

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 12 March

Children's Talk: Joyful Obedience

- What are the most exciting things in life?
 - Parties
 - Birthdays
 - Christmas
 - Holidays
 - Vacations
 - Games
 - Toys
 - Treats
- I notice that none of you said, "rules."
- Rules are not something we think of as fun or exciting.
- But there were certain rules that are designed to help us have a good and happy life. These rules are the Ten Commandments.
- Listen to how excited David was to bring the Ten Commandments into his city:

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. ¹³ And so it was, when those bearing the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. ¹⁴ Then David danced before the LORD with all *his* might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. ¹⁵ So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁷ So they brought the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place in the midst of the tabernacle that David had erected for it. Then David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. ¹⁸ And when David had finished offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts. ¹⁹ Then he distributed among all the people, among the whole multitude of Israel, both the women and the men, to everyone a loaf of bread, a piece *of meat*, and a cake of raisins. So all the people departed, everyone to his house.

- Rules help people enjoy life
- The Lord's rules especially help us have a good life.

Fear of the Law

A sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
12 March, 2023

One of the fundamental principles of the church is that we are to live our lives according to the Lord's laws. But with so many rules to follow it can begin to feel impossible; and if it is impossible to keep the Lord's law, than we may start to feel we are doomed to failure. Today we will explore a story that involves fear of the law, and the joy that can actually be found in the Lord's laws.

To understand this story we first have to understand the Ark of the Covenant. This was a wooden box, overlaid with gold, which contained the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments. These Commandments were the heart and soul of the Israelitish religion, and they remain the heart and soul of the Christian religion (see *Apocalypse Revealed* §529). The power and centrality of these Commandments can be seen in the rules surrounding the Ark: it was not to be touched, or even looked at, on pain of death. Many years before David became king, the Ark of the Covenant had been lost to the enemies of Israel, the Philistines. Although it had been returned to Israel, it had not yet been brought back to the centre of the place of worship. When David became king he set out to change that:

Again David gathered all the choice men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, whose name is called by the Name, Jehovah of Hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill, accompanying the ark of God; and Ahio went before the ark. Then David and all the house of Israel played music before Jehovah on all kinds of instruments of fir wood, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on sistrums, and on cymbals. (2 Samuel 6:1-5)

David was determined to bring the Ark back into the centre of Israel's worship, and he did so with great fanfare and celebration.

Everything that is said of the Ark in the natural sense could be said of the Ten Commandments in a spiritual sense. What would it mean then to commit ourselves to bringing the Ten Commandments back into the centre of our lives, and to do so with joy and celebration? I think it has something to do with the fact that when we first commit to keeping the Lord's commandments there is a certain amount of excitement and optimism.

Take for instance the person who realizes that he has neglected his spiritual life, and commits to honouring the Sabbath by attending church more frequently. He envisions how much more fulfilled he will feel as he heads into his busy week; he can picture the uplifting messages that will motivate him; he looks forward to the sense of peace and awe as he puts aside time to worship the Lord in a beautiful sanctuary.

Take another person who decides that she needs to practice more honesty, and so commits to not bearing false witness. She anticipates how much less drama there will be in her life without the constant exaggerations and conflicting stories. She looks forward to building back a solid sense of trust with her friends and family. The future appears bright and hopeful. In most scenarios, at the beginning, one can see all the positives that will come from following the Lord.

That doesn't last long. When challenges arise the commandments that once seemed uplifting now appear condemning and out of reach; they become ideals that cannot possibly be fulfilled. In the story of David we see this tragic turn from joy to sorrow and even fear:

And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of Jehovah was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God. And David became angry because of Jehovah's outbreak against Uzzah; and he called the name of the place Perez Uzzah to this day.

David was afraid of Jehovah that day; and he said, "How can the ark of Jehovah come to me?" So David would not move the ark of Jehovah with him into the City of David; but David took it aside into the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. (2 Samuel 6:6-10)

For merely touching the ark, out of apparent concern lest it should fall, Uzzah was struck dead. David no longer saw the Ark as a source of joy but one of fear and danger. How could he possibly keep such a dangerous item anywhere near him? And so he tucked it away in a nearby house and left it behind.

This tragic turn in the story reflects a turn in our own lives that comes when we have committed to the Lord's Commandments, but then fall short of them. If we take the man who committed to more consistently keeping the Sabbath: life gets busy; church feels like a chore, not an uplifting way to start the week; the initial excitement fades away and it becomes mundane, merely routine. He struggles to keep his commitment; and so slips out of the habit of coming to church again. But now, because he is failing to uphold a commitment, he feels worse about it than he ever did before. The guilt and sense of failure are ten times worse than when he just never had the habit to begin with. Yet it seems impossible to keep to his commitment too.

Or take the woman who committed to greater honesty. Instead of making life easier it has made it harder. She continues to slip into dishonesty, without a second thought, and now has the guilt and sense of failure to contend with on top of her initial problem of simply struggling with honesty. It would appear that she is not, and never will be an honest person. The habits are too ingrained; any chance of change or growth has passed. She can either accept that fact or live the rest of her life in a shadow of guilt.

What had appeared to be a source of new life feels like a source of death; where once there was hope there is now pessimism. It turns out that it is impossible

to perfectly keep the Lord's commandments, and so all that committing to keeping them does is to fill one with guilt and shame for falling short. This is a nearly universal experience, and through the centuries people have been trying to get around it. In the traditional Christian Church's they turned to faith alone. It was, and is, apparent to everyone that we cannot perfectly keep the Lord's commandments, and so if that is what is expected of us then we are doomed. And so they decided that faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ, apart from keeping His commandments, must be the only route to salvation.

There is a truth here, but one that, when mixed with a falsity, becomes highly destructive. The truth is that we cannot, on our own, keep the Lord's commandments. We will always fall short. The falsity though is to conclude that therefore we should not even try, or that we cannot even keep them in some meaningful degree at all. If we see how painful it is to fall short of the ideal, if we see how destructive the guilt and the pain feel, and conclude that therefore we should not even try, then we are throwing away all of what is possible simply because we cannot be perfect. We are, like David, becoming afraid of the power of the Lord's Commandments and forgetting the joy and happiness that comes when we are able to keep them.

This is the truth that we need to keep coming back to again and again: while it is impossible to keep the Lord's Commandments on our own, *we need not be on our own*; and when the Lord does give us the ability to keep them, to the extent we are willing to try, we will find real, lasting happiness. If we return to the story of the Ark, Uzzah was struck dead because he reached out his hand to stabilize the Ark, which spiritually symbolizes trying to keep the Lord's commandments under our own power and by our own strength (see *Secrets of Heaven* §878). To do this is as impossible

as trying to lift an incredibly heavy by oneself, without asking for any assistance. Of course you will fail! But that does not mean it is impossible for said object to be lifted.

Spiritually, we simply need to rely on the Lord's strength and power, as we find in the Teachings of the New Church:

...it is evident that to enter upon the way to heaven is not so difficult as many believe. The sole difficulty lies in being able to resist the love of self and the world, and to prevent their becoming dominant; for this is the source of all evils. That this is not so difficult as is believed is meant by these words of the Lord:

Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart, and you shall find rest to your souls; for My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matt. 11:29, 30).

The Lord's yoke is easy and His burden light because a man is led by the Lord and not by self just to the extent that he resists the evils that flow forth from love of self and of the world; and because the Lord then resists these evils in man and removes them. (*Heaven and Hell* §359)

All the work of keeping the Lord's commandments, all the work of regeneration, is done by the Lord Himself, not us. We simply welcome Him in, and allow Him to do his work. This is perhaps easier said than done; but it is doable, and that is the key. As long as we continue to believe that the Lord *will* give us the ability to keep his Commandments, then we will have the encouragement and motivation to give it our best efforts. The man who has committed to church can prayerfully ask the Lord for greater commitment, and then start from scratch, attending church as often as he is able. The woman struggling with honesty can prayerfully look to the Lord for fortitude to endure the hardship of her newfound honesty, and trust that in the end putting aside dishonesty will strengthen, rather than weaken, her relationships. All of us, no matter how far we have fallen, even if we have fallen into the lowest depths of our own personal evils, can still be lifted up and be saved from them. As Jesus said to His disciples, when they questioned if even anyone could be saved.

With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:25-26)

Do not give up hope; you do not need to be perfect; you do need to rely on the Lord.

If we can do that, keeping the commandments to the best of our abilities, looking to the Lord for encouragement and strength, continuing to strive in spite of our many, many, imperfections, then we will once again return to the joy and excitement of living a good life, a joy that is in fact deeper and more heartfelt than the initial excitement that we discussed at the beginning of this sermon. Perhaps we can find hope in this too: that we are heading to something happy and joyful, in spite of current challenges and pessimism. This is reflected in the story of David: the Ark, far from being a curse and source of pain, become a source of blessing to the house of Obed-Edom where David had left it; and so David realized that he need not fear, but could bring it to the heart of his capital city with still greater rejoicing:

The ark of Jehovah remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite three months. And Jehovah blessed Obed-Edom and all his household. Now it was told King David, saying, "Jehovah has blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. And so it was, when those bearing the ark of Jehovah had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. Then David danced before Jehovah with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of Jehovah with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.

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So they brought the ark of Jehovah, and set it in its place in the midst of the tabernacle that David had erected for it. Then David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before Jehovah. And when David had finished offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of Jehovah of hosts. Then he distributed among all the people, among the whole multitude of Israel, both the women and the men, to everyone a loaf of bread, a piece of meat, and a cake of raisins. So all the people departed, everyone to his house. (2 Samuel 6:11-15, 17-19)

The Lord's word is not too far from us, that it is beyond our ability to keep; nor is it too difficult that it will forever be a source of pain and struggle. We can welcome the Lord's commandments joyfully, into our very hearts, knowing that they will connect

us to His all-powerful love, and bring us greater happiness than we can possibly
imagine. *Amen.*