ourselves we can look at them.

But then we have to get rid of them.

We could look at all this and say, "hm, I like this goat, I think I'll keep him around!"

But we have to get rid of him. Shall I get rid of the goat?

Ok, now that was easy. It is harder to get rid of bad habits. But it is easier if we can see them and acknowledge them.

Then we can CHOOSE to get rid of them, and we won't have to have them inside of us any more, making us feel guilty and bad.

Teen Talk: Don't Keep the Goat

Being willing to accept that something that you enjoy is evil.

It is very easy to look at the things that we do and enjoy and decide that it must be good because it feels so good; and we can avoid a lot of guilt that way. If we say something that we are doing is wrong, then instantly we have to feel this guilt.

So our evils, which actually are hurting us, fester within, hidden.

And we can feel an internal shame that we try to hide and ignore but we know is there and it's eating us up.

When we let ourselves accept and openly acknowledge our evils, it does hurt; but it opens the way for actually getting rid of them. We all have that hard time when we have acknowledged our evils but we haven't stopped doing them yet.

You may find yourself thinking that something you were doing yesterday or last week is something that is also harmful, destructive, and evil.

But on the other side of that is cleansing and a new start.

Don't keep the goat: it will only make you feel guilt. Get rid of the goat; let it die.

Starting Fresh

A sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
23 October, 2022

The ritual of Holy Supper offers us a great opportunity: the opportunity to actually start fresh; to consciously choose new habits, new plans, new ways of living and interacting with the people around us. It's almost an opportunity to reinvent yourself or to decide that you are going to be a new kind of person. And that would be awesome if that's how it actually happened. We took an old habit that we don't like, we said, "forget that, I'm going to be different from this point forward," and bam, you're a new person! But that isn't how it works. It turns out that starting fresh is much harder than it sounds.

The problem is that the past has a pretty strong hold on us. Habits aren't something that just come and go; habits are things that get ingrained in us; the more we do something, especially if we really enjoy it, the more it sinks into our life and becomes part of who we are. Those habits then shape the life around us. They shape how we treat people, how we interact with them, the plans that we make, our choices. So when we go to start over as if it were, we find that our past, like it or not, is deeply embedded in our psyches and our past has also shaped what people think of us and the situation we are in (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 9444). All of this is especially true of our spiritual bad habits, or our evils and sins.

The first barrier that we have to overcome if we want to start fresh is simply the idea that we can't start fresh. We need to let go of the idea that we have made too many mistakes, that our habits are too deeply ingrained, that we have destroyed our chance of having a good relation with someone, or that we are beyond the point of no return. As hard as it is to believe, this is *never* the case. This concept is beautifully illustrated in the prophet Ezekiel. To understand this passage, you have to

remember that in Ancient Israel they had the idea that one person's sin would not only result in that person being punished but also their family and the generations that follow.

Now we don't have that mindset today so much: we pretty much all accept that when we do evil other people should not be punished for it. But on a spiritual level we do have a sense that the sins of our past selves, the selves that birthed our present selves, have made mistakes that we now have to deal with. Like the Ancient Israelites we think that the sins of a previous generation have doomed the current generation as well. It is true that we have to deal with the consequences of our past choices, we cannot avoid that. But it is utterly false that our past choices for evil mean that we are stuck with those choices and will forever make those same mistakes. So listen to this passage from the prophet Ezekiel, and when he speaks of fathers, think of your past self, and when he speaks of children, think of your current self:

¹⁹ "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?' Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live. ²⁰ The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.

²¹ "But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²² None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live. ²³ Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?" says the Lord God, "and not that he should turn from his ways and live? (*Ezekiel 18:19-23*)

We are all judged on what we are doing now. It doesn't matter how many mistakes you have made: if now you decide to do good and reform, than you will be judged as a good and reformed person. The sins of the father do not rest on the children. The sins that you have committed do not restrict who you are capable of being today,

right now. It is possible to start fresh. So first and foremost, if we are to have a fresh start, we need to let go of the pessimism that says it is too late. It is never too late.

Part II: No Reset Button

Once you have acknowledged that you can change and have decided to take that step the process is only beginning. Just because we are not enslaved to our past does not mean that we can instantly change who we are in the present. Changing who we are is hard work. We would love it if we could just change in an instant: just hit the reset button, become a blank slate, start totally new without having any of our past come back to haunt us. This desire has existed in people for centuries. In Christianity it shows up in the desire to have all our sins forgiven and forgotten by faith in the Lord: if I just accept Jesus Christ as my personal Savior in my heart, then I can start over.

We cannot simply do that by starting over. In order to move forward we have to confront the mistakes we have made. This was represented in the ceremony that we talked about with the children. This ceremony was to be done once a year to remove the sins of the Children of Israel. It was a way for them to start afresh. In the ceremony, the priest would stand over the goat, place his hands on its head and confess all of the sins that the Children of Israel had committed in the past year. Now isn't it interesting that in this ceremony that is all about starting over, they would take the time to list their past mistakes. This is *essential* for us as well. We cannot just start over and pretend the past never happened. The only way to overcome the past is to look it openly in the eye; if we want to start over by just pretending the past never happened, we will never get over it. This symbolizes the first part of repentance: looking within ourselves, discovering our evils, and acknowledging our responsibility for them.

Once the priest had put all of the sins of Israel into the goat, they would then send it out of the camp into the wilderness to die, taking their evils with it. This is the origin in fact of the idea of a scapegoat: someone else upon whom we can lay the blame for our own faults. It is tempting to think that sending out the goat symbolizes forgetting about our evils, but that is not the case. Sending the goat into the wilderness symbolizes casting our sins into hell; this is done when our present day actions are so far removed from how we used to behave that that past behavior is completely out of sight (AC 9937:8). This is the latter part of repentance: once we have seen and accepted our sins, we then cast them out by living a new life in opposition to the life we used to live.

All this shows what the forgiveness of sins is. Being able to be maintained by the Lord in the good of love and the truths of faith and to be withheld from evils and falsities constitutes the forgiveness of sins; and at the same time keeping well away from evil and falsity and detesting them constitutes repentance. But all this is so only with those who have received new life from the Lord through regeneration, for those things belong to the new life. (*Arcana Coelestia* 9448)

Part III: The Fresh Start

This at last is where the fresh start comes in: you've chosen to believe that a fresh start is possible; you confronted your past mistakes and have not ignored them; now you are ready to make a commitment to live a new life that is pure. It is not that all past mistakes have been forgotten: it is that they have been overcome. This is the true meaning of being forgiven.

The proof of the Lord's forgiveness is not in that He forgets our past; it is that He continues to support us in spite of our past. Long after someone else would have given up on us as a poor investment, the Lord continues to maintain in us an ability to do good and live wisely. That is the proof of his forgiveness and it is the fresh start that He gives us.

I want to end with a quote about being given a fresh start. This quote is taken from the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁶Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes.
Cease to do evil,
¹⁷ Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Rebuke the oppressor;
Defend the fatherless,
Plead for the widow.
¹⁸ “Come now, and let us reason together,”
Says the Lord,
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
They shall be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They shall be as wool. (*Isaiah 1:16-18*)

Even something that has been stained a deep red can be restored to a pure white. This isn't talking about a little dirt, some discoloration from white to off white. Even a deep red stain can be cleansed. Now this isn't going to happen tomorrow; it isn't going to happen this week or this month; it might not even happen this year. But the Lord does promise that it will happen *if you are willing to work on it*. And it will be difficult. We all want the reset button that allows us to start fresh right now. But this is a process. When we don't see progress we can't say “oh well, I guess I can't start fresh after all.” We need to recognize that the fresh start is not a moment in time, but an opportunity that lasts and grows and eventually takes hold fully. But we cannot get there by waiting for it to happen. We receive forgiveness when we repent; we cannot hold off on repenting until we are forgiven.

We always have an opportunity to start fresh. Any time of the year we can remember that no matter how far gone we seem to be, the Lord is always offering His forgiveness. If we are willing to own up to our mistakes, learn from them, and live anew, we too will see His forgiveness. Even “though your sins are like scarlet, they

shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool”

(Isaiah 1:18).

Amen.