

Giving Good Gifts to Our Children

By the Rev. A. Wynne Acton

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Luke 11:11-13).

The thoughtful reader of the New Testament is constantly struck with the practical nature of the Lord's parables and illustrations. The Lord speaks to people in a way they will understand, presenting His Divine truth in external imagery that is familiar to us all. Who, for instance, is not aware of the great power of parental love, and cannot, therefore, have an image in which to picture the infinite love of the heavenly Father for all His children?

For the preservation of the human race, the Lord implants within all parents a love of their children to ensure their protection, raising, and education. This love of children is one of the two universal spheres proceeding from the Lord. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that

There is a sphere of protection and support of those who cannot protect and support themselves; for it is a part of creation that the things created must be preserved, guarded, protected, and supported; otherwise the universe would go to destruction. But because with living beings, to whom freedom of choice is granted, this cannot be done immediately by the Lord, it is done mediately through His love implanted in fathers, mothers, and nurses" (Conjugal Love 391).

The love of parents, nurses (caretakers), teachers, and all who have responsibility for children, is a holy love, implanted by the Lord to ensure the fulfillment of His Divine purposes in creation.

Humans share this natural love of children with animals, but we alone can determine the quality of this love. For every love from the Lord can be diverted by people from its useful purpose and be turned to selfish and evil ends. All the natural loves and appetites which the Lord gives us as means of attaining higher states can be inwardly turned to our own pleasures as their chief goal, and thus be perverted.

The purpose of the Divine Providence is that there shall be a heaven from the human race. For this purpose the Lord gives all people the sphere of the love of procreating and the sphere of the love of protecting what is procreated. This is the Divine provision on the natural plane. But the Lord has left us free to enter, as if of ourselves, into the sphere of the love of the *spiritual* protection and education of children. The natural love of children is so strong that there is a danger of its being made the chief goal. The danger is in allowing this to become a love of *one's self* in one's children, a possessive love which does not look beyond self and the things of this world to eternal realities. And so we find parents who take an interest and pride in their children, who seek their welfare in this world, but who are relatively indifferent to their spiritual development. The desire to prepare children in the best possible way for their uses in this world is a good love, and it should by all means be developed. But this desire should be regarded by

parents only as a means of looking toward eternal life and should be subservient to their efforts to prepare their children for uses in heaven.

The contrast between those who look to the spiritual welfare of their children and those who ignore it is drawn strongly in our text from Luke 11. The former provide bread, fish, and an egg; the latter offer a stone, a serpent, and a scorpion.

Bread or Stone

The “bread” which children need is the bread of life for the nourishment of their souls. It is the Divine love which can be received by them as a sphere of worship, a sphere of reverence for the Lord’s Word and all things of His church, and a sphere of innocence in their work and in their play. This bread is withheld from our children if we, in any way, encourage or countenance a lack of reverence for the Lord’s Word and His church, a lack of enthusiasm for public and private worship, a lack of loyalty to their school and teachers, and, in general, a lack of respect for others. For these things form negative attitudes which are alien to the orderly state of a child and which, from small beginnings, may develop into states that are unresponsive to Divine love. Externals—especially examples—have a powerful effect in developing the attitudes of children.

The alternative given in the reading is a “stone.” A stone represents truth, and the church must indeed be founded upon the rock of Divine truth, but this is indigestible food for children who are not prepared to receive it. The truth must be presented to them in a form that can arouse their affections—as nourishing bread rather than as a hard stone. Truth is essential, but it is only a means looking to the purpose of good. So the important thing is to arouse reverence and affection for the Divine truth of the Word, for it is into these states that the Lord can inflow with the bread of life.

In a perverted sense, a stone represents falsity. By this we are reminded that it is our duty to protect children from the falsification of any truth, particularly that of the Word and of doctrine. We must guard against false teaching and be alert to combat its harmful effects.

Fish or Serpent

As children grow older there is need for instruction in the natural truths represented by a “fish.” These include knowledges from the Word and doctrine, as well as the various knowledges of the world. These must be seen in a unified way and be presented as expressions of spiritual truth and Divine law. Parents and teachers must themselves strive to see all the phenomena of this world as corresponding to spiritual order and use, and so be able to set forth the wonder and glory of God’s creation. When this attitude is active in their own minds then it can be taught, directly and indirectly, to children.

However, if these knowledges are presented from a purely materialistic viewpoint, our children are being given a “serpent” instead of a “fish.” A serpent represents the sensual degree of human life, from which comes our pride of self-intelligence. In a “serpent” state, children may be initiated into the attitude that they should not believe anything which cannot be seen and proved to their senses. In such a state, demonstrable facts are regarded as the only criteria of truth, and the development of rational thought is prevented.

Egg or Scorpion

An “egg” obviously indicates a new beginning, a spiritual rebirth (called regeneration in the Heavenly Doctrine). When we strive to prepare our children for spiritual life we are, as it were, presenting them with an egg into which the Divine can inflow to bring forth a new spiritual life.

Opposite to this is the “scorpion” which represents deadly persuasion. The Heavenly Doctrine says that “When a scorpion stings a person it induces a stupor upon the limbs which, if it be not cured, is followed by death; this deadly persuasion produces a corresponding effect upon the understanding” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 425). This persuasive sphere, arising from purely materialistic thought and spurred on by self-pride, can be deadly to spiritual growth. It produces a spirit that is negative to all spiritual values. It does not attack the Divine truth directly, but subtly creates a sphere of denial, in which no eternal truth can be seen. Such a sphere is very powerful in the world today, and it can exert its influence strongly—especially upon a child’s developing mind. Only affections and knowledges that look to spiritual principles can combat this deadly sphere.

However, we can pass these good things on to our children only to the extent that we develop the same qualities within ourselves. Let us strive to ensure that our thoughts and affections look to spiritual uses that are receptive of Divine good, and are not based on the fallacious appearances and ideals of the sensual, material world. Let the knowledge we possess be a means of forming rational thoughts. Let us fight against that deadly, persuasive sphere— arising from self-love— which leads to the denial of (or, at any rate, indifference to) all spiritual purposes. Let us seek to make our whole life a form into which the Divine can inflow to produce a new, spiritual birth. If we desire these things for our children, we will learn to place greater value upon them for ourselves. Our effort to educate our children for heaven may also be a strong factor in our own work of regeneration.

These responsibilities are great. It would be presumptuous—and impossible—for us to fulfill them if we did not know that, in a deeper sense, it is the Lord alone who gives all these good gifts. “Your heavenly Father give[s] the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” It is the Lord who feeds His children with spiritual bread. It is He who can open their eyes to behold the spiritual truths within earthly knowledges. And it is He who preserves within people an affirmative attitude which enables them to lead the life of heaven. We are given the opportunity to cooperate with this Divine work. So we should not be discouraged by the apparent slowness of our efforts, or by our own inadequacy and shortcomings, for this is the Lord’s work, and we are instruments in His hands. In the degree that we ask, the Lord will be present with His power in the work of raising our children. As Psalm 127 tells us, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it... Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord” (Psalm 127:1,3).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 127; Luke 11:5-13; *Heaven and Hell* 341, 344