

we should love God and love our neighbor.

In the Ten Commandments we find those truths expressed in a way that helps us understand what genuine love is: To love God we must believe in the one God, respect and obey Him. To love others we must especially take care not to do anything that would hurt them, such as lying, stealing, committing adultery or breaking promises, killing others or seeking to make them suffer.

WHAT TIPS THE SCALE

The Lord does not judge us by His Commandments and His Word. Rather, we judge ourselves by our own actions and choices. When we live in this world we are in equilibrium between heaven and hell. This is the balance in which our lives are weighed. The scale tips toward whatever we value the most. If we put the greatest weight on our ego, our own pleasure and pain, then the scale tips towards hell. If we put the greatest weight on love and service, offering compassion and sharing others joy, then the scale tips towards heaven.

Something inside us has to die, because selfish ego and compassionate integrity cannot coexist. If we fail to understand the judgment on us, that is, the consequences of our selfishness and addictions, then we, like Belshazzar will suffer a loss of our spiritual life. Yet if we choose, we can recognize the truths in what God has written on our wall (His Word and His Tables of Stone). These truths let us judge our ego's addictions. Our ego will perish, and we can live on and continue our journey to heaven.

WEEK SIX

Love Wins

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life; and I will dwell in
the house of the Lord forever.*

— Psalm 23:6

MANIPULATING OUR EGO

King Darius had set up his empire with three presidents and 120 governors to rule the kingdom. Daniel was one of those three presidents, and he did his job so faithfully and skillfully that the king was thinking about having him preside over the whole empire. This instilled jealousy in the other governors, and they began looking for some way to discredit Daniel. But he was so faithful at his job and of such integrity that they could find nothing to use against him. They knew that he was honest in his worship of God, so they decided to use this against him.

King Darius seems to have liked Daniel and not wanted to cause him any harm, yet he was easily manipulated by the satraps and governors who were jealous of David. People who are caught up in their own ego tend to imagine that they are good at decisions. The reality is that the bigger our ego is the more easily we are manipulated. It is common for powerful leaders to be surrounded by hypocrites and pretenders who promise anything and say what they want to hear.

What we cherish the most of all is the king within us, governing our mind as a ruler governs a country. There

are many different desires and loves that make up our minds. "The dominant love is, so to speak, their king and head; it controls them, and by using them as mediate aims keeps in view and pursues its own aim" (*True Christianity* 399).

According to the teachings for the New Church we can lead people wherever we want if we can first discover what they love most of all. If people value money above anything else, all we have to do to get them to do what we want is to convince them that we can make them wealthy (see *Secrets of Heaven* 479.3).

THE LORD GIVES US FREEDOM

The Lord leads us by means of our love, but He always does this through freedom. The Lord never forces us. It's quite different with evil spirits. They always try to control, manipulate and force us.

The Lord's presence brings freedom; one follows the other. The more the Lord is present the more free a person becomes.... That is how the Lord influences us through angels. On the other hand, the influence of hell through evil spirits brings with it a force and impulsion to dominate. Their whole intention is to subjugate us to the point of making us nothing and themselves everything. When they are everything we seem to be one of them. Though we are scarcely one of them, in their eyes we are a veritable nobody. Consequently when the Lord is freeing us from our yoke and dominion, conflict arises. But once we have been set free, that is, been regenerated, we are led by the Lord through angels so gently that no yoke or dominion exists at all, for we are being led by what is joyful and pleasing, we are being loved, and we

are being shown respect. This is what the Lord teaches in Matthew, "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:30) .

—*Secrets of Heaven* 905

For this reason the more we turn to the Lord, the more we are genuinely free. On the other hand, the bigger our ego is, the more we are vulnerable to being manipulated by evil spirits and sly people. We can see an example of this in Darius, who was easily convinced by the satraps and governors to pass a law demanding that everyone worship him. Daniel, on the other hand, was devoted to the Lord, and he was able to stand firm and not be pushed into any kind of worship that was against his own choice.

DOES PRAYER WORK?

There are two parts of our spiritual life. First, we must seek to overcome evil and do what is good as if we were doing it on our own. Second, we must acknowledge that everything good in us is from God and give Him credit for it. Our natural tendency is to separate these two. We do good things, perhaps with great effort, and then we take credit for them and want to be praised. If we give thanks to the Lord, it is for the things we didn't struggle to achieve.

Some people do not pray at all. "What difference will it make?" they ask. "If we pray for a cure for cancer or for world peace will we miraculously get them? Isn't prayer just wasting time looking for a miracle instead of doing something constructive to better the world?" In fact there is an element of truth in this point of view. People who rely solely on prayers are wasting their

time.

People going through trials usually pull back their hands and resort only to prayers, pouring them out fe- verishly. They don't realize that their prayers have no effect, but that they must struggle against the false assumptions and bad impulses that the hells introduce, and they fight that battle through the truths they believe in. . . . Some people going through trials take no action other than prayer. They don't realize that if their test was interrupted before it was fully done, they would not be ready for heaven, and so they couldn't be saved. For this reason also the prayers of people going through trials are hardly heard, for the Lord wants the final re- sult, which is our salvation. The Lord knows that final purpose, but we do not, and the Lord does not do what prayers ask for if it is contrary to His goal, which is our salvation.

—*Secrets of Heaven* 8179.2-3)

We pray for a way out of our troubles, and an end to our suffering. We want a quick fix to our problems. The Lord knows that only through suffering can we learn compassion. Through facing challenges can we rise to our full potential. Only by experiencing troubles greater than we can face on our own do we come to recognize our powerlessness and our need for the Lord. So every time that the Lord does not give us what we sincerely ask for, it is because He has something even better waiting for us when we are ready. In this case, unanswered prayers are a blessing.

Now even though prayers by themselves will not solve our problems, that doesn't mean prayers are not nec-

essary and powerful. The Lord wants us to pray, and promises that they will be answered.

You will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.

—*Jeremiah* 29:12-13

The Lord promises to answer our prayers. "I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them" (Mark 11:24). Yet how can we believe if our prayers often go unanswered? We might hear people say, "If your prayer isn't bringing the results you want it's because you don't have enough faith." Or perhaps, "If your prayer isn't working, it's because you're a bad person. Maybe God is punishing you."

There is a little truth to both these statements, of course. If you don't believe in God at all, then how could praying make any difference? And if you want something that's bad, then of course God cannot give it to you because all that He does is good. Yet, you don't have to be a perfect person nor a firm believer in order for prayer to work. The Lord honors the prayer of the one who says, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). He hears the person who says, "Lord I believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). And to those who say, "Lord increase our faith!" the Lord says, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). The smallest amount of faith is enough.

PRAYING FOR SPIRITUAL AND HEAVENLY THINGS

One reason that we may feel our prayers are unanswered is that we sometimes pray for worldly things, when the Lord wants to give us heavenly things. In fact, New Church teachings tell us that the Lord answers our prayers "If our prayer springs from love and faith, and if it is only spiritual and heavenly things that we pray for and pray about" (*Secrets of Heaven* 2535). The Lord will give us blessings of health and wealth when He can, in the next life if not in this one. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all the other things will be added to you" (Matthew 6: 25-35).

NOTICING THE ANSWERS

One of the reasons we may feel that our prayers are not answered is that we simply aren't paying attention to the answers. New Church teachings say that when we pray for spiritual and heavenly things, the answer "is experienced in prayer as a feeling of hope, consolation, or a kind of inner joy" (*Secrets of Heaven* 2535). There is always an answer, even though it may be subtle:

The hells fight against us, and the Lord for us; to every false thought the hells inject, there is an answer from the Divine. The false messages from the hells are injected and flow into our outward or worldly self; but the answer from the Divine flows into our inner or spiritual self. The spiritual influence, which is from the Divine, does not come to our perception so much as the false messages, and it does not stir specific thoughts, so much as change our overall perspective, and in such a way that we scarcely notice it except as hope and then comfort.

—*Secrets of Heaven* 8159.3 (emphasis added)

FACING THE LIONS

When King David was a young man guarding his father's sheep and a lion or bear came and took one of the lambs, David killed it and rescued the lamb from its mouth (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Later in life David described people who were cruel to him as lions: "My soul is among lions; I lie among the sons of men who are set on fire, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword" (Psalm 57:2-4). "The wicked . . . go astray . . . speaking lies. Their poison is like the poison of a serpent. . . . Break their teeth in their mouth, O God! Break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!" (Psalm 58:4-6).

The Lord warns us that we may be challenged by people who use slander and trickery to tear us down, the kind of people David described as lions. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (Matthew 5:11). "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake" (Luke 6: 22). The Lord says we are blessed when people attack us this way because bad people have always opposed and attacked the Lord's prophets and the Lord himself.

We may not be aware that attacks on us come also from evil spirits.

A spiritual trial within us is evil spirits fighting with angels who are with us. We usually feel this struggle in our conscience. . . . We should know about this combat that angels continually protect us and turn away the

bad things which evil spirits try to do to us. They even protect what is false and evil in us, for they know very well where our falsities and evils come from, namely, from evil spirits and demons. We do not produce anything false and evil from ourselves, but it is the evil spirits with us who produce it, and at the same time make us believe that we do it on our own. That is how wicked they are. And what is more, at the moment when they are infusing and compelling this belief, they accuse and condemn us, as I can confirm from many experiences.

—Secrets of Heaven 761

Our ego cannot save us from our ego, any more than Darius could save Daniel from the law that Darius himself had signed. The ultimate answer to ego is turning humbly to the Lord and recognizing His power to change our lives.

THE STRUGGLE WITH DESPAIR

Often when we are going through struggles we feel abandoned and hopeless. It seems as if everything is going wrong, as if nobody cares. There is no solution to our difficulties, no light at the end of the tunnel. As there is nothing left to do, we resort to prayer. Maybe God can help. Yet often in the most difficult times our prayers seem to go unanswered.

People going through struggles who have no active life other than prayers do not realize that if the trials were interrupted before being fully completed, they would not be ready for heaven, and so they could not be saved. For this reason also the prayers of those going through trials are seldom listened to, for the Lord wants the goal, which is our salvation.

—Secrets of Heaven 8179

Even Jesus went through struggles like this. He prayed shortly before His crucifixion that He would not have to go through the difficult trial He faced. Later, when on the cross, it seemed that His prayer was unanswered. “My God, My God, why have You abandoned me?” He cried. We pray for help, but help doesn’t seem to come in time. Daniel prayed three times a day, but he got thrown in the lion’s den anyway. Often our struggles reach the point that we have no hope.

Each of us has limited power, and when the test or temptation stretches us to the absolute limit of our power we cannot stand up to anything further, and we start to slip. At that point, however, that is, when we are on the slope and start to slip, the Lord raises us and so delivers us from despair.

—Secrets of Heaven 8165

THE END OF DESPAIR

There are reasons why the Lord lets us reach the point of despair.

Through despair people are led in an effective and perceptible way to acknowledge that nothing true or good comes from themselves, and to acknowledge that what is their own has caused them to be damned but that with the Lord’s help they are rescued from damnation, with salvation entering in through what is true and good. Despair also exists to the end that life’s happiness which the Lord imparts may be felt; for when people come out of that state of despair they are like those who have been condemned to death but then freed from prison.

—Secrets of Heaven 6144

Spiritual struggles are a contest between ego and love. The only way love can win is when we surrender our ego. When we give up trying to do things ourselves, we can first discover our need for the Lord. When we give up trying to be superior to others, we can let go of contempt and experience compassion. When we experience the solitary misery that ego drives us to, we can find new happiness in simple opportunities to connect with others and feel gratitude for the Lord's presence.

When Daniel was in a hopeless situation the Lord helped him and protected him. The Lord helped Darius, too, because through the struggle in the night he became willing to give up his need for others to adore him, he grew in his love for Daniel, and he learned of the Lord's power and love. Our hope and prayer is that in each of our spiritual struggles, our ego can diminish, our humility and compassion can increase, and love can come out on top.