

Piety

A Sermon by Rev. Grant R. Schnarr

It seems dangerous to do a sermon on piety, such a bad connotation to it. It's interesting that in the book *The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*, after laying out some of the basic foundations of what life is about, we come to the chapter on Piety.

The first thing that the Writings say is that piety, in the way we think about it today, is not a good thing. If you talk about being in the life of worship, going to church, acting holy and devout, and yet not really having that feeling within, then that is a bad thing. So often when we talk about someone being pious, that's what we mean; we mean that on the outside are acting very devout and holy, but do they really mean it on the inside?

The first thing the Writings say is, when we talk about piety there's something good about a pious kind of life, but when it's removed from a spiritual life, removed from charity, that's when it becomes something bad, hypocritical, a holier-than-thou attitude. We are going to explore the different kinds of piety, what's good and what's bad about piety.

What is piety? It is a sense of holiness that one may feel. The Writings say, prayer and humility are a part of piety. The Writings say that speaking in a just way, speaking about the Lord in your life, talking with other people is part of piety. Also there's a feeling of a renunciation of the world. A lot of people think that's a pious way of life, and the Writings talk about that too, what that means. And also, going to church, the Writings talk about that as being part of this piety that we often think of in our life.

One of the first things the Writings talk about in the idea of piety is this idea of renouncing the world. Sometimes we can think to ourselves, if we could get off alone and study the Word as hard as we could and really commune with God, that somehow we'll find Him in our life, put down the world, get away from people, be by ourselves, let God come into us. But the problem with that is that when we remove ourselves from the world, the Lord can't come to us. It is true that the Lord does come to us from within, within our hearts, but only to the degree that we give without, in our life with our neighbor. And so, to the degree that we stop giving, to the degree that we stop being useful in society, to the

degree that we stop sharing with other people, becoming intimate with them, learning to risk, if we stop doing those things, the Lord cannot come into us. He cannot come into us. He comes into us through our life in the world. So often in our lives, we don't go join monasteries or become nuns, or something like that; we wouldn't do that. But so often in our lives we do isolate ourselves, we do renounce the world in so many bad ways.

Maybe some people have fears, fears about meeting other people, about going out into the street. They go to work, they hardly communicate with anyone, and then they go home and they work on their pet projects in their house. Perhaps it's reading. They read every day in their own little world. Perhaps they have a hobby--perhaps it's art--everyday they work on their art, just by themselves. They work on the computer all the time, playing with that, or sound equipment, recording something, music. But it's always by themselves in their own little world. And that is, in a form, a renunciation of the world because that's what we make our lives.

If we spend half our life locked up in our house, trying to find some kind of happiness with ourselves alone, are we wasting our time? To a degree, there's a time for that, there's a time to be alone, a time to commune with the Lord. There's a time for art, there's time for music, there's a time for following what we want to do on our own, but if we find that that's all we are doing with our life, we've got to ask ourselves why. Is it so different than locking ourselves in a monastery, being alone? Because the Lord can't come to us through there. We can have a superficial feeling of peace, but that peace comes because no one is affecting us. No good is coming to us and no bad. There's just us. How can we regenerate? How can we change ourselves in that kind of mode? We can't see what we're like unless we're dealing with people, to see how we are in front of people, and make those changes.

We don't even have to do that. Some people, they go through life, and they get hurt a few times in relationships, and then maybe subconsciously they just decide to renounce the world in that degree, not get involved, not wanting to be hurt any more, not willing to risk by becoming intimate with someone, and they take a relationship so far with someone they meet, but then something comes up in them, makes them hold back. They don't want to be hurt any more. And so they don't get involved, and they go on from one relationship to another, bringing

people in and then pushing them away. That is a form of renunciation of the world.

Yet hurt does come. Hurt comes with love. It does. And I think we have to accept that in our lives. It's just the way of life. This world has happiness and sadness, but if you never give, you'll never know love. You'll never know the joy of love. And if you're not willing to risk hurt, then you're never going to have happiness either. You'll be lukewarm. As it says in the book of Revelation, "Neither cold nor hot, and so I spew you out of my mouth." We've got to take the risk. It's really true, that saying, "It is better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all."

Renunciation of the world--there is something there--but it's a renunciation of the world, the Writings say, while we're in the world. Think about that: renouncing the world while we're in the world. And what the Writings mean is not being overly concerned with worldly things, not making our job the most important thing in our life, or status the most important thing, or how much money we have the most important thing in our life, or how popular we are the most important thing, or our relation with the opposite sex the most important thing in our life, all those earthly things. To renounce them as being the most important thing in our life, and to see that there is something higher, our relationship with the Lord. That's the most important thing in our life. We've got to see that in our life. And when we do begin to see that, renounce the world in that sense, lay these things down and seek after the treasures of heaven, a different world opens up to us, a whole different set of values, a whole different set of thoughts, and you can see the difference in the way that you think. It's not shallow; it's not, what am I going to wear today? What party am I go to tonight? What am I going to have for dinner, go to bed? Every it's the same thing. No.

It's a deeper life with all kinds of implications, insights, understandings, and as we deal with people, with these higher principles involved, thinking about our relationship with the Lord, all different sorts of joys take place in our heart and in our life, in our dealing with people. Yes, it's a risk, and sometimes we're hurt, we're hurt bad, but that's part of life, and it's worth it because the joy is so great. It's what the Lord wants for us.

So, in a sense there is a renunciation of the world that should take place. But it's a renunciation of our preeminent concerns with the world. It doesn't mean hiding from people. It doesn't mean hiding from

ourselves. It means being active in the world, caring about things more important than the world.

Another thing that the Writings talk about is speaking piously. And we can see in our dealings with people--I'm sure we've all come across times when we've hear someone who is really just talking about things in such a high and pompous way that we really wonder where they're coming from. And at that time, maybe what's really going on is we can become angry or upset with them because they are being pious but their life isn't in accord with the piety that they're showing. We've found ourselves doing that ourselves at times in our life. And the Writings point out that that's what's wrong. If we speak and act piously but inside are really not changing or growing or having any love, that's wrong, it's empty.

I can remember in theological school, having a certain discussion with theological school students, and you've got to understand that any theological school anywhere, in any different church, these guys are put away in their ivory tower for four years to discuss all this philosophy, apart from life completely, and so they tend to be so idealistic and so unrealistic about life, especially in the theological school that's at the college in the Academy of the New Church. There are college buildings there, and there's a commons where all the people there gather together during a break, and up above is the theological school with a window that overlooks the commons. I remember in college we'd look up there and see the theological students in their coats and ties discussing and looking down on the peons below, and they had their wingtip shoes on, and all the rest. I remember coming out of my office at one point--I guess it was my second year of theological school--and coming across some of the theologs having a discussion, and they were discussing who they would have into their house for dinner. Would they have a smoker into their house? I quickly put my cigarette out. Would they have a smoker in their house? And they talked about that for a while, then someone asked, would they have a hunter? Would they have a hunter into their house? Also my father had taken me hunting in the mountains of Pennsylvania when I was a child. I listened to this, and then it was, would they have a divorcee over for dinner, into their house? It went on like that until I said to them, "Didn't the Lord come to heal those who were sick? Who did the Lord spend His time with, the scribes and Pharisees? He spent His time with, not only people who were pretty normal, but with the prostitutes, with the tax collectors, with

the sinners. And you're telling me you won't even have a smoker in your house?"

One of the persons who was protesting most said, "Well, what the Lord was talking about there had a deeper meaning to it. We can't take it too literally."

I just walked away and realized, this guy is in the clouds.

You know, the wonderful thing is, you get out of theological school and that whole structure that they built up in you about what life's like, as soon as you're out in the field, comes crashing down, and you have to start all over again. That theologian today is a very down to earth minister.

That's an example of how you can become so idealistic about life, removed from any kind of love in your heart, that it's piety without charity. It's dead. It's meaningless. It's judgmental. It's wrong.

Think about the Lord and how He was with those people. If He was pious in His speaking but did not have charity in His heart, He would have passed Matthew right by. He never would have called Matthew because Matthew was a tax collector, but would have had His nose up in the air as He walked by. Think about all the times people came to Him to ask for help, even those who had real problems in their life, like Mary Magdalene who came to wash His feet with her tears. If He had said, "Get away from Me. You're a sinner; I can't talk to you. I can't deal with you."

Or that woman by the well, look at how the Lord dealt with her, the Samaritan woman. She had had two or three husbands, she was now living with somebody, and He didn't come right at her with it, "I won't take water from you because of your life." He gently, so gently, asked her questions so that she would evaluate her life. And even when she said, "I have no husband," He said, "Yeah, you're right. The guy you're with now isn't your husband." He didn't make any kind of accusation. He simply stated the facts in a very gentle and loving way.

Even that woman taken in adultery, He asked her a question, and said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He had piety. He did. He had piety in His life, but He had charity too. He had love. And that's what made it right.

Let's turn it around for a second. Sometimes there are things that we should speak and act and talk about from a pious point of view, the Writings say, that are good.

It is good to talk about the Lord in our life. It is so bad to talk about the Lord only on Sunday, and then live your life completely different all the rest of the days but it's hypocritical. That's piety without charity. But there is a time for talking about spiritual things in our life so that other people can learn from them. There's a time for saying no when discussions come up that shouldn't be taking place. Talk about the idea of sacrilegious or dirty jokes--and we all are affected by those--the difference is, in those jokes are we perpetuating them? Are we bringing them into our hearts? Are we memorizing those jokes so that we can go on to tell our brother-in law, or our wife or our partner, or our friends at work? Are we perpetuating that verbal pornography? That really does do damage to the way we think about the opposite sex.

Or even more so, in a joke of sacrilege about the Lord. Some people, and I know we've all met them, get so involved in using the Lord's name and then some disgusting phrase in the next word, putting the two together, "Jesus this" or "Jesus that." They can hear the Lord inside saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And it is important, right down on that level not to perpetuate those things.

We have a dorm in the high school of the Academy of the New Church in Bryn Athyn where I went to school. I remember one kid came who was really what you would call a really hard guy. He had this leather jacket and everything. He was mean, and if he told you to do something, you'd do it. You know how it is in high school, everybody respects the real hard guy. They are the ones that are in. And he was a bad kid, real bad. In fact, he was a minister's son. I guess he was rebelling against his father at that time. It was interesting. A lot of people had respect. One time some people were working together, some kids, and they were doing something, and this one kid joked around and made some tremendously terrible joke about the Lord. And this guy grabbed him and said, "Don't you ever, ever do that again, and in front of me. Don't you say that about the Lord." This guy was shocked and I was amazed, I couldn't believe it that this guy, the way he appeared, and yet he cared so much about the Lord and about the important things in life, about not taking His name in vain, and about not hurting Him. You know, the high school, the whole vocabulary improved by 15 to 20 percent after that.

There's something there. There's something about standing up and saying, no.

Sometimes in our lives we can't do that. Let's be realistic. We may work with people who are always like that. It's their whole life. That's what they're devoted to, devoted to telling these jokes, to making fun of religious things, and to say no to them to try to stop them openly, doesn't work. It will just cause bad feelings.

But there is a way, in our hearts, to put up that wall so that it won't hurt us or affect us, or at least to make the effect less than it could be. If we find ourselves bringing it in, memorizing it, delighting in it, taking it to our brother-in-law, whatever, we are doing something wrong. We're perpetuating evil. We are. And it is a big deal. Very important.

The Writings also talk about the idea of piety having to do with prayer and humility, and we've talked a lot about it, the two of these before. The key teaching here is the Lord can only flow into a humble heart, the Writings say. The Lord can only come into us and help us and affect us if we let Him in, if we call for Him, if we ask Him to come in, if we recognize the need that we have for Him in our lives. And you can see that, if you are so full of yourself, if you think you're so great, if you build your whole life round you and trust completely in you, how can the Lord come in? How can He make you concerned about other people? How can He make you see that you're making a mess of your life? And you know, it's funny, at times in our life we think we've got it together, then we make some terrible mistake and life comes crashing down, and that's when we so often turn to the Lord and say, "Yes, I need you. I really blew it. I can't do it on my own." It's providential that the Lord lets that happen so that we can turn to Him, so we can see that we do need the Lord in our lives.

I've had people come in here and we kneel down for prayer. We kneel down so we can show our humility. I've had people come in here and say, "I'm not going to get down on my knees. I can't get on my knees." Well, they've got a problem. They've got a big problem if they can't humble themselves enough before the Lord so that He can flow into their lives. No, you don't have to get down on your knees, but if you've got a problem putting yourself down at least mentally on your knees for the Lord, then you're full of yourself. And what's wrong with that? You're missing out on a whole lot of happiness. The Lord can only flow in to a humble heart.

The last thing the Writings talk about is the idea of going to church. The first thing they say is that you can go to church every week, you can sing with the greatest voice, you can pray, you can think about it, you can discuss all these things, you can be very humble, but if you walk out the door and you go away and it's gone and it's out of your life, it doesn't do you any good whatsoever. In fact, real worship, the Writings say, real worship isn't that kind of prayer and learning and hearing sermons; real worship is the life of love.

When you bring your love into life and help people and care about them and try to be useful, you're worshiping the Lord 24 hours a day, not consciously, but right in your life. Your life is a form of worship. That's so important. We've all seen it with some of the associates that we've had. I've heard people tell me over and over again, "Yeah, my friends, it's ridiculous, they live a wild life for five or six days. Saturday night they blow it away and have fun. Sunday they're in church looking good, dressed up, very pious, atoning for their sins." It doesn't work that way. The first thing the Writings say about going to church--they don't talk about all the great things, the wonderful things, why you should be there--the first thing they say is, "Look, if you're just going to go to church to look good so you don't feel bad any more, and then walk out the door and forget it, then why bother? Don't even go."

Let's turn it around for a second. The Writings go on to say that there are so many benefits from being here, being with other people. One of those is, how do we learn the truth? We can learn it on our own, but look at the different perspective that we have by listening to someone's rendition of a different verse in the Word, by discussing these things with other people. We get a different perspective. We're not just blinding ourselves. We can see truth, we learn. Some people take the idea that, "I'll get enough truth this week to hold me through till next week, really concentrate on what I learned today. Next week I'll be fed something else, that'll keep me for a week." There's something to that. We learn truth--we hope we do--and that will help us in our life.

Last week Grant Waller was talking about some people who were hypnotized and how he saw that they were beyond their control, and how in life so much of the time we do things and we don't know why we do them. We might be under controls of our environment and this and that, and it's hopeless. The Word was given to us to shed light on our lives so we can see where that is taking place, so that we can see where we are blindly hurting ourselves. The Word was given to us so

that we can see when our environment is affecting us in a bad way, so that we can make the changes. The Word is spiritual light. And what does that light do? It enlightens our life, to be able to see our life, to choose a different path, to not walk down that path that will lead us into the pits, to not fall into those traps we set up for ourselves. But the Word can lead us to the path that is higher than ourselves, and happiness. That's why we have the Word, and we can learn the truth here Sundays.

Another reason besides that is also a form for fellowship, a form for taking these truths and putting them into life. At work, in your job, there are different expectations. You are trying to get the job done, and everybody talks about that, or if you are a doctor or a nurse, you are dealing with patients all the time. Different occupations have different things. If you are with your friends at night, the idea is to have fun, and that's fine. That's what you are supposed to do. But this is the one place that the idea is to love your neighbor. Openly, that's what we are trying to do, to understand God and to love our neighbor. And there is nowhere else that we can practice that as much in our lives than right here in this cafe among our friends who believe the same things we do, or at least are seeking after the same things that we are seeking after. It's a wonderful form for growth, form for friendship, form for fellowship and brotherhood in a common cause.