

To Excuse or to Forgive?

By Rev. Edwin Capon

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Bible Reading

The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these was the whole earth populated.

And Noah became a man of the ground, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in the middle of his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both of their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done unto him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." And he said, "Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem; and Canaan will be his slave. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan will be his slave." (*Genesis 9:18–27*)

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you judge, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure that you get.

Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the beam in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the beam is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot, and turn and tear you to pieces. (*Matthew 7:1–6*)

Reading from Swedenborg

"He saw his father's nakedness" means he noticed the errors and perversities. This can be seen from the meaning of "nakedness" [in this context] as evil and perversity. Ham's noticing his father's nakedness, that is, his errors and perversities, describes people with whom faith is separated from charity. Such people see nothing but errors and perversities in other people. But those who have faith together with charity are different. They notice the good things, and if they do see evils and falsities they excuse them, and if possible endeavor to correct them with that person, as is said here of Shem and Japheth.

People who have no charity are involved in selfish love, and therefore in hatred toward anyone who does not show favor to themselves. As a result, they see only what is evil in the neighbor; or if they see anything good, they either think of it as nothing or place a bad interpretation on it. It is entirely different

with those who have charity. And from the presence or absence of charity these two kinds of people are distinguished from each other. Especially when those who have no charity enter the next life, a feeling of hatred is obvious in every single thing. They wish to scrutinize everyone, and indeed to pass judgment on them. Their one desire is to discover what is evil in them, all the time having it in mind to condemn, punish, and torment. But those who have charity hardly see the evil in other people. Instead, they notice everything good and true in them, and place a good interpretation on anything that is evil and false. The angels are like this; it is something they have from the Lord, who bends everything evil into good.

“He pointed it out to his two brothers” means he mocked. This follows from what is said above; for with people who have no charity, there is continual contempt for others, continual ridicule, and the exposing of their errors at every opportunity. (*Arcana Coelestia* #1079, 1080)

Sermon

Is not this the fast that I choose: . . . when you see the naked, to cover them? (Isaiah 58:6, 7)

It is sometimes said that Jesus’ ethical demands are too exacting, that they are impossible of fulfillment in this imperfect world. Possibly so. Perhaps they are more in the nature of ideal goals toward which to work as we mature in the faith, rather than unyielding demands to which we must fully respond at once. After all, we do not become fully regenerate all at once. I would like to talk about one of these unequivocal expectations this morning. It is not one of the easiest to abide by.

In the Sermon on the Mount we read these words: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you judge, you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure that you get.” Yet don’t we go around judging other people all the time?

Someone once said that America’s favorite indoor sport is rationalization. I’m inclined to think that America’s favorite indoor sport is talking about other people—and not necessarily with charity. In spite of the Lord’s warning, in spite of the prayer that we be forgiven as we forgive others, judging goes on all the time. But it is a sport that can be harmful not only to the one who is judged, but also to the one who judges. The teachings of our church make at least three important points about this.

Point number one is stated most simply in Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia*, #2284.3: “We are never allowed to judge others on the quality of their spiritual life, for the Lord alone knows this.” In other words, we cannot know whether another person is fundamentally good or fundamentally evil. This also means that we cannot always be sure of another person’s motivations, whether that person is acting from anger, or fear, or jealousy, or ignorance, or from some combination of these.

Swedenborg’s assertion was made long before Freud and the psychoanalytic movement, but I am prepared to believe he was correct. I can appreciate that a modern-day therapist may sometimes know us better than we know ourselves; but that does not necessarily mean that the therapist knows our core. A defense in depth may be very deep. Swedenborg writes:

No one but the Lord can judge people according to their actions. For all acts proceed from final causes, which lie deeply concealed within. A person is judged according to these causes, and no one knows them except the Lord. Therefore, judgment belongs to the Lord alone. (*Arcana Coelestia* #8620)

I am not denying that we may have some appreciation of the motives of others—at least, of the more surface ones. But I take very seriously the teaching that all our judgments in the matter of the underlying will of another person are more or less superficial.

Denying ourselves the right to make this kind of judgment does not prohibit us from making the kinds of assessment of other people that day-to-day living requires. The employer must judge the suitability of a job applicant for a particular job. A person considering marriage ought to judge the likely compatibility of the potential spouse. A member of a jury may have to decide upon the credibility of a witness. But such judgments do not require an estimate of a person's spiritual state. There is no condemnation implied, no necessary assertion of the person's inferiority as a human being. Indeed, the person doing the judging may wisely say, "I could be wrong."

My second and third points are derived from Swedenborg's interpretation of the inner meaning of our reading from Genesis. In interpreting this passage, Swedenborg focuses on the contrast between Ham on the one side and Shem and Japheth on the other. When Ham saw his father exposed, his first reaction was to go and tell someone else. When Shem and Japheth heard about it, their first reaction was to cover up that which was exposed.

Swedenborg's interpretation of Ham's action is that he acted from self-centered love rather than from any concern for the other

person—in this case his father. He writes: Where there is no charity, there is selfish love, and therefore hatred toward all who do not show favor to themselves. As a result, such people see only what is evil in the neighbor; or if they see anything good, they either think of it as nothing, or place a bad interpretation on it.... For with people who have no charity there is continual contempt for others, continual ridicule, and the exposing of their errors at every opportunity. (*Arcana Coelestia* #1079, 1080)

Ham did not need to speak to his brothers. He could have acted as they did. It is almost as if he were saying, "Come see what I've seen." It is reminiscent of the gossip saying, "Did you hear what Lucy Jones did?"

The Apostle Paul said that Christians were not like that. Remember the sentence in his great hymn to love, "Love rejoices not in iniquity" (*1 Corinthians 13:6*). The Jerusalem Bible translates it, "Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins." This is the opposite of the kind of judgment that Ham's behavior represents.

My second point, then, is that judging is wrong because so often it is done from uncharitable motives. When tempted to talk about, judge, and condemn other people, we would do well to ask ourselves why are we doing this. What is our motivation? Are we taking delight in seeing another person exposed?

My third point is illustrated by the behavior of Shem and Japheth. In this story they represent those who have charity. About such people we read, "Those who have charity hardly see the evil in other people. Instead, they notice everything good and true in them, and place a good interpretation on anything that is evil and false" (*Arcana Coelestia* #1079). And in another place, "Those who are true members of the church. . . . intend nothing but good toward their neighbor; and if they see anything evil in another person, they excuse it" (*Arcana Coelestia* #6655).

Isn't it more Christian and more loving to try to put the best possible interpretation on what someone else does and says? To defend them when they are absent? This, I think, is the deeper intent of the Isaiah passage I quoted as my text: "Is not this the fast that I choose:... when you see the naked, to cover them?" In Genesis, it was the descendants of Ham that were cursed.

We all have those times when we could be like Ham . . . or we could like his brothers, Shem and Japheth.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, it is so easy to see the wrong of others; so hard to see our own wrongs. We can clearly see the speck in our brother's or sister's eye, but we cannot see the beam in our own. Help us, we pray, to focus on our own needs for improvement instead of the ways others around us need to improve. And when we find those areas where we can use improvement, inspire us to move forward toward a higher ideal for our lives. Help us to appreciate the good in those around us, instead of focusing on their shortcomings. The faults of others sometimes seem much more obvious than their excellencies. Yet you and your angels are always seeing the good in us—and we pray for that angelic vision to see the good in those around us. Help us not only to see that good, but to bring it out in the people we know and love, so that we may be building the heavenly community here on earth. Amen.

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