



Our Choice?

A Sermon by the Rev. George F. Dole

Delivered at the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine

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Readings:

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.¹

Revelation 20:7-15

When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of

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fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.²

from Emanuel Swedenborg, Divine Providence § 191

“The idea that our own prudence is nothing runs directly counter to the way things seem, and therefore directly counter to most people’s belief. Since this is the case, if people believe on the basis of appearances that human prudence accounts for everything, the only way to convince them is with reasoning based on deeper investigation, reasoning that must be drawn from the realm of causes. The outward appearance is an effect, and causes show where this effect comes from. In this prologue, I need to say something about common belief on the subject. What the church teaches is contrary to the appearance; namely, it teaches that love and faith do not come from us but from God, as do wisdom and intelligence, prudence, and in general everything that is good and true. When these principles are accepted, we must also accept the fact that our own prudence is nothing but only seems to be something. The only basis of prudence is intelligence and wisdom, and these two qualities come only from our discernment and consequent thought about what is true and good. What I have just said is accepted and believed by people who acknowledge divine providence and not by people who acknowledge only human prudence. One thing or the other must be true—either what the church teaches, that all wisdom and prudence come from God, or what the world teaches, that all wisdom and prudence come from us. Is there any other way to resolve the contradiction than to accept the church’s teaching as true and to

² Ibid.

see what the world teaches as the appearance? The church finds support for its belief in the Word, while the world finds support for its belief in our self-importance. The Word comes from God, and self-importance comes from us. Because prudence is from God and not from us, when Christians are at worship they pray that God may guide their thoughts, plans, and deeds, adding that this is because they cannot do so on their own. Then too, when they see people doing good, they say that God has led them to do this, and so on. Could we say this if we did not believe it at some deeper level? That deeper level of belief comes from heaven. But when we think privately and gather arguments in favor of human prudence, we can believe the opposite, which comes from this world. However, the inner belief wins out for people who at heart acknowledge God, while the outer belief wins for people who do not acknowledge God at heart, no matter what they may say.”³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. Trans. George F. Dole. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008. Print.

In the Christian church, a common issue is the perceived tension between law and grace. Advocates of the law say that we are saved by obeying the commandments. Advocates of grace say that we are saved by the mercy of the Lord. Advocates of the law say that theories of grace lead to human irresponsibility, and advocates of grace say that theories of the law lead to self-righteousness. Both parties can quote Scripture in abundance because Scripture says both things. Paul in the letter to the Romans says "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of god, they are now justified by his grace as a gift . . . For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (Romans 2:23-4, 28), while it says in the Epistle of James, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).

This is not an exclusively religious or theological concern. About the time I was in college, a rather unorthodox scholar named Pitrim A. Sorokin set himself the task of investigating the possibility of altruism. It is possible for anyone to do anything that is truly unselfish? Obviously, we can do things for other people at real cost to ourselves, but to what extent are we doing it to appease our own consciences, so that we can feel good about ourselves? Sorokin's work never gained much currency, and I was then and am now familiar with it only from a few third-hand descriptions of it. My recollection is that he did conclude that altruism was possible, but I have no knowledge of the basis of that conclusion.

There can be no doubt whatever about the insistence of our own theology we ourselves must make the choice between heaven and hell. "Everyone is predestined to heaven," (Divine Providence 329) in the very real sense that we are all designed and created for heaven; but not everyone fulfills that destiny. This means that we are capable of becoming unselfish, because "being in heaven" is essentially having heavenly attitudes. It is caring about each other. Each one of us knows from personal experience and from the observation of others that we do have ideals and that we do all too often fail to live up to them. We seem quite sure that we are capable of being better than we are. That is, we seem to know ourselves to be responsible; and in fact, our whole societal fabric is based on this kind of assumption. Our courts of law hold us

responsible for our words and our actions; and the only way we can try to claim any real exemption from that responsibility is to plead insanity.

Our first Scripture reading gives one of the most vivid images of this sense of responsibility.

"This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live"

(Deuteronomy 30:19). The theme carries over into the first chapter of the next book of the Bible, Joshua, with its injunctions to "Be strong and courageous" in the first chapter (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9) and the covenant ceremony at its close, where Joshua says to the assembled people, "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord " (Joshua 24:15).

The other side of the picture, the side that focuses on grace, also has ample biblical support.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell record Jesus words about how hard it is for the rich to enter heaven, the disciples' question as to who, then, can be saved, and the answer that what is impossible for us is possible for God (Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27, Luke 18:27). We are told in John that "No one can receive anything unless it is given from heaven" (John 3:27). or we might simply turn to the Lord's words at the close of Matthew's Gospel, "All power is given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). That does not leave much for us.

There is certainly a tension between these two views, between "law" on one hand and "grace" on the other. The most common way it is expressed in our theology is in one very simply little phrase, "as if of ourselves"-my search program tells me that it occurs four hundred and seventy-two times in the works that Swedenborg himself published. We are supposed to do what is good and refrain from what is evil "as if of ourselves," and yet are to acknowledge that this is "from the Lord."

It is put very bluntly the first time the phrase occurs: "There is no way that we can do what is good and turn to the Lord on our own. This must be done by angels; and the angels themselves

cannot do it, only the Lord. Still, we can do it as if of ourselves" (Secrets of Heaven 233). Then in Divine Love and Wisdom (§425), we find the nub of the problem expressed:

Since our whole sense is that we are thinking truth on our own and doing what is good on our own, though, it is quite clear that we ought to think what is true as if on our own and do what is good as if on our own. That is, if we do not believe this then we either do not think what is true or do what is good and therefore have no religion, or we think what is true and do what is good on our own and thereby claim as our own what is actually Divine.

Our third lesson puts the same tension together in a slightly different way. "Our own prudence is nothing. It only seems to be something, as it should" (Divine Providence 191). The passage goes on, as we have heard, to state quite unequivocally that we really do not know where our thoughts and feelings are coming from. The Lord does know, and is overseeing all the inner processes that are beyond both our perception and our comprehension.

Where does this leave us? Perhaps the simplest way of expressing it would be to say that it calls us to do the best we can from day to day and to stop pretending that we really know what is going on. We are finite creatures, and no matter how much we learn, our understanding will never get any closer to infinity. Or to put it another way, we never, in this life or the next, perceive things as they really, really are. In doctrinal terms, we never get beyond "appearances" (see especially Secrets of Heaven 3207:3).

This means that in spiritual matters, we can never "tell it like it is." We can only tell it the way we see it, and to claim that we are telling it like it is is to claim for ourselves what is Divine. If we stop there, though, we can use it as a license for irresponsibility, to forget about thinking what is true and doing what is good, leaving us with no religion at all. It is marvelously freeing to realize that we can do our very best to think what is true and do what is good and leave everything else up to the Lord.

Another way of saying much the same thing is to say that we can learn not to take ourselves with such ultimate seriousness. There was a sports columnist some years ago who advised the manager of the Red Sox to take a particular player out into the open, show him the sun, and explain very clearly and carefully to the ballplayer that he actually was not the center of the solar system. Physically, of course, we do perceive the world as stretching out around us on all sides, so we do perceive ourselves as the center of the universe. We need to get over that illusion.

For me, Helen Keller answered the question as concisely and precisely as anyone when she wrote, "There is joy in self-forgetfulness." This offers an answer to Sorokin's dilemma. It says that we are capable of altruism because we are capable of enjoying what we do without thinking about our enjoyment. Further, because we have some sensitivity to each other's feelings, we can find pleasure in the pleasure of others.

Certainly one trap that must be avoided at all costs is that doing good is not really good if we find pleasure in it. That would condemn us to an eternity of masochism. In a way, the very possibility of altruism rests in the fact that the higher and purer the good, the deeper and greater the joy. When we do things "of ourselves," that is, when we are thinking about ourselves in what we do, we open the door to anxiety, envy, resentment, and ultimately despair. When we relax and do what we should because it is there to do and it is good to do it, when we focus on the doing and not our ourselves, we take a step from slavery into freedom.

We do live "as if," and that is O.K. Our prudence does seem to matter, and it should. But the angel on our shoulder is constantly whispering, "There is joy in self-forgetfulness. Don't take yourself so seriously." We would do well to listen.

Amen.