

Free To Choose

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Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? He who swears by his own hurt and does not change.

Who is this Psalm talking about? Who "swears by his own hurt and does not change?" Could that mean you? In another translation of the Word, this is one who "keeps his oath, even when it hurts." Have you ever done that? There are several things we are told in the 15th Psalm that are necessary if we are to "abide in the tabernacle of the Lord"--we read them in our Lesson. Some are positive (like doing what is righteous) and some negative (like not accepting bribes against the innocent), but the real operator in this list of suggestions is our *freedom* to follow them or not. We are free to choose..*Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?* The person who chooses, in complete freedom, to do or not do the things in Psalm 15, that's who.

So now we need to talk about freedom: the freedom of self-compulsion (does this sound like a contradiction in terms?). No one comes to abide in the Lord's tabernacle by accident, or without any effort. We get there by forming a habit of choosing good over evil, every time we have a choice, and then by allowing that habit to take us to heaven. It is not complicated. The habit is self-compulsion, and without it we are "among the more useless" (as we read in our lesson). Let's examine this idea a little further.

In two substantial passages of the *Arcana Coelestia*, nn. 1937 and 1947 (as well as in *The Divine Providence*), we find a detailed description of the mechanism of self-compulsion. It is not complicated, and as we shall see, it is really a function of the freedom in which it is practiced. But it does involve what at first may seem a paradox--so we must look at it very carefully--because self-compulsion, in general terms, means "submitting oneself beneath the controlling power of Divine good and truth." Now where is the freedom in this, you may well ask.

We read about two kinds of people this morning--passive and active, you might call them. One kind remains passive in the face of the fact that all good comes from the Lord. Knowing this, they sit idly by, assuming all things are beyond their control, so no effort is necessary, or even feasible. They end up abandoning themselves to evil, because

it, too, is beyond their control. "They are among the more useless;" we read this morning, "for they allow themselves to be led just as much by evil as by good." (AC 1937:2) Now that's an interesting distinction--not really evil, just *useless*.

The more active--"those who have practiced self-compulsion and set themselves against falsity and evil"--cannot be led by evil spirits, and are among the blessed. Why? Because although they may begin this habit of choosing good over evil *as if it were their own to do*, they eventually come to realize that their effort originates in the Lord, and they give Him the credit. This is the apparent paradox (one of the biggest ideas in all of New Church doctrine): that what we do and are are not from ourselves but from the origins of these qualities in the spiritual world. But knowing this, we must nonetheless act as if they were our own. This is the "as-of-self," a sense of spiritual identity which comes only from practice--lots of practice. It can become a habit, if we want it to. We call it the heavenly proprium; the "new person." This is who is "among the blessed." This is freedom in its highest order.

To further develop this idea of paradox, it is also true that people who are learning self compulsion do not immediately see this as freedom at all, but as an actual constraint on their free will. This is because the freedom is given in their own level of existence--the natural world--and it is often associated with the pain of the choice itself. Compare this with having a surgical procedure, an occasional unfortunate necessity in our modern world: is this not done with your "informed consent," for the sake of your good health? But do you revel in the freedom of that choice, while you are recovering from its painful repercussions? What about the hard choices in temptations? The same thing applies.

Freedom is necessary for the formation of the new will, which is your conscience, transformed by the habit of self-compulsion--tempered and formed by the pain of temptations. It is a *simple* process, but no one ever said it was easy. But true or not, this mechanism can seem so grave, so bleak and so cheerless. Is there no positive image of this process we can carry with us in our lives? Of course there is. The Lord is Creator, and Redeemer, and Savior, but He has also called us His *friends*. We must never forget this distinction. He has installed a wonderful mechanism in all this self-compulsion, because He loves us as friends. And that mechanism can make it the best and most delightful of things to do. Let me read you another portion of AC 1937:

Whatever a man does from love appears to him as freedom. But in this freedom when the man is compelling himself to resist what is evil and false and to do what is good there is heavenly love which the Lord then insinuates and through which He creates the person's proprium; and therefore the Lord wills that it should appear to the person to be his own although it is not his. This proprium which man during his bodily life thus receives through what is apparently compulsory is filled by the Lord in the other life with **limitless forms of delight and happiness**. Such persons are also by degrees enlightened to see that their self-compulsion has not commenced at all in themselves but that even the smallest of all the impulses of their will has been received from the Lord. (*Arcana Coelestia* 1937:6)

"*Limitless forms of delight and happiness.*" Now that's for me! How about you? The new proprium--it seems your own, it is your love (your life)--but it is from the Lord. Continually loving to do the Lord's bidding.. the life belonging to heavenly love.. compelling yourself to do the things that lead to that life. That's the *good* news about self-compulsion. And the even better news is that the more we do it, the easier it gets--like riding a bicycle--until finally (in heaven) there is no pain at all, only the increasing happiness of tending our garden of heavenly delights.

That is the freedom to choose. It is the Lord who does the good (He is good itself), but it is you who enjoy it as your own.

Man is only the receiving vessel of all good (or evil, for that matter), but in his participation in this good or evil, it becomes his own--his new will and proprium. His life.

Now we have seen the clear teachings on self-compulsion. And we have seen that once the process is begun, it is like any other habit--it is perfected with repeated use. But how does one begin the process? How can we get from a starting point of evil, to a habit of choosing good? This is no small question. In order to make room for good, we must first clean house of the evils in our lives. The Jewish mystics knew of this problem. They said that in order to create the world, the Lord had first to withdraw Himself, to make a space to fill with His *emanations*. This is the *zimzum* [creation] of the Kabbalah - the process of clearing out before the filling in--a fundamental necessity for the creation of the universe, or the salvation of a person.

In similar terms, the Writings tell us that in order for the Lord to flow in to our interiors, we must first make Him a space by clearing out some evils. *All* our evils? Instantaneous salvation? Regeneration in a blinding flash? Not in the New Church. But the beauty is that even a tiny little space will do at first. Remains alone will do the trick, if we are willing to do the *daily work* of building that habit of choosing good. The rules are there: the 10 Commandments, the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church, in our Psalm today, and in all of the Word.

You make the space, and then the Lord will immediately flow in. But not until. This is the "narrow gate" that leads to life, and as we have seen, there is nothing negative about this image. With the habit of self-compulsion, this narrow gate is the gate to "limitless forms of delight and happiness," and "wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction." Take your pick--you're free to choose.

So now we have decided that self-compulsion is not so bad after all, and that the freedom of the "narrow gate" sure beats the slavery of the hells. But where do we begin? At the only starting point there is: the Writings tell us again and again that to get rid of evils we simply must not do them--must not participate in them, must not entertain them, consider them, or invite them to live in our homes--we must *shun* them when they come our way. Shun--now that's a funny old word, and we use it all the time. But what does it really mean? It can mean a lot of things, but most important is what it does *not* mean. It does not mean conquer. Once in a blue moon we may be called upon to conquer an evil, or at least to fight it, but most often we are asked only to *run away* from it. The hells are powerful! Who says you have to conquer them? To clear out a space for the Lord to flow in to, we must only run away from evils and thereby refuse to entertain them. This will do the trick, until the Lord has infilled us with enough Divine good and truth to do a little battle. Until then, just run away. It works. In terms of the Covenant, this is your part of the job--the shunning of evils--and then the Lord will do His part--the new will. Passive won't work in this formula--only active will, but we have seen that it is not as hard as some people believe. Shunning evils and choosing good--this is swimming *with* the current in the stream of Providence. You can do it. You are free to choose.

We are told that beginners work this system a little differently than the experts do. Children, and adults new to the good-over-evil habit, (and all of us who forget ourselves from time-to-time) often do good for the most pragmatic of reasons, such as the fear of hell, or even for recognition, or

personal gain. We're tempted to see evil in these motivations we call *mediate good*, because we know that the "experts," choose good only from the love of heaven and the Lord. But no one is born an expert, and we all must start somewhere, so if you ever find yourself doing good from some strange and less-than-ideal motivation, just keep moving forward, and work on your habit. You'll be an expert someday. Regeneration is a process, right? And it lasts forever. And with every effort toward good and away from evil, the evils in our lives are steadily removed--not deleted or erased, in some magical way, but *removed*--pushed to the edge of our consciousness, until they can finally disappear from view. And as long as we keep up the habit, they'll stay there, and behave themselves. It is up to us. We are free to choose.

Now as we have seen, the self-compulsion to choose good is really not compulsion at all. It is the highest form of freedom. And freedom misinterpreted as license is not freedom at all--it is the slavery of the hells; slavery to the love of self and the delights of the world. This love, directed as it is away from the Lord, takes freedom away. This is a very important distinction; to many people this seems the other way around.

Self-compulsion is the *good news* of regeneration: it is the freedom to choose good over evil--the freedom to remove evils from our lives and thereby clear out a space for the Lord to flow in. And it is freedom from the *entanglements* of evil: Did you ever tell a lie, only to find that another lie was necessary to cover that one, and on and on until you couldn't remember what you had told to whom? These are the entanglements of evil. Did you ever compromise your standards just a little, only to find that it was necessary to do this again and again, until the compromise became the norm, and you didn't like it but you didn't really know what to do? These are the entanglements of evil. Have you ever wished you had just held your ground, and done the right thing *first*, and saved all that grief? "*Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? He who swears to his own hurt and does not change.*" No entanglements for that person. He is free. Evil is a trap, and leaves no choice, but the choice of good over evil is freedom of the highest order. It is living the life of heaven, in the here and now. And it is really not so hard--you are free to choose.

There is contentment and peace in following the Lord. It is found in the simplicity of the new will. And as we read this morning, "this proprium which a person receives in this manner during his lifetime by means, as it seems, of compulsion, the Lord replenishes in the next life with

limitless forms of delight and happiness. The freedom to choose is never having to look back. "He who does these things shall never be moved." Amen

The lessons: Psalm 15, Matthew 7: 13-14, Arcana Coelestia n. 1937