

The Speck and the Plank

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“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 out of 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 out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5).

The Lord taught people to live a life of genuine charity. The fundamental principles of this are displayed clearly in our text. Coming immediately after the command, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1), it expresses our relationship to our neighbor, who is here called “brother” to express the affection of charity. The definition of charity is love toward the neighbor (*Arcana Coelestia* 615), and in its essence it is described as willing good to the neighbor (*Arcana Coelestia* 5132). Therefore, whatever teaches about our relationship to others, teaches about charity.

The general meaning of the text can be seen from common perception. We can easily see that we should not criticize others for evils we accept and practice ourselves. They may practice them unconsciously, but if we *know* that they are evil, so that we see them in others, and still do them ourselves, then we do them consciously. Thus we may be more to blame than others. Our concern should be to remove those evils we can see and judge from ourselves, and then, with the power of evil removed, we can deal justly with and help our neighbor.

Truths of common sense have great power. By their means people are able to receive the teachings of Divine Revelation more quickly, and they can be led to accept its authority. Common sense is the first appeal. So we find that the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount abounds with common sense, although it is presented in the parabolic expressions of that time. The Lord taught people that they should love their enemies, and then gave the comparison of His love for all men, even the wicked, saying that He caused the sun to shine on the evil and the good. This is an obvious truth, and a common sense example. Later He said, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. . . . Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:17-18,20). Such common sense language and home-spun examples drew the people of that time to hear His Words. Through these teachings He led them to a new and deeper acceptance of Divine Truth in their lives.

The obvious teaching of our text, which everyone can grasp, is that we are not to correct and reprove others, but to cure ourselves. We must learn to see the evils deeply hidden in our character—faults we have loved and cherished—so that we may remove them. In this process of removing our own evils, because they are sins against the Lord, we do help others. There are always two aspects to genuine charity, the one is shunning evils that would harm others, the other is doing goods which will help them. The fact that both are needed, and that evils must be shunned first, is plainly taught in this Sermon on the Mount. By our text the Lord teaches that we must shun evils first, to remove the plank that blinds our sight. In the Golden Rule, He clearly teaches that we must think of others, and serve them. This is an easily understood law of charity which can readily be applied: “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

The Lord has a Divine insight into the character of humanity. He adapted His teachings to meet the essential needs of the soul’s development. He knew that it was easy for all people to see the truth in its application to others. He knew that unregenerate people are tempted to apply truths to the obvious

faults in their neighbors, rather than to themselves. The Lord addressed the words of our text to this natural reaction to His teachings. He preceded them with the commandment, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” He did not mean that we should merely allow others the benefit of the doubt as to the appearances of their actions. He taught a positive truth; we must not judge. For judgments made from our own nature, with all its prejudices, are false judgments. Although we must use judgment every day of our lives, Divine Truth must be the judge. So the Lord also taught that we must judge righteous judgments. Our minds should be formed from the truth, and we should turn to it for light to see and understand the way of life that we must apply. If the truth makes the judgment, then we will not make it, we will only enter into it, and the Lord Himself will guide us. This kind of judgment is not forbidden.

However, we are taught that judgment is never to be applied to the spiritual state of another. That is always forbidden. All that we can judge is the external life of another, and external circumstances. It is proper for parents to judge the deeds of their children, to reprove and correct, and to encourage. It is proper for a judge to sentence a criminal to corrective punishment. But it is wrong to say of another, “You are an evil person,” or “You will be condemned to hell.” We cannot know the internal state of anyone, and therefore we are not to allow such a judgment to enter our minds.

The Lord also teaches that we must be charitable in our judgments of others—even in judgment of their external misdeeds. We can exercise charity without approving of their evils. The Lord clearly taught this when the elders brought a woman taken in adultery to Him. She stood condemned. But when the elders wished to put her to death by stoning, the Lord turned to them and said, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (John 8:7). This is a Divine example of the application of charity. The Lord did not condone the evil; He merely pointed out that we are all far from perfect. For this reason, it ill-becomes us to judge others; we have all that we can do to judge and to condemn the evils we find in ourselves. By such self-condemnation we are made better people—better able to perform our uses in the world, and by our uses to serve the neighbor.

The speck and the plank are pieces of wood. The speck is a tiny sliver of wood, whereas the plank is a huge stick of wood. Before regeneration, our own evils do not appear visible to us, no matter how great they may be. Our evils agree with our state of life. We love them and cherish them before we begin the work of regeneration. Therefore, they do not appear to be evil. This is because whatever a person loves appears to him to be good, just as whatever he believes appears to him to be true (see *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 108). However, when such a person looks out to the world from his little, self-centered state he is very harsh in his judgments. He condemns the tiniest faults in others. This is another failing in our human nature. We try to bolster our own self-opinion by seeing and condemning faults in others. We use the faults of others to excuse and cover up our own shortcomings. This may be quite unconscious. We may be unaware that our natural reasoning uses this means to protect its own comfortable habits. Yet by this means we may add new evils to our lives which we excuse with the common phrase, “Everyone else does it, why shouldn’t I?”

When we allow our own evils to lie unseen in our own nature, then the plank blinds our sight. We cannot see correctly, for we look at things from self-love and self-intelligence. Yet these are the very things that the Lord called the darkness that would not receive the true light. Such a person is a hypocrite, for he hides his evils from the world. By his natural thinking he sees the faults of others, yet he will not see his own. He is spiritually blinded by his own evils. He *could* see them, but he *will* not, and his hypocrisy is unknown even to himself. This form of hypocrisy may be present even with a religious person. He may attend church and live an externally upright civil and moral life, and yet not see the evils in himself. For our evils can only be seen if we search them out. They

hide well. They cover their nature so that they might not be seen and so be rejected. And the light of our natural life is not strong enough to expose spiritual evils. They can be seen only from the revealing light of Divine Truth given in the Word to heal our spiritual sickness. So we are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church that if people do not examine their lives and their intentions and repent of the evil they then see, they lose the ability to know what is really evil, and what is saving good. They allow the evil loves which the hells stir up to remain unchecked in their lives. The evils then become firmly rooted and spread like poisonous weeds until they choke out rational thought. Yet, on the external plane, such a person might live a normal life and appear to be good, even to himself. It was to correct such a condition that the Lord added, “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5).

The Lord taught that it is our intention—our will—that defines the quality of our actions. He also taught us how to use self-examination to see our intentions. In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, we read,

A person explores the intentions of his will while he explores his thoughts; for there the intentions manifest themselves. If he examines whether he would commit these evils if the fear of the law and of loss of reputation did not stand in the way, and if after this scrutiny he determines that he will not will them because they are sins, he performs true and interior repentance (True Christian Religion 532).

We are further taught that once or twice a year we should center our thought upon one or two evils that we see to be active in us, so that we may concentrate upon shunning them as sins against God. For the period between such searching examinations of the internal will, we are told how to preserve the intention of shunning evil in life: “When anyone meditates an evil and intends it, let him but admit to himself quite honestly, ‘I think this, and I intend it, but it is a sin, I will not do it.’ By this means the temptation injected by hell is broken, and a further entrance is prevented” (*True Christian Religion* 535).

How important this subject is can be seen if we look to the teachings of how we become truly human—true forms of charity. So in the *Doctrine of Charity* we are taught: “The first of charity is to look to the Lord and to shun evils because they are sins. The second of charity is to do uses to the neighbor” (number 40). We cannot do any genuine good until we strive to shun evils. Before that everything we do is from self-love, done to benefit ourselves alone. So to shun evils must be our very first purpose; by doing this we also begin to do uses to the neighbor. This is what the Lord emphasized, when He said, “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 6:27-45; *Divine Providence* 101:2 to 102 beginning