

WEEK FOUR

Humility over Shame

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
—Psalm 23:4

THE LORD LOVES EVERYONE

The Lord loves everyone. “God is love.” (1 John 4:8) He is “merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth.” (Exodus 34:6) He is “good, ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy . . . full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering.” (Psalm 86:5,15) Teachings for the New Church emphasize the Lord’s infinite love:

The Most High [God], or Inmost, is the heavenly essence of love, or Love itself. Jehovah, or the Lord’s Internal, was the pure heavenly essence of love, that is, it was Love itself. No other attributes are fitting than those of pure Love and so of pure Mercy towards the whole human race, that Mercy being such that it wills to save all people, to make them eternally happy, and to give them all that is its Own—thus out of pure Mercy and by the mighty power of love to draw towards heaven, that is, towards Itself, all who are willing to follow.

—Secrets of Heaven 1735

For love desires to communicate its own to another, and even to give from its own as much as it can. What then would the Divine Love which is infinite not give? . . . Love always wants what is good for others. Parents’

love wants what is good for their children; a groom’s or husband’s love wants what is good for his bride or wife; our love in friendship wants what is good for our friends; so what would Divine Love not want?

—Divine Providence 324

THE LORD IS NOT AT ALL SELFISH

The Lord loves us, wants to make us happy and give us good things. There is not the least bit of selfishness in Him. The Lord said that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13). The Lord came into the world to overcome the power of hell for our sake, not for His own.

While He lived in the world the Lord was engaged repeatedly in conflicts brought about by temptations, and was repeatedly victorious....The Lord, however, in all His conflicts brought about by temptations, never fought out of self-love, that is, for Himself, but for all throughout the universe. He did not fight therefore to become the greatest in heaven, for that is contrary to Divine love. He scarcely did so to become the least. He fought solely so that all others might become something and be saved, as He Himself also declares in Mark:

“The two sons of Zebedee said, Grant us to sit in Your glory, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left. Jesus said, Whoever would be great among you must be your minister, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be ministered to but to minister, and to give His life as the price of redemption for many.” (Mark 10:37, 43-45)

—Secrets of Heaven 1812

The Lord did not create us or save us because He wants glory from people.

The Lord does, it is true, demand humility, worship, thanksgiving, and much else from us, which seem like repayment, so that His gifts do not seem to be free. But the Lord does not demand those things for His own sake, for the Divine derives no glory at all from our humility, worship, or thanksgiving. It is utterly inconceivable that any self-love should exist within the Divine, causing Him to require such actions for His own sake. Rather, they are required for our sake, for if we have humility we are able to accept good from the Lord, since in that case we have been parted from self-love and its evils which stand in the way of our accepting it. Therefore the Lord desires a state of humility in us for our own sake, because the Lord can flow in with heavenly good when that state exists in him. The same applies to worship and thanksgiving.

— *Secrets of Heaven* 5957 (emphasis added)

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

Yet even though there is no selfishness at all in the Lord, the Lord still wants to us to love Him in return. This is because genuine love is always mutual or reciprocal.

Every partnership in the entirety of heaven, in all the world, and throughout the human form is the result of two parties moving into a closer relationship with each other until both parties intend the same things. . . . This is how the minds of people who deeply love each other form a partnership. It is an integral part of all love and friendship. Love wants to love and it wants to be loved.

— *True Christianity* 99

The essence of love is not loving ourselves but loving others and being united to them through love. The essence of love is also being loved by others because this is how we are united.

— *Divine Love and Wisdom* 47

People who have experienced love generally know this. How many stories are about the pain of “unrequited love”? What is more painful than to spend all your effort trying to make someone happy only to have them walk away? How often do parents suffer with loneliness when their children do not write or call? Doesn’t the Lord feel the same way when we turn away from Him? Isaiah opens his prophecy with this lament:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.”

— *Isaiah* 1:1-3

ONE-WAY LOVE

One-way love is unhealthy. Love should have give and take, and if one person does all the giving and another does all the taking, there is no balance. In heaven, people who have mutual (that is, two-way) love “experience supreme happiness in being able to communicate to others that which flows into them, and to do so from the heart” (*Secrets of Heaven* 2057). People whose love is centered on self or ego, though, want to receive happiness from others without giving it.

Self-love does not communicate anything [happy] to others, but stifles and smothers all their delight and happiness. Whatever delight flows into them from others, they take to themselves, focus on themselves, and transform into some filthy thing of their own, and prevent it spreading any further.

— *Secrets of Heaven* 2057

When we get caught up in ego we want to be loved without having to sacrifice anything for others. We want recognition and respect. We want people to respect us, take care of us and meet our needs, and think little about respecting others.

SELF-IMPORTANCE

Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, was proud of his accomplishments. He had built an empire and basked in his own greatness. In his dream he saw himself as a great, high tree in the middle of the land that grew and became strong, reaching up to the heaven, and visible to the borders of the land: “Its leaves were lovely, its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it” (Daniel 4:10-12).

Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that the dream was a warning not to think too highly of himself or to take credit for the success God had given him. Yet a year later Nebuchadnezzar had not changed at all. He was walking in his palace thinking how grand he was and what an auspicious kingdom he had built for himself. His only concern was narcissistic—that people would admire him for this magnificence. Suddenly everything

changed. He lost his kingdom and his sanity. “He was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws” (Daniel 4:33).

What really makes us human is our ability to have compassion the way God loves us. When we focus exclusively on ourselves, our own greatness or our own suffering, we become a beast. The Lord wants us to feel joy, but we can’t with a hard heart. We must be softened to be open to the Lord’s blessings, and the single way our hearts can be softened “is by trials or temptations, for trials take away the things that make up self-love and contempt for others in comparison with oneself, consequently that make up self-glory, and also hatred and revenge on account of that” (*Secrets of Heaven* 3318).

WHAT DO I THINK OF MYSELF?

As I work to overcome ego, I face a dilemma: is it good to think highly of myself? Should I feel good about myself or bad about myself? Sometimes the message seems to be that we should love ourselves first of all, and when we love ourselves and feel powerful, then others will recognize our worth and love us as well. Yet most of us recognize that people who think they are better than others and focus attention on themselves are very annoying. Superiority and egotism will not make us lovable.

We can be paralyzed by self-doubt. How can we do anything worthwhile if we doubt our capability? If I think I am completely worthless and every effort I make will hurt others and make them hate me, why would I even

try? If I hate my life, my appearance and my lack of abilities or accomplishments, how can I expect others to love me?

Psychologists have noticed that people who are successful and happy in life are not obsessed with negative feelings and self-doubt. They are not crippled by feelings of worthlessness or worried that others will dislike them. It's easy to conclude that the first step towards being happy is to accept and love yourself.

Jesus gave His disciples many positive messages:

You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

—Matthew 5:13-16

When Jesus sent His disciples out to preach, He gave them power to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, and raise the dead. He told them not to worry about what to say or what other people thought of them; He would give them words and wisdom that their enemies would not be able to contradict or resist (Luke 21:15). When the disciples returned from their first mission, they joyfully exclaimed, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name!"

SHOULD WE HATE OUR OWN LIFE?

While Jesus encouraged His disciples with positive messages, He also told a different story: the path to

greatness is humility. The route to love is self-denial. He says,

You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

—Mark 10:42-45

Jesus did not promise his disciples that people would love them. In fact, He said that everyone would hate them (Matthew 10:22). He also asks us to recognize our sins and humbly repent. It is better to pray, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* than to brag, *God, I thank You that I am better than others!* "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus even says that we must hate our own life in order to be His disciple (Luke 14:26).

HUMILITY OR SHAME?

So are we supposed to feel bad about ourselves? It can help to recognize the difference between healthy humility and debilitating shame. It is productive to recognize our limitations. It is beneficial to admit our guilt and take responsibility for our mistakes. When we feel remorse for hurting others, it can motivate us to change our habits and do better. When we realize that we can't overcome our addictions on our own and need the Lord's help, that acknowledgment can open us to the Lord, connecting us with His power (which

often comes by means of others). As we noted earlier, the Lord wants us to have this kind of humility for our sake, so that we will be willing to let Him build us up.

What is less helpful is being paralyzed with feelings of guilt. When we believe that we are intrinsically evil or broken, with no hope of changing, we have no reason to try to improve. If we believe that we are born such sinners that we deserve eternal torture in hell, and that that this is how God sees us, how can we possibly sense God's love for us?

According to the teachings of the New Church, we get emotional baggage from our ancestors, yet no one is ever condemned on account of inherited tendencies. Our family history does not define who we are or determine our destiny. We are always free to choose a better path. Since the Lord loves us, He always sees in us our greatest potential and does everything possible to help us attain it.

The Lord tells us in the New Testament that the first will be last and the last will be first, and that those who humble themselves will be lifted up, and those who lift themselves up will be brought low.

I grew up in a family that valued finding the right answers to questions. We got excellent grades in school, and interrupted our family suppers to look things up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or the unabridged *Webster's Dictionary* that was always open on its own little table. *Science Magazine* was my father's light reading, and it, too, became part of our dinner table discussions. My quest for truth led me to study New Church teachings

more deeply. When I was in theological school I thought I knew a fair bit of true doctrine, and I enjoyed arguing with teachers and fellow students about various issues. About the middle of my second year I started to realize that having the right answers or being able to defend my point of view was not always the most important thing. I realized that part of what motivated my learning was pride.

My belief that I was right and others were wrong was almost unconscious, but gradually I came to realize that almost everything I said to my teachers and fellow students was a kind of brag about my knowledge. I realized that the Lord's way was humility, not hubris, so I began to bite my tongue. It was about that time that I started dating the beautiful woman who would become my wife. Looking back, she later said that she almost wrote me off, because I talked a lot and didn't listen much. Fortunately, she was patient with me, and gradually I learned that listening to others is more rewarding than trying to coerce them to listen to me.

I have tried to learn humility over the years; it has been a challenge. I still find that when I focus on my ideas being right, I tend to dismiss others' contributions and become defensive about my own. It makes it impossible to actually enjoy the people I am with or have empathy for them. Most people don't like being with those who are full of themselves.

As I have learned to be more humble, I have also noticed that trying to be superior was a compensation for negative feelings about myself. Selfish pride doesn't mix with genuine humility, but it does feed on low

self-esteem. When I was trying so hard to be right I was terribly afraid of rejection. I thought people would mock me if I said the wrong thing, and even more if they discovered my hidden thoughts.

So sometimes I would put myself down, say something self-deprecating and turn aside compliments with a kind version of false humility. They wouldn't insult me if I insulted myself first, and they might even compliment me, just to build up my ego. But that was just the embarrassment of not being good enough to gain respect. It was not true humility.

FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF

The Lord wants us to feel good about ourselves. He wants us to love the people in our lives, to love our work, to feel that we can make a difference in the world. He longs for us to enjoy life, be happy, and notice all the good things that show up in our hearts, minds and relationships. We can do all these things without forgetting that the Lord is the source of all our blessings.

We can remember that every blessing we do is the Lord working in us and through us. When I am living the way the Lord designed, I can enjoy people around me without thinking that everything is about me. I can be deeply grateful for the gifts the Lord has given me without thinking that I am God's gift to the human race.

At the same time I can acknowledge my limitations and weaknesses, feeling confident that with the Lord's help I can overcome them. Recognizing that the bounty in our lives is from the Lord does not mean we only recognize the hurtful attitudes that come with selfish ego.

It means that we don't see our own ego as the source of those things. We let go of the assumption that it is our own greatness that makes life great, and focus humbly on the Lord's bountiful love. Then every day becomes like Christmas, where each minute we open up a new gift from God. Knowing that we don't deserve those gifts just increases our gratitude and joy.

GIVING GOD THE GLORY

After Nebuchadnezzar learned humility through losing his kingdom he became able to accept God's gifts without egotism.

And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth....

At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honor and splendor returned to me. My counselors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down.

—Daniel 4:34-37

One of the fundamental teachings of the New Church is that everything we think, feel and intend flows into our

minds from the spiritual world. Ultimately everything loving comes from God and everything heinous comes from hell, but they come into our minds and hearts in a way that we can't trace the source. God gives us the power to do many positive things, yet it may feel as if we can do them without any assistance from God at all. Yet if we don't recognize the origin of our power and goodness, we can't stay connected to it.

Think of an electric motor in a vacuum cleaner. The motor doesn't have any power of its own. It only works when it is plugged in. We *seem* to have our own power, but in actual fact, we can only work when we are "plugged in" to God.

Often, when our ego is threatened, we respond with deep—sometimes even unconscious—feelings of shame. Yet if we can remember, as Nebuchadnezzar did in the end, that everything heavenly in us is from God, we can overcome shame with genuine humility.

WEEK FIVE

Contentment over Materialism

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

My cup runs over.

—Psalm 23:5

King Nebuchadnezzar's grandson Belshazzar was on the throne of Babylon, the greatest emperor of the most extensive kingdom known to the world. His grandfather had built the empire, conquering neighboring lands, and because of his accomplishments was obsessed with his own power. Belshazzar, on the other hand, inherited all his wealth. He did not have to struggle and overcome, to work or accomplish anything. He just had to wait to inherit the kingdom. And waiting must have been easy, since he had every luxury right at his fingertips.

We don't hear stories of Belshazzar's time as king. The first day we meet him is the last day of his life. If that final day is an indication of the way he spent his time as emperor, we don't hear much of the story because there was nothing to tell; no accomplishments, no laws, no legacy.

On his last day Belshazzar was partying in his palace, feasting and drinking with a thousand upper crust guests. After probably too much wine, he called for the sacred vessels that his father had looted from the temple