

LOOKING FOR GOOD IN OTHER PEOPLE

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It is not angelic to seek for the evils with a person unless we at the same time seek for the goods (Arcana Coelestia 10381).

In this world we should aspire to be like the angels, to have an angelic attitude. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that “No one becomes an angel, that is, comes into heaven, unless he carries with him from the world something of the angelic character” (*Divine Providence* 60). Now, a notable hallmark of the angelic character is speaking and thinking well of others. People in this world who think and speak well of others “are like the angels” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1088). These people are contrasted with those who see only evil. Only evil? Can’t they see good in other people when it is there? Apparently not, for “If they see anything good they either perceive it as nothing, or put a bad interpretation upon it” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1079).

Instead we are to look for the good in others. We should look for the qualities and virtues that make someone useful, rather than considering mere externals. “If you were to choose a helper or servant from those in your neighborhood, and ten were brought before your eyes from whom you were to choose one, would you choose from the face alone? Would you not choose from some quality that you love, [such] as integrity, modesty, piety, uprightness? These you would consider as you looked upon them” (*Apocalypse Explained* 834). Even when good is not evident in someone, we should look for the potential of good. Especially when dealing with children we should look upon them as good, or look for the good in them. For they are potentially good, and of such is the kingdom of heaven.

But what about seeing evil? What kind of judgments do we need to make in the course of our lives? We do have to look for faults in decisions we make. And we will find that some people are simply not suited for certain uses. We put little value on them in this context, “because they are of no ability or endowment, or aptitude to this or that use” (*Spiritual Experiences* 4347). Even so, we must bear in mind that they are of value in other respects. According to the Sermon on the Mount we are not to say “Raca” of anyone (Matthew 5:21-22), as if they were worthless. “Raca” implies an emptiness (*Apocalypse Explained* 746:18) and is translated in one modern version as “good-for-nothing.” We are never to make this kind of judgment about others, but we do need to be able to see when someone’s actions are not useful in a certain situation.

In a cynical world we could easily fall into the illusion that it is wise to be critical of others, to pick out their errors and to be suspicious of any good in them. But someone who does not look *for* good and who does not look *from* good is not really wise. The Heavenly Doctrine says that such a person “regards everybody as being in falsity, is ready to rebuke, to chastise and to punish; has no pity, and does not apply or adapt himself to others” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1949). If our “prudence” goes to the extreme, we will make the mistake of thinking that the angelic way of looking at others is naive and dangerous. And yet, in this very effort to avoid danger, we may alienate the spirit of charity and open ourselves to the dangers of infernal influence (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1088). Let us not forget that it is not angelic to seek for the faults of others unless at the same time, we are seeking for the good in them.