

# Healing Deafness: Listening, Hearing, and Doing

## Miracles, Health, and Healing Series

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

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***[Jesus] rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” (Mark 9:25)***

***“Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.” (Jeremiah 7:23)***

**The Call to Obey.** The Word of the Lord is full of calls for obedience. The Lord said, through the prophet Jeremiah, “Obey My voice, and I will be your God...” (Jeremiah 7:23). In the giving of the Ten Commandments, we hear a more strident God saying that He “[visits] the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations, but [shows] mercy to thousands to those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6). There are times when the Israelites were moved with a spirit of obedience, saying to Moses, “All that the Lord has said, we will do” (Exodus 24:7). And there were other times when they simply refused, and ended up reaping the consequences. In fact the Old Testament as a whole can be seen through the lens of obedience: the good things that happened when they obeyed, and the bad things that happened when they disobeyed. It is a “do it, or else” context.

Stepping back a bit, for this reason—the seeming harshness of the obedience-disobedience construct—the subject of obedience can leave a bad taste in our mouths. It’s somewhat authoritarian, lending itself to power struggles or clashes of will. It may draw us back to our childhood, when we bristled at the demands of our parents. Or it may bring us to the present wrestlings we have with our own children where we are the ones calling on our authority and expecting compliance.

Truly there are limits to obedience. It is not intended to be the only, or even the primary, motivator for living a good life. But it does have its place! In fact, it could be said, that if the bedrock of obedience is absent, no other more laudable motivations work.

So let’s examine obedience, to discover the appropriate place it can hold in our spiritual lives.

**Deafness—An Unwillingness To Obey.** We begin with the healing miracle that is our focus for today—of a boy who was cured of his deafness and muteness. What needs to be established is that this story is about the subject of obedience, even though that word is nowhere mentioned. We heard a passage from the Writings for the New Church that relates “hearing” to “obedience.” It says, “the deaf” [stand for] those who do not discern what truth is and consequently do not obey it” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6989). It goes on to say, “The sense of hearing corresponds both to discernment and to obedience—to discernment because what people hear is discerned by them inwardly, and to obedience

because from that discernment they know how they ought to act” (*Ibid.*).

Working with this idea, we can see the truth of it. Consider the phrase, “I don’t want to hear it!” What is being conveyed is, “I have absolutely no intention of going down that road.” Or think about what someone is striving to convey with the words, “You’re not hearing me.” While sometimes that is said in the context of communication and listening, it can also mean “You’re not doing as you’re told,” or “...complying,” or “...following my wishes.”

Seen symbolically then, “deafness” stands for that part of us that is unwilling to hear, or follow the wishes of, or obey the Lord. Call it stubbornness, or arrogance, or selfishness—there’s that part of us that just won’t.

**The Child—True Ideas Not Being Heeded.** It’s interesting that this healing miracle is given in the context of a family, and specifically that it’s a child who is deaf. In one sense, it can remind us that we all have that recalcitrant child within us that stubbornly resists any authority. But that view of this story only takes us so far. It’s not that the child won’t, in this case; he simply can’t act on his own devices. Symbolically speaking, the child doesn’t stand for a separate human being; he stands for a true idea from the Lord’s Word that we know (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2677). Let’s think about it in the form of a call to forgive: “...Forgive [your] brother his trespasses” (Matthew 18:35). Or it could be the call to repent: “For a person to be saved, he (or she) must repent of his sins” (*True Christian Religion* 621:6). Or it could be the need to apologize: “First be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift...” (Matthew 5:24).

In this context, though, we are not acting in accordance with those true ideas. Something within us is stopping us from “hearing” them, and living according to them.

**A “Spirit” Of Disobedience.** So we turn our minds to the question: Where does a spirit of disobedience come from? The answer is, from hell. The truth is, our “Miracles, Health, and Healing” series would not be complete if we didn’t draw attention to the fact that one of the primary things the Lord healed people of while He was in the world was demon-possession. We know that the level of possession that took place back then can no longer happen now, for the Lord conquered hell and reorganized the whole of His kingdom by means of His life on earth. Yet He does allow hell to influence us, in order to preserve the freedom which is essential to our salvation.

It is no surprise to most of us that we are influenced by hell. Even cartoons in the world around us depict the simple concept of a devil on one shoulder speaking into one of our ears, and an angel on the other speaking into the other ear. There’s some truth to that image. In fact, one of the passages we heard earlier in the service asked us to believe that “everything good comes from God [through heaven] and everything evil from hell” (*Heaven and Hell* 302). This is one of the more freeing teachings of the New Church, for it allows us to live within the framework of the truth: we are not fully responsible for all the negative impulses that come into our lives. We do not generate the terrible thoughts that come to us at times. They flow into us. Yes, we have a part to play—through entertaining and acting on certain thoughts, we open channels within ourselves to the influence of hell. But the truth remains: the impulse comes from without, and because that is true, we can choose

NOT to own it. We can send it back to hell from whence it came (*Ibid.*).

**The Need For The Lord's Help.** It's not always quite that simple, is it? We know that the impulses toward disobedience or stubbornness, or an unwillingness to reconcile (say we're sorry) are felt strongly within us, and they come with ready-made justifications for why it's not us that needs to make the first move. That's why we need to be healed.

The truth is, left to our own devices, we are no match for the influences of hell in our lives. We read in the Writings for the New Church, "People are attacked by hell with devilish fury, and unless the Lord resisted and subdued hell, they would inevitably be overcome" (*True Christian Religion* 123).

The beauty of this particular situation is, the Lord IS there. This is a healing miracle. The hells are no match for the Lord, as is seen in this very story: It says, "He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, 'Deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!' Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him" (Mark 9:25-26).

**Our Part.** Up to this point, we've talked about the fact that there is "spiritual deafness" that can afflict us—a spirit of disobedience, causing us to be unwilling to obey a true idea from the Lord's Word that we know. We've reminded ourselves of the fact that this spirit of disobedience comes to us from hell, and that this is where the Lord directs His healing energy.

So what is our part? The story indicates five things that we are to do. The first is to regard the truth as precious. This is clearly seen in the father's obvious love for his son. No parent likes to see their children suffer. The obvious reason is that our children are precious to us. We want them—even if they are not our own—to be happy. Indeed, parents go to great lengths to ensure that their children are cared for, protected, loved, and able to experience joy. It grieves us greatly when that is not the case.

But again, this story is not necessarily about a parent-child relationship. We discussed that the child stands for a true idea from the Lord's Word that we know. The father, in this case, stands our loves—in this case loves directed toward truth ideas (see *Apocalypse Explained* 532:11). For us then, the first thing we are to do is regard the truth as precious—to love it. If it is a truth about forgiveness, can we see the goodness in forgiveness? Can we honor the relationships that can be strengthened when people are willing to move to a better place in their relationship through the sharing of forgiveness? Similarly, if the truth is about repentance: can we see that it is not a harsh and negative concept, but one that actually shows how we can move through a challenge in our lives—a facet of our lives that has brought suffering to ourselves and others—and see a new life without that painful habit? Our first task is to see that truth is good. It looks to healthy and loving relationships. It is a statement of how things really need to work if we are to experience that goodness.

A second thing we need to do is see the opposite: without that truth, pain and suffering are the reality. Without obedience, hurt happens. In the story, the boy is

convulsed, thrown into the fire or the water, foams at the mouth. It's a sad, sad picture. Continuing with our practice of viewing this story symbolically, what we come face to face with is that all disobedience to the Lord's teachings leads to suffering. All evil hurts. One teaching puts it this way: "Its own punishment follows every evil" (*Divine Providence* 249). In other words, there is a logical consequence to selfishness. Our job in this realm is to acknowledge the suffering—and to acknowledge it in the context of a truth that is not being followed. If the suffering is a wedge in a relationship, likely the law of reconciliation is not being heeded. If distrust is evident, likely the command against lying has something to do with it. The point is, wherever there is suffering, there is likely some form of disobedience going on.

A third thing to do is to recognize the source of suffering, namely hell. The father in this story knew that his son was possessed by a demon. So we are asked to acknowledge the truth that all that is hurtful and destructive of human relationships and happiness comes from hell. The key point here is not to own evil. Yes, we have culpability for past bad choices, that make our present choices harder. We may have stubborn habits that are harder to get rid of because they have become habitual through frequent permission. But even then, the stimulation of that habit flows into us from hell. It is always outside of us coming in. That's such an important concept for us to believe.

A fourth thing is to pray to the Lord for help. As we heard earlier, we are no match for hell by ourselves. If we try to do it alone, we will fail. This father had tried lots of things, but it was only when he brought his son to the Lord that actual healing took place. The truth is, there is no substitute for humble prayer, borne out of a recognition of the truth, the suffering, and the presence of hell causing the pain in the first place.

Finally there is the need to act—to act specifically in accordance with the truth that we see as precious, and which is not, as yet, being obeyed. In this regard, we note the following teachings. "Faith involves not only knowledge of all the things that the doctrine of faith embraces...; it is first and foremost obedience to everything that doctrine teaches" (*Arcana Coelestia* 36). Our "first and foremost" responsibility is to obey.

Which brings us to a second teaching. The man in this story, when asked if he believed, let out a heartfelt plea: "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief." Within this statement is a path forward. If we do our part, which is to obey the command, whatever that command is, the Lord will "help our unbelief." He will lead us, eventually, to love that command, because of the goodness that results. As we read, "Action comes first, then the desire for it in the person's will follows" (*Arcana Coelestia* 4353).

A third teaching about the need to act involves the boy himself. After the demon was cast out, it says the Lord "took him by the hand and lifted him up" (Mark 9:27). The truth that that boy represents, be it forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation, honesty, chastity, or anything else, needs to be lifted up and brought to life. The boy was restored to his father. So the truths that we know need to be brought together with love and put into practice in our lives. We need to do what is taught, and only then can true healing take place.

**The "divine design."** We've talked a lot today about the place that obedience

can have in our lives. It may not always be the most laudable motivator, but it is an essential catalyst in our spiritual journey that opens us up to all that the Lord is leading us toward. We close today with a teaching that summarizes the part that obedience plays in the Lord's "divine design":

Therefore we have to follow the divine design in the way we live. We have to acknowledge God, His omnipotence, and our resulting safety from hell, and do our part to fight against the evil that is with us; this acknowledgment and this fighting go together as part of the divine design. Otherwise we cannot help being plunged into hell and swallowed up; and once there, we cannot help being driven by evils, one after the other, like a little rowboat on the sea being pushed around by storms.... The more we follow the divine design in the way we live, the more wisdom about goodness and truth we receive from God's omniscience.... The more we follow the divine design in the way we live, the more fully we are in God because of God's omnipresence. (*True Christian Religion* 68-70) **Amen.**

**Readings from the Lord's Word:** Mark 9:17-27; *Arcana Coelestia* 36, 6989; *Heaven and Hell* 302.

## **Mark 9**

<sup>17</sup>Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. <sup>18</sup>And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.”

<sup>19</sup>He answered him and said, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me.” <sup>20</sup>Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth.

<sup>21</sup>So He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?”

And he said, “From childhood. <sup>22</sup>And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

<sup>24</sup>Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

<sup>25</sup>When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” <sup>26</sup>Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.” <sup>27</sup>But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.

## ***Arcana Caelestia 6989***

The words of Scripture, “or the deaf” mean lack of discernment of truth and consequently lack of obedience. This is clear from the meaning of “the deaf” as those who do not discern what truth is and consequently do not obey it, thus in an abstract sense a lack of discernment of truth and consequently a lack of obedience. “The deaf” means these things because the sense of hearing corresponds both to discernment and to obedience—to discernment because what people hear is discerned by them inwardly, and to obedience because from that discernment they know how they ought to act.

## ***Heaven and Hell 302***

If we believed the way things really are, that everything good comes from God and everything evil from hell, then we would not take credit for the good within us or blame for the evil. Whenever we thought or did anything good, we would focus on the Lord, and any evil that flowed in we would throw back into the hell it came from.

### ***Arcana Caelestia 36***

Faith involves not only knowledge of all the things that the doctrine of faith embraces and the acknowledgment of them; it is first and foremost obedience to everything that doctrine teaches. The primary point that it teaches for people's obedience is love of the Lord and love of the neighbor.