

THE LORD IS MERCY ITSELF

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Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies... (Psalm 103:1-4).

Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cause Your anger toward us to cease. Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong Your anger to all generations? (Psalm 85:4-5).

What is the true nature and quality of God? Is He a God of infinite love and mercy, as taught in our first text—a God who forgives all our iniquities, heals all our diseases, redeems us from destruction and crowns us with lovingkindness? Or is He a God of anger, wrath and vengeance, as implied in our second text—a God who never forgets our backslidings and punishes us for them? Or is the Lord, like mortals, subject to both of these feelings and emotions? Is He moved by love and mercy at certain times and by anger and wrath at others? The answer to the latter two questions is an unqualified No! Our first text presents the Lord as He really is, while our second text presents Him as He appears to the wayward, self-led person.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church declares: “The Lord is love itself, to which no other attributes are fitting than those of pure love, thus of pure mercy toward the whole human race, which [love] is such that it wills to save all and make them happy to eternity, and to bestow on them all that it has, thus out of pure mercy to draw to heaven all who are willing to follow...by the strong force of love” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1735). It further states that “the Lord never curses anyone. He is never angry with anyone, never leads anyone into temptation, never punishes anyone...for such things can never proceed from the Fountain of mercy, peace, and goodness” (*Arcana Coelestia* 245).

The Lord, who is mercy and goodness itself, regards all people from mercy and never turns His face away from anyone. It is we, when in evil and disorder, who turn our faces away from the Lord. This is what the Lord was speaking of in Isaiah, when He said: “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you” (59:2).

Even though we may turn away from the Lord and reject His love, still the Lord does not desert us. He is ever present waiting to be received. He continually breathes into us His own life. And even though we may not respond to it according to order, this life nevertheless gives us the ability to think and reflect, and to discern whether a thing is good or evil, true or false (*Arcana Coelestia* 714). Thus the Lord provides that, even though we may reject Him and close the door of our minds to Him, yet we retain the ability to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsity, so that we may, at any time, change our ways and admit Him into our life. The Lord spoke of this saying: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20).

The mercy of the Lord is perpetual with everyone, for the Lord wills to save all people, whoever they are. Yet, His mercy cannot be received until evils are removed, for evils oppose and prevent the reception of the Lord's mercy (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8307). The Lord's love and mercy go out to everyone, but a person must have something within himself that is able to receive the love and mercy. And the thing that can receive love and mercy is truth. Where there is no truth, there can be no good or love, because there is nothing to receive it (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10579:8).

Divine love and Divine wisdom are inseparable, for these two are one in the Lord. And since mercy comes from love and justice comes from wisdom, these two things are also inseparable. Therefore, when a person rejects the Lord's truth, he is also rejecting the Lord's Divine mercy, because he has nothing to receive it in himself. Therefore someone who rejects Divine truth is judged from the laws of justice and truth separated from love. This is not because the Lord withdraws His love, for Divine love is always joined with Divine truth, but because the person has rejected His love and mercy along with the Divine truth. On the other hand, a person who willingly receives Divine truth is judged from justice tempered with mercy, because he has vessels in himself which can receive the mercy (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5585:6).

The Lord wills that everyone should enter into the happiness of heaven. This, in fact, is His purpose in creation. But since heaven is within a person according to his reception of good and truth from the Lord, therefore only those who have heaven in themselves can be received into heaven. When the evil are punished, it is not because the Lord wills it, but because such people have separated themselves from His Divine love. So the Heavenly Doctrine states: "The Lord in no case sends anyone down into hell, but a person sends himself" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2258).

Looking at this question of Divine mercy from another point of view, we should bear in mind that it is of mercy to the good that the evil are separated from them. For if they were not, the evil would do harm to the good, and would be continually attempting to destroy order, for this endeavor is inherent in all evil. The same thing is true on earth. If breaches of civil and moral order were not punished, society would soon be infected with evils and disorders and would eventually perish. For this reason, we are told, a judge shows greater love and mercy by punishing evils and those guilty of them than by exercising inappropriate clemency (*ibid.*).

These teachings make it clear that the Lord's mercy is with everyone according to the person's state. With those who are receptive to good and truth, the Lord's mercy bestows peace and heavenly joy. With the evil, who undergo punishment as a result of their transgressions against Divine order, the Lord's mercy bends the penalty of evil to the person's eternal welfare. Thus, even with the evil the Lord's mercy is operative, but it takes another form with them than with the good (see *Arcana Coelestia* 587:2). The Lord says: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent" (Revelation 3:19). "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

The truth of these teachings concerning the Lord's mercy is evident when we reflect upon the relationship of wise and loving parents with their children. When the children act according to order, they perceive and feel the love which their parents have for them, and they experience states of happiness, confidence, peace and security. However, when the children depart from

orderly behavior, they are no longer receptive to their parents' love, but come under the rule of truth. If the parents are wise they do not punish in and from anger but from love, which expresses itself as zeal. But the child does not *perceive* the love. Temporarily the child is estranged from his parents, and therefore he mistakes the zeal for anger. It is because of this appearance that the Lord is alternately pictured as a God of love and mercy and a God of wrath and anger, particularly in the Old Testament.

Even when we recognize the truth of the Lord's unchanging love from doctrine and logic, we are also inclined to be deceived by appearances. There are occasions when we tend to regard the Lord as a hard taskmaster. When we read or are taught something from the Word that makes us aware of our own evils and shortcomings, we are often inclined to think that the Lord requires more of us than can be reasonably expected. It even appears that He has put stumbling blocks in our way. The truth then seems hard and cold. It seems to rebuke us, and we unconsciously attribute something of harshness, or even of anger, to the Lord.

To many people the life of religion seems to be a stern, restrictive discipline instead of a source of inspiration and delight. And for this reason they are inclined to absent themselves from religion and church. They do not want its discipline. Furthermore, they do not wish to be made aware of their shortcomings, for this awareness destroys their equanimity and enjoyment of life.

The fact is, however, that the Lord—from infinite love—reveals Himself in the Word for the sake of human happiness. The Lord seeks to lead people to true and lasting happiness through the teaching of the Word. In the family of humankind, the Lord is our Father. His love reaches out to us and, like children, we should respond affirmatively to that love. If we do not feel the love which goes forth from our spiritual Father, if we do not experience the states of happiness, peace and security which come with that love, it is because of a state of disorder within ourselves. The love is there, but we may not receive it; we may be aware only of the truth, which seems hard, cold and stern.

We know that things do not need to be like this. We are rational beings, and we can see, if we are willing, that these feelings are merely an appearance—an appearance caused by our own lack of receptivity. Recognizing this, we should not regard the Lord's commandments as hard laws that seek to deprive us of the delight of living. Nor should we regard the church as a demanding institution which seeks to confine and restrict us. The Lord seeks our real happiness, and through His church seeks to promote our real, eternal welfare. If we elevate our thought above the senses, we are able to see that if we will freely walk in the way of truth, in the path of life, we will feel the warmth and reassurance of Divine love.

In this state of elevation we will look upon the Lord as the source of all our blessings. As is said in an old hymn, we will acknowledge that "before His gifts earth's richest boons grow dim," and that "resting in Him, His peace and joy possessing, all things are ours, for we have all in Him."

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 103:1-13; Luke 15:11-32; *Heaven and Hell* 522-523