

GOOD GIFTS FOR OUR CHILDREN

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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)

Think of all the different kinds of people to whom children are born. Many are utterly self-centered. At times every parent is self-centered. Yet raising children requires of us a time commitment, a negation of self and its pleasures, which we would not have thought we would give willingly.

Why do we do it? Why does a father who has to be at work at seven in the morning spend the hours between two and four nursing a crying child while his wife comforts the baby? Why does a mother break her sleep every night for two years to feed, change, and comfort an infant, and then choose to go through the same process again—and maybe again? Why do parents save all their available financial resources to put their children through college twenty years from now? Why do they spend their leisure hours singing to them, teaching them to pray, showing them how to walk, playing “baby-games” with them, helping them with their homework?

The answer seems simple. “Because we love them.” Yet that answer is a miracle. People of all kinds give it. People who seem never to have thought of others deny themselves for their children.

To counter child neglect, abuse, and even murder, the Lord inspired into everything that lives a particular love—the love of its own offspring (*Conjugal Love* 386, 387). It doesn’t always work, of course; even the most beautiful gifts of the Lord can be rejected, and we hear of all too frequent cases of child neglect and abuse in this day and age. But, considering the evil in this world, His gift of parental love is miraculously effective. It is a most tender sphere which moves His creatures to protect and sustain those who can’t protect themselves (*Conjugal Love* 388, 391, 392). It particularly affects mothers, and through them fathers, and it touches them both with something that reaches into the inmosts of their beings—innocence and peace (*Conjugal Love* 394-396).

Without this gift, little children would not be cared for. Many, many of them would die while their parents pursued their own pleasures, or took out their frustrations on these defenseless beings. But, because the aura of innocence is given to infants, the hearts of people are moved to love and care for them.

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children....”

One of the paradoxes of life is that even the most worldly of people tend to seek the spiritual as well as the natural good of their children. A man may be deceitful himself, but punish deceit in his children. It is strange: he seems to be telling himself that he will be happy if he cheats people, but he knows his children will be unhappy if they do the same. It has been said that sometimes we are saved by being parents; when we think of our children growing up with our weaknesses, we realize for the first time how dangerous our weaknesses are. And if we turn to the Lord, He begins to give us a spiritual love of offspring—the determination to help them to heaven.

Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord once said, “How shall I pardon you for this? Your children have forsaken Me!” (Jeremiah 5:7). We don’t ever want the Lord to say the same to us. This is a holy fear—to want to do what is right for our children in the eyes of the Lord. To this strong feeling the Lord speaks in our text, giving us an insight into ways in which we can “give good gifts to our children,” so that He Himself may give the Holy Spirit to them.

“If a son asks bread of his father, will he give him a stone?” A stone usually represents solid truth—for example, in the parable of the house built upon a rock. Sometimes, however, hard, rock-like truth is not what is needed. This is illustrated by the account of the Lord fasting in the wilderness. He was hungry, and the devil tempted Him to make stones into bread—because we cannot eat stones.

An example of a rock-like truth is the teaching that we should not tell lies. A child should certainly be taught such a truth. But when he willingly turns to his parents, asking for spiritual food, we should perhaps find a different way to teach honesty—one that feeds the wish to be good. We might explain that we tell the truth because then we are speaking the way that the Lord speaks, for He always speaks the truth. We should tell the truth because when we do the Lord speaks through us. We should tell the truth because it makes the Lord very happy when we do so, and because it makes us strong people, not weak ones—people who can do the Lord’s will.

Truths like these feed the growing spirit. Every truth of the Word can be given to a child in this palatable fashion, becoming for him or her the bread of life. For example, why do we worship? Because we love the Lord and are so grateful to Him for all He gives us. Why do we speak to Him in prayer at night? Because He has watched over us every second of the day; He knows everything we have thought and done, and He has helped us in everything. He knows more about us than anyone. So each night we can talk to Him about absolutely anything—the bad things and the good things—and He listens and helps us. These truths are bread, not stone. They are food.

“Or if he asks a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?” Fish stand for lower truths—those in the letter of the Word and also the truths of natural life. A child needs these, but they must always be in the light of heavenly truth. The same Lord controls both worlds. Natural learning is palatable if it acknowledges the Lord as the God of the earth. These are the fishes that feed the growing child.

The serpent represents worldly cunning and craft—the feeling that we have to trust our own knowledge and intelligence to fashion our happiness. The serpent in the Garden of Eden represented this conviction—that we can decide for ourselves what is right and use our experience to “get on” in life. We all know how easy it is to give that impression to our children.

Therefore, we try hard to show them instead that the Lord's laws rule this earth. In the New Church we have a school system dedicated to doing just that—helping our children learn natural truth in the light of the Lord's Word, so that they can receive a fish, not the serpent of self-intelligence and self-trust.

“Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?” The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church does not specifically say what an egg represents, but some passages lead to the conclusion that here it speaks of a child's need for simple truths (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4383; *True Christian Religion* 193). Little children love simple truths that go to the heart of things. They understand that some things are good and others are bad, and the Lord wants us to do one and not the other (*Arcana Coelestia* 245, see 5135). These truths are a spiritual egg, from which many others grow (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4378, 4379).

A scorpion represents specious reasoning which denies those simple truths. In explaining this correspondence, the Heavenly Doctrine refers to the poison of the scorpion, which brings unconsciousness, and often death. It says that reasoning which makes it impossible for us to see the obvious truths of life is represented by this insect (*Apocalypse Explained* 542, 544, 548, 549, 581:7; *Apocalypse Revealed* 425, 427, 428, 438).

Perhaps the simplest example of the difference between an “egg” and a “scorpion” is the principle of admitting when we are wrong. We teach little children to say sorry and not to hide the fact that they have done something wrong. We teach them to “own up” if they have been at fault, especially if someone else is likely to be punished for what they have done.

It doesn't take much intelligence to realize that if we use specious arguments to avoid having to apologize, or if we hide our faults, our children will eventually notice the disparity between what we say and what we do. If so, we will have given them a scorpion. We will have taught them, by our example, that complicated reasoning to get out of trouble is more important than honest admission of fault. For *their* sake, therefore, we often learn to say, “I'm sorry; I was wrong.”

Yet is there any parent who can look back and say, “When my children needed the beauty of truth—the bread from heaven—I never gave them harsh commands instead. When they were learning the exciting things of this world I never taught them through my example to trust cunning and cleverness—the serpent—instead of the Word. When they needed simple truths of life, I never undermined them by convoluted reasoning, designed to avoid admitting my own faults.” None of us can say that, but our text tells us that the Lord has inspired us to know what we should be doing, and to keep trying. He doesn't ask for perfection.

Then the Lord added, “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.” Here is a sharp contrast. We give items of food; He gives the Holy Spirit.

We strive to give our children truth on three levels. We hope we give them uplifting, loving truth—bread. We try to teach them the stories of the Word and the learning of this world—fish. We give them basic, simple truths about how life is—the “egg” from which other truths will grow. In His infinite mercy, the Lord inspires life into all our efforts. For that is what the Holy

Spirit represents. In our text, the Heavenly Doctrine says, the Holy Spirit means “the Divine truth, and through this the life of faith and of love, which flows in immediately from the Lord” (*Arcana Coelestia* 9818:4).

One of the most wonderful things about being parents is that the Lord inspires us, through our love of our children, to turn away from “being evil.” The innocence of their loves touches our hearts. Their need for the Lord causes us to turn to Him. For them we learn and teach truths, and so see what otherwise we might have ignored.

The best and the worst of parents are invited to wonder at the miracle of parental love, and at the mercy of our Lord who puts such tender souls into our unworthy hands, and then inspires us to care for them. In doing so, we frequently find our own salvation, for we too are children, and “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Readings: Luke 11:5-13; *Arcana Coelestia* 2292, 2293; *Divine Providence* 331:2