

The Power of the Word

by the Rev. Geoffrey S. Childs

There are times in our day-to-day living when we find ourselves engulfed by irritations. They stem from ordinary and unexciting problems—from such things as failure to get ahead in our job; from difficulties with our children; from too intimate association with people with whom we don't mix well. Such irritations facing us day after day can take away a feeling of happiness in living and can lead us into states we find hard to bear.

Sometimes states of discontent stem from more basic things. Perhaps all our lives we have wished for a little more luxury—a little more of the ease and respect that money can bring. We feel unhappy with what we have. Or perhaps we haven't discovered the happiness in marriage that we expected.

Whatever form unhappiness takes, it is axiomatic that a person's deepest annoyance will always stem from his ruling evil. All of us tend to have some chief evil ambition in life, some false goal we value highly. Yet, in Providence, we find many things blocking us from obtaining that goal. Then, although we go ahead living our daily life, a feeling of unrest plagues us. We feel restless to get what we are after, restless because things stand in the way of our ambition.

The temptation then is to indulge our evils to soothe our unrest—to do everything we can to remove our unhappiness—everything except face the true reason for our discontent. The true reason is revealed in the teaching that all unhappiness originates in hell. Therefore, the states of unhappiness that burden us arise from our own proprium—from the hell that is within us.

Thus, if a person is honest with himself, he can see that his irritation over not getting ahead in his work is caused basically by the frustration of evil ambition. He can see that his shortness with his children is due to selfish impatience. He can even see that his personal frictions with other people are due to evils within himself as well as within them.

And yet, even though we know these things, even though we know that our dissatisfactions arise from our own evils, we still feel discontent. For we do not wish to admit our actual evils. Sometimes, in the desire to put the blame for discontent on others, people shift all the blame to hereditary evils. They imply that without an evil inheritance, there would be no such thing as unhappiness. Yet through His Divine plan of mediate goods—through progressions from lesser to greater goods—the Lord has provided that hereditary evils bring people no unhappiness. It is only those evil tendencies that a person confirms—makes his own—that cause him misery. Actual evil, not hereditary evil, is the cause of all unrest.

Knowing then he can only blame himself, a person often feels hopelessly surrounded by his own pettiness and selfishness. He feels the burden of confirmed evil upon himself as a great weight, producing irritation and restlessness within his heart. All people feel this to some degree; yet we can do much to escape this burden if we turn to the Lord for help. For when the Lord said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), He was speaking directly to us in our moods of despair. He is the way out of our discontent to honest happiness; He is the truth that leads us along this way; and He is the Life to Whom this path leads.

The Lord doesn't leave us alone, surrounded by the hell of our proprium, He does not leave us cursed in a sea of unhappiness. For He has given us a great gift—a gift so beautiful that it counterbalances completely the weight of hereditary evil and of actual evil. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church call this gift “remains”.

What are “remains”? They are not secret and hidden theological things, of which we are entirely unaware. Rather, they are all the heavenly affections implanted in a person from infancy to the end of his life. And we can be acutely aware of these affections. Our love for the Lord is such an affection. And so, too, is our love for spiritual truth—for the truth of the Heavenly Doctrine.

Remains are the most human and poignant things in our life. Any sincere and genuine love we feel towards another person is a part of our remains. So, too, is our affection for our husband or wife. Loyalty to country, loyalty to an organization in which we believe—these are also good spiritual affections or remains given to us by the Lord.

When a person finds himself overwhelmed by annoyances and unhappiness in his day-to-day living, he should acknowledge that his discontent arises from his actual evils. And then, instead of concentrating on his unhappiness, he should turn his back upon it and compel himself to think of the affirmative side of his life, forcing himself to recall his affection for the Lord and the Word, his love for his friends and the things he believes in, And from these remains he can fight the evils which are tempting him and causing him discontent. If, instead, he dwells only on his unhappiness, he is doing exactly what the evil spirits wish. Secretly, then, deceitful spirits can lead him onward to morbid depression, despair, and finally defeat.

In honest conscience, a person should force himself to look away from his unrest and discontent, to concentrate rather on the heavenly remains the Lord has implanted within him. For the choice before a person is between an affirmative or negative outlook, which is the choice between good or evil, heaven or hell. The heavenly affections called remains are not a person's own; they are the Lord's—they are the dwelling place of the Lord in the human heart. Thus a person can turn to them as to a mountain “from whence comes...help” (Psalm 121:1). And as he does this, he can gain a new philosophy about his evils. He can come to see that his remains are stronger than his hereditary traits or actual evils. He can come to trust in the strength of the mountain of the Lord.

This is all very well, but in human honesty we may ask, “how do we discover this mountain of the Lord, this source of inspiration, when in our spirit we seem to be lost?” What if all we can see is the level ground of human unhappiness, and there is no way out—no view of anything approximating celestial heights. A person cannot then turn to himself for strength, for in his heart he finds disillusion. To say that he therefore should turn to the Lord is not enough—for how does one find the Lord?

The pious admonition that in despair a person should turn to God means nothing unless this truth is defined. To turn to the Lord is to turn to His Word. When our sphere is negative, then no mental or emotional turning within our own subjective sphere will give us warmth and light. We are in a prison of our own spirit. We must turn to something outside of ourselves, something in which the Lord Himself may be found. This means simply one thing: we must turn to the Word, to reading it and reflecting upon it with humility and sincerity.

It is the direct teaching of the Lord Himself that He may be found in Divine revelation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1,4).

The Word—especially the *letter* of the Word in which the spirit or internal sense is seen—has the power of evoking remains. Where the internal sense is seen in the letter, or where the Old and New Testaments are read in a holy sphere, there the Lord is present. He is present with a fullness of power that will break negative spheres, that will bring the warmth and light of the sun of heaven to where before there had been darkness. This gift will come to those who diligently read and meditate on the Word of God.

To attain inner permanent peace we must be regenerated or be spiritually reborn—a life-long process. And yet if we find ourselves surrounded by unhappiness in our day-to-day life, we need not feel as if there is no way out. There is an immediate way out—by turning to the Word, and to the remains that are in us for strength and inspiration, and then by fighting against our evils from the sphere of the Word.

This immediate change is also a matter of attitude. If we are negative in our attitude, as we approach the Word, concentrating only on our own unhappiness, then the Word can bring us no release from our unceasing restlessness. But if we compel ourselves to be affirmative, looking to the Lord alone as we read His Word, then we will be given a miraculous new strength.

This strength is twofold: it is a strength of love re-inspired, and it is a strength of thought. For the Word has two vital functions: to bring order, that is heaven, to a person’s affections, and to bring deeper truths to his thoughts. For when a person sees new and deeper truths, he is confronted with the possibility of advancing his regeneration. If he will live these new truths, they will bring higher goods to him—a more complete regeneration.

The commonly accepted axiom that “It doesn’t matter what you believe, it is how you live that counts,” is a terribly dangerous half-truth. For how you live is always according to some belief, secret or open. And the source of true belief is from the Word. For the Word has the power to bring heaven to every plane of the mind, to scatter the thousands of disillusionings and discontents of earthly life. This is eternally testified to by the song of David:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper (Psalm 1:1-3).