



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

An Introduction to the Swedenborgian Way of Life

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A Course Consisting of Weekly Reflections on Swedenborg's Theology

Course Outline

WEEK I: INTRODUCTION

WEEK II: GOD IMAGE:

WEEK III: HEAVEN AND HELL

WEEK IV: DOCTRINE OF LIVING I-- FAITH:

WEEK V: DOCTRINE OF LIVING II-CHARITY:

WEEK VI: DOCTRINE OF LIVING III-USE:

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WEEK X: THE DEPTHS OF THE SELF

WEEK VI: THE DOCTRINE OF LIVING - USES

For Swedenborg, love acting through truth in good deeds, deeds of love and service to our fellows is the goal of spirituality. The deeds of loving service are called “uses.” The word means being useful. And being useful means serving our fellows. But uses are also all deeds of love that we express intelligently. Uses can be making a painting, or playing music, or knitting a blanket or sweater, or playing sports. Of course uses are jobs that we love to do.

Swedenborg has a foot in both Protestant and Catholic belief systems. Like Catholics, Swedenborg wants us to do good works, or deeds of charity. He wants us to identify shortcoming in our character and overcome them. He wants us to perform our jobs honestly. He wants us to be good to other people and ourselves. But like Protestants, he does not want us to feel that we deserve heaven because we have earned it by our good works. He doesn’t want us to take credit for our good deeds.

In order for a good deed to be spiritually good, we don’t want to gain anything by doing it. We don’t do good so that we can brag of it. We don’t do good with the intention of getting rich and famous. Spiritual good is doing good because it is good, and we love what is good. We do good for its own sake. There is no thought of gain of any kind—reputation, wealth, credit, to get paid back. Good is done because it is simply the right thing to do.

His solution to this problem takes us into the depths of Swedenborgian mysticism. The solution to this problem of how to do good deeds without taking credit for them is the concept, “as if of self.” We do good as if we were doing it by our own power. All the while, we acknowledge that God gives us the power to do the good. So it really isn’t ourselves doing the good, but God, acting through us, that does the good. So we can’t take credit for it. Swedenborg comes us with a metaphor that explains how this doctrine works. It is like a servant who gets dirty from his or her work and wants to be cleaned. So the servant goes to the master and asks to be cleaned. The master says, “Here is water, soap, and a towel—wash yourself.” The key elements are all in this story. First, and most important, it is the master who gives the water and soap. So the power to cleanse him or herself is from the master. But the servant has to do the actual work of cleaning themselves. So God gives us the power to find spiritual life, but we have to act “as if” we are doing it all ourselves.

Now we are coming to the mystical Swedenborg. For even though it looks like we are doing good and turning away from bad things, it is really God-in-us that is doing it all. Think about your heartbeat. Can you stop it or start it whenever you want to? When you get injured and your body heals itself,—can you start or stop your body from healing? Of course we can cooperate with the healing process, such as cleaning a wound and putting a bandage on it. But once we do that, our body heals itself without any willpower of our own. Or does it? Isn’t there a life-force in us that makes our bodies do all these and countless

other miraculous chemical reactions? Isn't God in our souls and giving life to us? Without this life-force in us, without God in us, we would fall down dead in an instant.

This is the case with good deeds, also. God is good. Everything good is God-given. Everything good is from the Source of all Good. When we have good-will in our hearts, we have God in our hearts. And it is the God in our hearts that is doing the good. So when we do good, a real union takes place between God and us. God and we together are doing good.

There is Biblical support for this view of good works. A very clear statement of this doctrine is in Philippians 2:12-13:

“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”¹

The Gospel of John, the most mystical Gospel, also has a clear statement of this doctrine, “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (15:4-5).”²

Some people don't like this idea. They can't imagine that the hard work that they do, and the accomplishments that they achieve are not the product of their own effort. We want to pride ourselves in what we do. But, in fact, it is really our ego that wants all the credit for the good we do.

Really, this way of viewing good deeds is how we love God. When we love God, we thank God for giving us the opportunity and power to join with God in the creation of beauty in the world.

It is damaging for us to take credit for things we do for the sake of our salvation. Hidden within our credit-taking there are evil attitudes of which we are unaware at the time: denial that God flows in and works in us; confidence in our own power in regard to salvation; faith in ourselves and not in God; [the delusion that] we justify and save ourselves by our own strength; contempt for divine grace and mercy; rejection of reformation and regeneration by divine means; and especially disregard for the merit and justice of the Lord God our Savior, which we then claim as our own. In our taking credit there is also a continual focus on our own reward and perception of it as our first and last goal, a stifling and an extinction of love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, and total ignorance and unawareness of the pleasure involved in heavenly love (which takes no credit), while all we feel is our love for ourselves (*True Christian Religion* n. 439).

If we believe that everything truly good comes from the Lord, we do not take credit for what we do. The more developed this faith becomes in us, the more the Lord takes away our fantasies about getting credit for what we have done. In this state we can practice goodwill

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible: copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Ibid.

abundantly without a fear of taking credit. Eventually we sense the spiritual pleasure in goodwill. Then we become averse to taking credit because doing so is damaging to our life. It is easy for the Lord to erase people's idea that they deserve credit, provided those people attain goodwill primarily through working justly and faithfully in the position, business, or line of work they are in and with the people with whom they interact (*True Christian Religion* n. 442).