

Guilt And Thankfulness

By the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your loving kindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51:1-2

Which do you think is the clearest opposite to gratitude and thankfulness: a person feeling like his life is relatively empty of blessings, or a person feeling a heavy load of guilt for evils intentions, hateful, destructive, or self-centered thoughts, and for actual evils committed? If we are thankful when we recognize that we have received something good in our lives then perhaps worse than having nothing is feeling weighed down with guilt.

A sense of guilt can cripple a person. A woman can be so conscious of something she did when she was seventeen that it haunts the rest of her life. She can have the recurring thought that all of the troubles she faces in her life are a form of retribution that she justly deserves because of what she did. She can be desperately afraid that people will somehow recognize how she has been tainted by what she has done. She tenses up and feels frantic if a subject of conversation comes up that might be related to her teenage choice. Perhaps she doesn't believe that her husband could ever really love her if he knew, so there is a wall or uncrossable boundary that tends to divide them from a real trust and confidence in each other.

Counselors, psychologists, even friends have sometimes become aware of the impact that guilt can have on a person like this woman. They can have a sense that it ruins lives. At times the response of people has been to try to convince the woman that the problem would disappear if she just viewed her seventeen year-old behavior as inevitable and caused by circumstances. At times, in the name of helping, there can be a tendency to view concepts of good and evil as antiquated, to assert that we are always doing the best we can given our background, and that any sense of guilt is wrong.

But is a sense of guilt also something that we can be grateful for? Psalm 51 speaks both of a clear sense of guilt and a need to be cleansed and it also of the Lord "restoring the joy of ... salvation" and of the writer singing aloud the Lord's righteousness and his mouth showing forth His praise. Does this Psalm sound like it speaks of a beaten down state of mind? It conveys a powerful trust in the Lord and confidence in His help. It speaks of the power of the Lord to bring about change and to cleanse a person of his iniquity. It is powerfully hopeful and yet it also conveys a clear sense of guilt.

Recognition of evil within oneself doesn't have to be crippling. It can be a powerful stimulant to change. Consider the man who recognizes that his patterns of action and speech at work have had a destructive effect on the morale of the people he works with. Perhaps he has been quick to find fault in others work, always pointing out the flaws and incompleteness of their efforts. At a staff meeting when the group has come up with desirable solution, he cannot seem to resist pointing out that they really should have been able to recognize this solution and implement months earlier than they did. Always his eyes and comments go to what he sees could of and should have been done better. Perhaps a blow-up during a meeting and a stern reprimand by a supervisor opens his eyes to the destructive effect his communication has had on the creativity and sense of delight of his work team. He may suddenly put together the recollected comments of his co-workers that has him realize that they have dreaded coming to work and especially meetings in which they would come under his critical scrutiny. How does he respond to this recognition. Does he justify his past behavior and try to convince others that he was right in the first place? Does he feel so incompetent and incapable that he seriously considers quitting, and in extreme cases, even taking his own life? Or does he recognize that he wants to become a different person, one whose words and actions don't have the same effect on his co-workers? If he recognizes how important their sense of capability and their sense of accomplishment is, he can be strongly motivated to change. He can acknowledge to the Lord that he has been guilty of destructive behavior and can pray for the daily strength and commitment to change. In a very profound sense he can end up being deeply grateful for the blow-up at the meeting and the stern words of his supervisor. He can be thankful to see that he needs to and wants to change.

A recognition of evil within oneself can be a powerful stimulant to change, like adrenalin within the human body that helps us focus, to react more quickly, and with greater effect. A recognition of evil within oneself can also be deeply crippling, bringing spiritual darkness, and a strong sense of deserving terrible punishment. Why can it evoke such opposite responses?

We cannot understand the nature of our minds unless we know and acknowledge that our thoughts and intentions are formed by the influence of two competing forces. The Writings of the New Church describe it with these words:

With every person there are spirits from hell and angels from heaven. It is by means of hell that a person is in his own evil, while it is by means of angels from heaven that a person is in good from the Lord; from this he is in a spiritual equilibrium, that is, in freedom. (Heaven and Hell 599)

Each experience that we have, both those that happen to us from events and people who touch our lives, and the inner mental experiences that occur in our conscious thought, can be given very different sets of meaning. Consider the event in the Lord's life when the people of a Samaritan village refused to host Him and His disciples. What did this mean? The disciples, James and John, responded to this rejection with a clear sense of judgment that the people of that village were terribly evil and deserved punishment. They asked, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" (Luke 9:54) They viewed this situation as a clear matter of right and wrong. They had a powerful sense that Jesus was so important and His cause so valuable that this slight should not go unavenged. They concluded that perhaps the whole village, man, woman, and child should be obliterated into a smoking ruin as a warning to others.

I would not have wanted to be in their sandals when Jesus responded to their righteous judgment. "He turned and rebuked them, and said. 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.'" (Luke 9:55-56) It is recorded simply that they went to another village. Both Jesus and the disciples knew that they had been refused by the Samaritan village. One response to this event was evoked in James and John, "Destroy them!" and a very different one was evoked in Jesus, "Let's try the next village."

Jesus sternly reprimanded James and John for their suggestion. Their call for punishment evoked in Him the response of "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of." We have all experienced the quality of this spirit. We have experienced when we have been righteously indignant at someone else's behavior and we have experienced it if we have ever felt terribly guilty and deserving of punishment for something we have done. The quality of this spirit is the quality of hell. The Lord and the angels never desire any punishment for anyone. It is a quality of hell that evil spirits love to both inspire, entice, lead us to desire, think, and choose evil and destructive things but also to accuse us of having broken Divine law, to condemn us, and to delight in inflicting punishment. James and John had accepted this second spirit of hell in their call for the fiery destruction of the Samaritan village and so were strongly rebuked by Jesus.

The adult mind is capable of being a spiritual battlefield between forces of good and evil. Many people apparently do not experience this battle. For some it is because they are so superficial in their thoughts and concerns. Their lives are so dominated by worldly and self-centered motives that the only battles they face are between their desire for short-term gratification of their inclinations and a fear of the consequences that may come if they're caught.

For those who are consciously trying with a part of their mind to follow the Lord and to live a good and useful life, a very different level of battle can occur. These battles are the battles of spiritual temptation. They are a battle between good and evil within our thoughts and motivations. The Lord has told us:

There are evil spirits who in times of temptations call up a person's false ideas and evil loves, and in fact call forth from his memory whatever he has thought and done from early childhood. Evil spirits do this with a skill and malignity so great as to be indescribable. But the angels with the person draw out his good loves and true ideas, and thus defend him. This combat is what is felt and perceived by the person, causing the pain and remorse of conscience. (Arcana Coelestia 751)

Unhealthy guilt arises when the evil spirits with us work to undermine any sense of hope we might have in salvation and the possibility of spiritual progress in our own lives. They would love to point out all of our failures, our backsliding, and our imperfections. They would love to so bog us down with a consciousness of sin that we feel hopeless and

helpless. They want us to give up. They want us to conclude that the Lord has rejected us and views us with stern condemnation. They want to attribute all that goes wrong in our lives to the Lord, all punishment, all sadness.

If they can succeed in their efforts we will be deeply troubled by unhealthy guilt and will be terribly distanced from the Lord.

Another tactic that the evil spirits can use is to get us to feel like we've done all we need to do when we merely recognize and acknowledge faults and evils within our selves, but do little or nothing to change. A person can almost rejoice in a sense of guilt even though it goes no further than an acknowledgment that one isn't perfect. This also can induce spiritual apathy in a person's life. Consider the implication of the following passage from the Writings of the New Church:

Cannot anyone understand, from the reason given him, that the mere lip-confession of being a sinner is not repentance, or the recounting of various particulars in regard to it, as a hypocrite can do? For what is easier for a person when he is in trouble and agony, than to utter sighs and groans from his lungs and lips, and also to beat his breast and make himself guilty of all sins, and still not be conscious of any sin in himself? Do the diabolical horde who then occupy his loves, depart along with his sighs? Do they not rather hiss at those things, and remain in him as before, as in their own house? From this it is clear that such repentance is not what is meant in the Word; but repentance from evil works. (True Christian Religion 529)

The Lord want us to recognize that there are parts of our lives that need to be changed. There are motivations that we sense, thoughts in our minds, and words and actions that we do that are destructive to the welfare of others, to the goals we seek, and to ourselves. He wants us to recognize them, acknowledge them, and know with a strong sense of hope and trust that He can bring about a change in us if we cooperate with Him. A person who wants to follow the Lord can be grateful for seeing a significant fault or flaw that previously he had been unconscious of. He need not be crippled by guilt over this. He need not listen to the spirits who like James and John righteously call for a fiery punishment for his evil. Instead he can be strengthened to the turn to the Lord, to seek His help, and to work toward living a better life in the future. For him a recognition of evil and sin helps him lead a better life. May we pray for this spirit within our own lives. AMEN.

*Lessons: Psalms 51:1-14, Luke 9:51-56, Arcana Caelestia 751, Arcana
Caelestia 6324*