

An Eternal Perspective

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

Determining what is really important, what is really valuable, is very difficult for most of us. The media bombards us with how vital it is for us to look fashionable, smell fragrant, and present the right image with the car we drive. Our responsibilities to earn a living, manage a budget, and a thousand other daily chores demand a tremendous amount of time and energy, focusing our attention on mundane chores.

Even when we have time to sit back and think, how do we decide what is of value? Many immediate concerns are important—we have to eat regularly and take care of a host of other daily functions. But if our perspective is locked onto today or tomorrow, our priorities are probably slightly out of alignment—which will dramatically affect how we prioritize our lives, how we determine what is important. Just as we cannot effectively steer a car if we only stare directly over hood, neglecting to look into the distance, so if we make decisions by only looking at what is immediately before our faces we may lose track of where we should be going.

How long term should we think? For the education of children it may be tens of years. For saving for retirement it may be forty or more years. For the future of our families it may be several generations. But to define what is genuinely most important our time frame must go on forever.

It is only from an eternal perspective that we can determine what has real value. Anything less is to court unhappiness. For if our goals are primarily success, financial security, good health—we will be disappointed because we will lose all of these. Perhaps we can become rich. Perhaps we can lead active healthy lives. But in a hundred or two hundred years they won't do us much good!

Only when we view ourselves and our priorities in light of eternity do we have the possibility of knowing what is truly important. As the teachings of the New Church ask, “What should a person have more at heart than his life to eternity?” (*Arcana Coelestia* 794e)

The Lord constantly attempts to focus our thinking in this direction. In the Scriptures we are encouraged to believe our lives will go on. The ancient psalmists said: “You will show me the path of life...at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:10); “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity....It is like the dew of Hermon descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forevermore” (Psalm 133).

While the Lord was on earth, He stressed the importance of the spirit over the body. “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28). “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven....For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). The Lord also told the thief on the next cross that he would be with

Him in paradise soon. He did so because death cannot sever the relationship the Lord has established with His people. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25). "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19).

We are created with both body and spirit. The body serves us while we are in this world but being composed of earthly matter it will deteriorate. Death is merely a transition--the putting off of that body. It does not harm or change the spirit. And it is the spirit of the person that is real, that lasts forever (*Arcana Coelestia* 1999:3; *Heaven and Hell* 39e). The spirit is born in this life. It takes its basic form here. And then it is freed to develop to eternity in the spiritual world. Life is created and endures.

This makes sense. What kind of God would create the human race, allowing each person to experience some of the joys of life, only to destroy it after a few short years? If God can create life, cannot He not also sustain it? Jesus said: "What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:9-11). The initial gift of life is great, but if it ends, it has really amounted to nothing. For life to be truly a good gift, it must endure.

This fundamental truth is stressed in the New Church: "Every person is created that he may live forever" (*Divine Providence* 324). They further pose the question, "Can [the Divine love] give and take away again? Would not this be giving what is about to perish?" (*Divine Providence* 324:2). The Lord does not give what is about to perish. He created every person to live forever, and all His providence looks to this eternal end. As a result, the teachings of the New Church state: "the goods, satisfactions, and happiness given and provided for a person by the Divine are eternal and have no end; and so are true blessings" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10409:3).

Why is it important that true blessings have no end? Because "what endures to eternity is; but what has an end, relatively is not" (*Arcana Coelestia* 10409:3; P 59). What comes to an end ceases to exist. It can no longer affect others or be of use. Only what remains has lasting value. We see this in education. The facts one learns in school are relatively unimportant. They are memorized and then most of the details forgotten, hopefully after the exam! But they were not useless for they were tools to help in the formation of the mind: the thinking process. It is the ability to think that is important and lasting; facts, relatively, are not.

It is in the same sense that the things of this world are relatively unimportant. Our life is eternal, but our time here is not. What happens to us and how we respond are like the facts that aid in the formation of our spirit. Our life here comes to an end, but our real life, the life that has grown and developed, continues. In this sense, earthly life is preparation for eternal life. What we start here, the direction in which we have begun, then continues forever.

This is why a person should fundamentally have at heart his life to eternity. Recognizing that we will live to eternity affects all our priorities, our values. Our definition of quality or importance should be based not on 10 or 50 years, but on 100 or 10,000.

The value of such a perspective can be seen in mundane things, such as our jobs. If we look at our work, be it repairing engines, washing dishes, or selling furniture, we can think that it has

little value. If we work solely for the sake of money or power we will always have emptiness within, perhaps felt in a mild dissatisfaction. But if we view our work as a way to touch the lives of others and for us to learn and practice becoming useful peoples, then how we perform it will affect us forever. In this sense *what* we do is not as important as *how* we do it. It does not really matter if all our work is heralded with honors or raises, because what we gain from it is an attitude of service that prepares us for eternity. Our job satisfaction can increase if we do not look at the short-term gains but can see the value of serving the neighbor.

An eternal perspective is equally vital in our attitudes towards marriage. If we view it only in terms of romance or the joy of living with another, arguments or times when the inner love is not felt could be taken as a signal the relationship should be ended. Indeed, if marriage is thought of as simply something of this world then most couples will not struggle through the difficulties to reap the rewards of joy later on.

But where there is a firm belief that the basis for genuine marriage love is in two people forming one human being over the course of a lifetime here and in the next world, there is strength to face and eventually overcome the frustrations and difficulties inherent in any relationship (*Conjugal Love* 216; *Spiritual Experiences* 6110). This belief also sets the stage for a couple to share their most intimate feelings and thoughts. Trust can develop and grow because they have a special relationship that will never come to an end.

A belief in eternal life has the power to help us view major and minor decisions from a perspective of what will be best forever. In some areas it will seem to have minimal effect. After all, believing we will live forever will not tell us if we need new tires for the car or should go to a concert or not. But what it can do is cause us to set our sights first on what will be with us forever. Do we need to hang on to the hurts done to us? Do we need great wealth or even perfect health? They might be nice, but they will not determine who we really are, the quality of our eternal existence.

By thinking from an eternal perspective, we can begin to see what is truly good—what qualities we should develop, what to include in a balanced life. And we can also set aside undue worries about our limitations. For we do not have to become perfect on this earth. Mistakes will be made, and at times we may act selfishly. But we have all eternity to grow. We do not have to overcome all our faults and problems here, just make a start that can be continued forever.

It is as the Lord said: “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (John 6:27). This does not mean that we are to reject the things of this world, only that we ought to measure them in relation to eternal values. “Is it important for me to get a more powerful position at work? Is it necessary for me to spend three more hours at home?” These questions can be validly answered differently by different people, but the most valuable answers are found when measured against the yardstick of eternity. To believe in eternity is to see what is of lasting worth. It is to view all the daily chores and problems from the vantage point of an eternal perspective. It is to seek first the kingdom of God, so that all the blessings of eternal life can be added.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 16; Mathew 6:24-34; *Divine Providence* 59