

The Grace Of Our Lord Jesus Christ

By the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen"
(Revelation 22:21).

At the end of many New Church services the minister's final words are the benediction, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." Other than this you would probably hear only rare reference to the word "grace" within the New Church.

The terms, *grace*, *mercy*, and *forgiveness* are interconnected, but not the same. One of the appealing ideas associated with the Lord's message in the New Testament is the concept of Divine forgiveness. We don't have to live a perfect life to make it to heaven, and indeed we are incapable of being perfect. We all fall far short of perfection. Even the most loving and wise angel doesn't remotely approach perfection. We are not perfect because our understanding is always limited and our motivations are never completely pure. Sometimes these qualities have only faint effects on our actions and sometimes we, as human beings, knowingly, and with intention choose to think, say, and do evil things. In the words of Revelation, all that we do is written in our book of life. By the measure of perfect truth, then each of our book of life would keep us from heaven. But the Lord isn't just perfect truth. He is perfect love and this love lifts all to heaven, as it were overcoming the evil loves and false ideas that we have attached to our lives.

The Lord as King governs each and all things in the universe from Divine truth; and as Priest, from Divine good. Divine truth is the very order of His universal kingdom, all the laws of which are truths, or eternal verities Divine good is the very essential of order, all things of which are of mercy. Both of these are predicated of the Lord. If Divine truth alone were His, no mortal could be saved, for truths condemn every one to hell; but Divine good, which is of mercy, uplifts from hell to heaven (Arcana Caelestia 1728).

It is very important that each of us thinks of ourselves as being capable of learning what is true and good and becoming better and better able to do what is truly useful. Sometimes a person's thoughts

can so focus on his flaws and ignorance that he feels incapable of being useful or is encouraged into feeling irresponsible about even trying to become a better person. But if we overcome these false ideas, and become better and better at living a truly useful life, it is important for us to know and acknowledge that we will always need the Lord's help.

Every one believes at the present day that the evil loves and false ideas in a person are entirely separated and abolished during regeneration, so that when he becomes regenerate, nothing of this evil or falsity remains, but he is clean and righteous, like one washed and purified with water. This notion is, however, utterly false; for not a single evil love or false idea can be so shaken off as to be abolished; but whatever has been hereditarily derived from infancy, and acquired by act and deed, remains; so that a person, notwithstanding his being regenerate, is nothing but evil and falsity, as is shown in a living way to souls after death. The truth of this may be sufficiently manifest from the consideration, that there is nothing of good and nothing of truth in a person except from the Lord, and that all evil and falsity are the person's from those things that are his own; and that a person, spirit, and even angel, if left in the least to himself, would rush of himself into hell; wherefore also it is said in the Word that heaven is not pure. This is acknowledged by angels, and he who does not acknowledge it cannot be among angels. It is the Lord's mercy alone that frees them, and even draws them out of hell and keeps them from rushing thither of themselves.

That they are kept by the Lord from rushing into hell, is clearly perceived by the angels, and even in a measure by good spirits. Evil spirits however, like people, do not believe this; but it has often been shown them (Arcana Caelestia 868:1).

This passage states that it is the Lord's mercy that frees us. There are actually three distinct concepts of how the Lord's forgiveness is received by a person. The first is a dangerous falsity that has led people away from following the Lord and trying to live a good life. This is the belief that a person is forgiven and receives the benefits of the Lord's mercy purely by means of faith or an acknowledgment of Christ's death on the cross. This idea of forgiveness and mercy, together with other supporting ideas, has led

some to assert that how a person lives his life makes no difference, as is spoken of in the following passages:

"From this one error [that truth is the essential of the church, and so essential that truth, which people call faith, has power to save without the good which is of charity], very many other errors have been derived, which have infected not only doctrine, but also life; as for instance that no matter how a person lives, provided he has faith he is saved; that even the most wicked are received into heaven if in the hour of death they make profession of such things as are of faith; and that every one can be received into heaven merely from grace, whatever his life has been. In consequence of holding this doctrine they at last do not know what charity is, nor do they care for it; and finally they do not believe there is such a thing, nor consequently that there is a heaven or a hell (Arcana Caelestia 4925:2).

"[A false principle of religion] is the doctrinal idea of a church which acknowledges faith alone as a principle, as that a person is justified by faith alone, that then all sins are wiped away from him, that he may be saved by faith alone even in the last hour of his life, that salvation is merely admission into heaven through grace, ... These and the like are the special things belonging to the principle of faith alone. But if the church would acknowledge as its principle the life of faith, it would acknowledge charity toward the neighbor and love to the Lord, consequently the works of charity and of love, and then all these special things would fall to pieces; and instead of justification it would acknowledge regeneration" (Arcana Caelestia 4721).

Both of these passages mention the word "grace" and it might be concluded from its association with a clearly false idea, that it perhaps makes one with a false idea of forgiveness and salvation, but this is not the case.

The Writings of the New Church distinguish a fundamental difference between grace and mercy that has to do with the recognition a person has of his or her need for the Lord's help. Those people whose approach to the Lord is more dominated by what they know and acknowledge to be true are called spiritual. Those people approach to the Lord is more dominated by what they love and acknowledge to be good are called heavenly, or "celestial."

Those who, at the core of their life, are led by their understanding (or I believe by simple obedience) acknowledge in their thoughts that they are not perfect and that they need the Lord's help. They nevertheless are not so aware of their faults and flaws other than intellectually. Consequently their humility is affected by the fact that they sense that they see their faults and flaws with their own intellectual ability.

A person can acknowledge, from his own reflection that he has trouble telling the truth and the whole truth about a situation, can acknowledge that this evil, feel remorse for this fault, and still have it all be significantly a matter of thought. Such a person may have a genuine humility in his approach to the Lord, but it is limited. Such a person knows that he needs the Lord's help in fighting this evil tendency, knows that he needs the Lord's forgiveness for the times that he has lied to himself and others, and knows that as he fights this tendency he will receive the Lord's help and forgiveness. This state of mind seeks what the Writings would call the Lord's grace.

But if a person, at the core of his life, is led by a love of what is good, he will sense the presence of evil loves and false ideas in his life with a horrifying and saddening clarity. He will sense at a very deep level of his life that he is absolutely dependent on the Lord's help. His humility before the Lord will be from his heart and far, far surpass that of the person who is led more by his understanding. Such people are the ones that the Writings state really understand the Lord's mercy.

This distinction is indicated in the following passages: "The mercy of the Lord involves and looks to the salvation of the human race; and so does His grace. In the Word however a distinction is made between mercy and grace, a distinction which depends in fact on the difference in those who are their recipients. Mercy applies to those who are heavenly, but grace to those who are spiritual, for heavenly people acknowledge nothing other than mercy, while spiritual people acknowledge hardly anything other than grace. Heavenly people do not know that grace is, while the spiritual scarcely know what mercy is, for they make mercy and grace to be one and the same. The reason for the difference springs from each one's humility. People in whom there is humility of heart plead for the

Lord's mercy, but those in whom there is humility of mind seek His grace. Or if the latter do plead for mercy they do so in a state of temptation or with the lips only and not with the heart" (Arcana Caelestia 598:2).

"People governed by an affection for truth are not able to humble themselves sufficiently so as to acknowledge from the heart that all things are attributable to mercy; and this being so, instead of mercy they speak of grace. Indeed the less affection for truth is in them, the less humility there is within their speaking of grace. On the other hand the more affection for good exists with someone the more humility there is within his speaking of mercy" (Arcana Caelestia 2423).

The Holy Supper is the act of worship that most clearly reflects our need for the Lord's help. In it we turn to the Lord, seeking to receive more of His life within our own. The bread represents the Lord's love that we need within our own hearts, fundamentally changing what we care about and make most important. The wine represents the Lord's wisdom that we need in our thoughts, fundamentally changing how we see ourselves, others, and the life we are to lead. Each of us, if we are to approach the Holy Supper worthily, need to be actively acknowledging that we have specific faults and flaws that harm us, others, and the uses we seek to achieve. We need to acknowledge these evil loves and false ideas to ourselves and to the Lord. We are to pray for His help in fighting their influence and we are to be doing the best we can to change the quality of the thoughts, words, and deeds that have been tainted by them in the past.

To begin with this effort will be more a matter of intellectual acknowledgment and we will in reality be seeking the Lord's grace. As the miracle of regeneration occurs we will come more and more to recognize and acknowledge on a progressively deeper level that we can not be the person we want to be or accomplish the things we hope to without the Lord's constant presence and help. From an ever greater humility we will turn to the Lord for this help. More and more we will truly know what His mercy is.

We cannot instantly change who we are. In fact, by ourselves, we cannot change at all. With the Lord's help we can gradually become better and better human beings. Where ever we are in spiritual growth, may we turn to the Lord, acknowledging as best we can our need for His help. May we do our part to receive His life, His love and wisdom more and more within our lives. And from this we will become more and more useful human beings, all who our lives touch will be blessed by this growing ability, and we ourselves will grow in fulfillment and blessedness.

AMEN.

Lessons: Revelation 22:12-21, Arcana Caelestia 598:2, Arcana Caelestia 242