

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

Children's Talk: A Plank in Your Eye

When other people make mistakes, do you notice? Probably a lot of the time you do. And when you notice that someone else has made a mistake, what do you usually do? Perhaps you point it out, or if it will get them in trouble, you go tell on them.

When you make a mistake, do you notice? Probably some of the time. Maybe less than you do for other people. And when you notice you have made a mistake, what do you usually do? Try to hide it, pretend it didn't happen, or cover it up perhaps.

We all make mistakes. I make mistakes, and you make mistakes. But we treat our own mistakes as different from other people's. The Lord compared this to trying to help someone with a speck in their eye, even though we have something much bigger in our own eyes:

And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)

Imagine if I had a plank of wood stuck in my eye; and you came to me and I noticed that there was a tiny speck of dirt in yours; which would be more important for me to focus on; should I try to get the little speck out of your eye, or should I try to get the huge plank out of mine? I need to focus on myself first.

The plank and the speck are like mistakes that people make; the plank is like the big mistakes that I make and the speck is like the little mistakes that other people make. We sometimes like to draw a lot of attention to other people's little mistakes, and hide our own, even bigger, mistakes; but what we need to focus on is the big mistakes that we make.

The next time you find yourself about to point out someone else's mistake, ask yourself, is there something in me that I can work on instead? Or ask yourself, have I made that same mistake before too? Or I can I be a good friend to this person who is making such a little mistake, but might still be embarrassed? When we work on our big mistakes instead of hiding them, we will be in a much better place to help other people with their little mistakes.

A Shift in Perspective

A sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
23 April, 2023

We look at the world as if our view of it were a true one. We rarely reflect that perhaps what we see with our own two eyes and hear with our ears is otherwise than what it seems; and even the conclusions that we jump to feel as if they were objective reality rather than speculation based on a biased impression of events. It's a bit like having an accent: it sounds like everyone who deviates from my way of speaking has an accent whereas people who speak like me do not. Yet of course *everyone* has an accent, a specific way of talking that marks their speech. The same is true of most other parts of our lives. *We all* have a certain perspective that warps how we see the world, and a lens that shapes what appears to be objective reality. The Lord calls us to rise above this personal perspective and see things from a higher vantage point.

The Lord used the illustration of a plank and a speck in someone's eye to demonstrate how blind we are to our own character, and how it shapes how we see the world:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)

The speck that we see in the eyes of others represents the little errors and foibles that we have such an easy time seeing in other people; meanwhile the massive plank in our own eye represents the selfishness, and even the evil, that falsely colours how we see and understand everything around us (*Secrets of Heaven* §9051). In spite of how massive it is, we are blind to it.

It's not hard to demonstrate that our clear, objective point of view is actually anything but. I've noticed this in myself when driving. When I am going at a reasonable speed and people zip past me, it is clear that they are irresponsible drivers; and when I am going fast and come up behind someone trundling along slowly, it is clear that they are irrationally hesitant and unconfident drivers. My very "rational" assessment, it turns out, is entirely based on my limited viewpoint. This viewpoint is driven not by reason but by desire: I want to be in the right, so anyone who differs must be demonstrated to be in the wrong; and I am irritated by their behaviour so I must justify my irritation.

The desires that drive our thinking are not random either. They stem from our natural inclinations that we are born into; and sadly for us, we are all born self-centred. Our viewpoint is immersed in selfishness from the get go. Even when we learn to be rational, reasonable, apparently objective adults, we are still driven by our natural desires. Listen to what happens when a natural minded person, with his natural desires, starts to think rationally and objectively about his life. From the Teachings of the New Church:

[A person who is caught up in evils and their resulting falsities] is governed by the delights of his natural mind, and if he elevates his intellect above that, his love's delight perishes. If he does elevate it further and sees truths opposed to his life's delights or to the premises of his own intelligence, he then either falsifies those truths, or passes them by and scornfully leaves them behind, or he retains them in memory as means to serve his life's love and conceit in his own intelligence. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §267)

Even when a person can think objectively enough to come across what the real truth of a situation is, they still find a way to warp it to suit their own ends, or even find a way that they can reject it altogether as if it were false!

An example of this came up the other day. I was talking to someone about theft, and why otherwise good people might steal. People don't often just think to

themselves, “well I’m selfish, so I’ll take what I want.” They think through it very objectively and rationally; and so someone who steals petty cash from their company might think, “well I’ve worked here for many years and put in way more than what I’ve been paid; and I’ve gone above and beyond without any extra compensation; really I’m owed this extra money!” To us we can see that that is stupid thinking. But to the person they fully convince themselves they are being rational, while actually being driven by their desires. Whenever we encounter something that feels good, are instinct is to call it good even if it is truly evil, and if some idea supports what we want we call it true, even if it is completely false.

To be able to shift our perspective we need to work not just on how we think but on those deeper wants and desires. But how are we to alter the very things we are so blind to? The Lord has given us the tools to be able to lift our minds above our own lower thoughts and desires, to observe what lies below, and then to consciously choose what to accept and what to reject:

To enable a person to examine himself, he has been given an intellect, and this separate from his will, in order that he may know, understand and acknowledge what is good and what is evil, and may also see the character of his will, or what he loves and what he desires. For a person to see this, his intellect has been endowed with a higher and lower thought, or an inner and outer thought, that from the higher or inner thought he may see what his will is doing in the lower or outer thought. He sees this as someone sees his face in a mirror, and when he does, and knows what sin is, he can, if he implores the Lord's aid, stop willing it, refrain from it, and subsequently behave contrary to it. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §278a)

This process is indeed a struggle. It requires us not only to raise our minds and observe our thoughts and feelings, but to then judge those thoughts in feelings, not, as we tend to do, in light of what will be in our best self-interest, but in light of what the Lord calls us to do, and in light of what will be in the best interest of others.

That's only the beginning as well: having achieved that new perspective, we must think and act according to it.

This practice is intensely challenging. It takes putting aside what we want, and what we want to be true, in favour of what we don't enjoy and what we would rather ignore. This is required though if we are to keep some of the most important rules the Lord ever gave us, rules such as, "whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (Matthew 7:12) and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37). Inherent within these commandments is seeing things from the perspective of other people and behaving accordingly.

It's worth spending some time reflecting on what this would look like in practice. Take a conflict with a friend in which you "know" that you are right. Lift your mind and try to observe your intentions and motivations; might it be that for the sake of self-righteousness you are causing harm? That underneath your sense of rightness it is actually less about the truth and more about being superior? Are you wanting to be justified rather than to maintain a friendship? And from there see what the Lord's viewpoint might be: how would He judge your conversation? Would His focus be on you being right, or would He focus on charity, kindness, friendship, and mutual respect? Which is not even to say that you are wrong! But even in being right, shift your viewpoint to take in more than just what serves you. That shift in perspective can shift the whole tone of the conversation, and in turn the whole friendship.

Another scenario that comes up quite a bit is our judgments of other people. You might look at someone who is struggling and condemn them for their poor choices that have led them to be in a messed up relationship and a disastrous home life, with a constantly negative attitude towards the world. Your judgments of that

individual might feel as if they perfectly reflect reality; yet again even our most rational seeming thoughts are driven by feelings and affections. Took an honest look at why you are judging them; is it out of insecurity? Out of a sense of superiority? From fear even, the fear that if you accept them you might also accept their mistakes as allowable? And then ask how the Lord looks at them: what love does the Lord shower on them, what mercy does He bring to them, how much forgiveness does He offer? One's we are no longer viewing the person only in relation to ourselves, we will be able to better see the reality, the reality as the Lord sees it.

If we are willing to do this work it starts to shift our perspective in a more permanent way. At first it will be a struggle, a struggle against our own wants and needs; but the goal is not to become a totally unbiased, mechanically objective observer, forever denying ourselves the things that we want in favour of others. We can actually develop, or rather the Lord develops within us, an innate viewpoint that takes the Lord and others into account. That passage I read before continues in this vein:

If he cannot do this readily, still he can overcome [the sin] through struggle, and at last become averse to it and abhor it. Moreover, for the first time then he perceives and also feels that evil is evil and good good, and not before. This, now, is what it is to examine oneself, to see one's evils and acknowledge them, to confess them, and afterward to desist from them.
(*Divine Love and Wisdom* §278a)

At last we feel good as good, and evil as evil; we become, through practice, averse to good, such that our natural instinct in any given situation is to first and foremost think of the Lord's perspective, and desire above all to behave in line with that perspective.