

Evil and Falsity Used for Good

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, ‘Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook, Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.’” – I Kings 17:3-4

In our first lesson today you heard about the prophet declaring to the wicked king of Israel that a great famine would occur in his land, and that the Lord then told him to run away to a brook on the eastern side of the Jordan River where he would be able to drink water from the brook and also be fed by ravens. And of course this is just what happened, the ravens bringing him both bread and meat. It’s worth noting that when the brook dried up, in the follow-up story from the same chapter Elijah is fed by a widow in Zarephath, way up in the north coast of the Mediterranean. Both of these incidents are of special interest to us because they both indicate a less-than-ideal way of getting spiritual nourishment, ravens representing falsities and a widow the affection for truth without the truth.

Then in our second lesson you heard the Lord teaching a parable about a man who did something apparently dishonest in order to avoid the consequences of his mismanagement of an estate. It’s all very straightforward except that in the end the Lord praised this “unjust steward” for his shrewdness and actually told His disciples to do likewise, and to “*make friends of the mammon of injustice*.” Now we know that “mammon” is just a fancy word for wealth and that wealth corresponds in the spiritual sense to knowledge. Either way, whether natural or spiritual, wealth is not in itself good or evil. Still, in referring to “the mammon of injustice” the Lord clearly meant wealth gained or used for “unjust” purposes.

So the question is, what does all this mean? For sure, in both stories, either directly or through the symbolism involved, we are being shown that evil and falsity can be used for good. In fact, we are being encouraged look for the good and take advantage of it, even when it is presented in a context of falsity or corruption. But what can we do with these lessons, and how can we see them working in our lives today?

For a start let’s go back to the ravens. Any bird represents human thought or understanding, but this very large, very clever black bird represents falsities and the ability to reason in support of them. Ravens are known for their trickery and theft. Yet in 1st Kings they supply the prophet of God with food – both bread and meat, morning and evening. Evidently there was nothing wrong with this food, which represents genuine good, and which was probably stolen from the rooftops and fire pits of people throughout the land, but its delivery certainly was curious.

For context, remember, there was a famine in the land at this time, and a famine spiritually represents a lack of goodness and truth. Now remember the Lord’s words in Matthew, “...to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 25:29). This seems like a case in point. The famine prevailed as a consequence of people’s neglect of the Lord, and so what little they had was being taken from them – not by the Lord but by their own falsifications of the truth – and transferred to the prophet to sustain him. Spiritually the bread and meat both correspond to the good we can

receive from the Lord even in our states of suffering and misfortune, which good very often is delivered to us on the wings of falsity.

“For example,” we read, “a person who is being regenerated believes at first that the good which he thinks and which he does begins in himself, and also that he earns some reward, for he does not yet know, or if he does know does not comprehend, that good is able to flow in from some other source. Neither does he know of or comprehend any other possibility than that he should be rewarded because he does it of himself. If he did not believe this at first he would never do anything good. But by this means he is introduced not only into the affection for doing good but also into insights concerning good and also concerning merit. And once he has been guided in this way into the affection for doing good he starts to think differently and to believe differently. That is to say, he starts to think and to believe that good flows in from the Lord and that he merits nothing through good which he does from the proprium. And when at length true affection lies behind his willing and doing of what is good he rejects merit altogether and indeed loathes it, and he is moved by an affection for good for the sake of what is good” (AC 4145:2).

“Take as another example anyone who believes that he is pure from sins, and so is cleansed like somebody from whom dirt has been washed away by means of much water, once he has repented and carried out the prescribed penances, or after he has made his confession and heard the confessor declare him free from sins, or after he has been to the Holy Supper. If he leads a new life, being stirred by an affection for good and truth, *that falsity is such that good can be mingled with it*” ...Also, with anyone who believes that man is saved by virtue of believing what is good and not of willing it, and yet who *does* will what is good and therefore *does* it, *that falsity is such that good and truth can be attached to it*” (AC 3993:10).

All this is very fortunate for us because we ALL start out laboring under a huge load of falsities in our spiritual lives, thinking from appearances, acting from a sense of merit, working for selfish and material goals – the beautiful or handsome partner, the nice house and comfortable surroundings, the rewarding career – all of which **can** motivate us to get or stay on the right track, make us feel good, and open the way for better perceptions that come to us with time. These things are not “unjust” in a natural sense but they are off the mark spiritually, and so to use the old translation of the word, they are not “righteous,” they are essentially self-centered.

It is therefore all the more notable that in the sequel to the story about the ravens Elijah is told to go north and west to Zarephath where he is fed by a widow. Now as mentioned earlier, a widow, a woman who has lost her husband, represents an affection for truth without the truth. But at least the affection is present, and that affection can nourish us until the truth is restored.

By the way, the Brook, Cherith, has a meaning consistent with the meaning of ravens. It was not in the land of Israel, proper, but on the “other” side of the Jordan, in Ammonite territory. And although it is safe to say that the water itself in the brook – which gradually dried up – represented truth (however external or natural), the Ammonites themselves represented the falsification of truth. “Cherith” in Hebrew is a trench, and we know the brook was in a deep canyon, which suggests the deep, hidden truth that lies obscurely within any perversion or falsity.

But in case the illustrations of good being “delivered” by falsity seem a little abstract, consider other possibilities. A bad man, for example, can perform a good use. He may be quite corrupt, but in the interest of his own reputation, honor and gain he can do good things for his country, his business, the church or... any one of us (DP #250). Again, a person who believes – falsely – that certain harsh teachings in the Word must be taken literally can still benefit from those teachings if he lives according to the main intent of the teachings by keeping the commandments.

There are lots of stories in the Word in which good comes out of evil or falsity. Jacob on two occasions cheated his brother, Esau, for his own advantage, but the Lord used this deceit to provide for generations of both their descendants. Again, the 10 brothers who hated Joseph cast him into a pit and then sold him into slavery, but the Lord used this terrible treachery to provide for all of Israel *and* Egypt during the seven year famine that followed.

Our second lesson from the Word today presents a variation on this theme but with a focus on the truth itself in the form of knowledge or information. Much has been written about this,* but we can distill it down to a few critical points. First, as noted earlier, mammon, which is wealth, is neither just nor unjust, but “the mammon of injustice” is the wealth that is gained or used unjustly. That same wealth can be used justly, for good. So, to “make friends of the mammon of injustice” is NOT to endorse injustice, but to feature the benefits of the mammon itself, which in spiritual terms is knowledge. THIS is what provides for our eternal life, or as we read, that we may be “received into everlasting habitations.”

The big question in the parable is why it is said that the rich man, who clearly represents the Lord, “commended the unjust steward.” And the answer is two-fold. First, and in the literal sense, He is commending the steward’s prudence, his smart, shrewd initiative to provide for his future, given the mistakes of his past. At this level He is simply saying that it would be good if we were all as concerned about our spiritual lives as this guy was about his natural life. Sadly, as He said, “the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light,” meaning, “than the sons of light *are in theirs.*”

More significantly, though, in the spiritual sense the Lord is highlighting the fact that we all begin our regeneration with selfish or unjust motives, and while that’s not really OK the truth is that it can’t be otherwise. We all take the goods and truths that our Heavenly Father gives us and we waste or mismanage them. The crux of the lesson is what we do about this when we get caught, that is, when we finally realize it isn’t working and that our eternal welfare hangs in the balance. Ouch! Now what? We can’t really repay our debt: what’s done is done. As it says in the parable, we don’t have the strength to dig, that is, to dig our own way out of this mess, and we are ashamed to beg, knowing that, having messed up, our credibility in spiritual things is shot. So the plan, which looks on the surface like just another scandal, is to ingratiate the debtors by reducing their bills.

To the man who owed his master 100 measures of oil he said, “Sit down quickly and write fifty,” and to the man who owed 100 measures of wheat he said, “Take your bill and write eighty.” It looks for all the world like another scam. But in fact it’s the smartest thing he could do. Spiritually oil represents the good of life and wheat represents the truth. One hundred represents all, or

* See especially “The Parables of the New Testament,” by the Rev. Edward C. Mitchell, published in Philadelphia in 1900, pp. 459-470, also available on “Newsearch” software.

a full measure, and by comparison 50 represents some, or just enough. Eighty, being two times forty, represents temptation, perhaps a double dose of temptation. And ALL the debtors in the story, including the steward, represent aspects or qualities of our own will and understanding, the faculties in us that are indebted to the Lord for all His goodness and truth.

Here's the point: in our regeneration, when we acknowledge our debt to the Lord for all the goodness and truth He has given us, realizing that we can't possibly repay Him in full, if we will agree to just TRY, and do our best, the Lord will not only accept that bargain, He will fully support it and bless us in the process. In a way we can think of the unpaid 50 measures of oil as the good of life that is owed from the past. It's unfortunate, but we can't re-do the past. However going forward we can make a fresh start and so pay the *other half* by now doing better.

In natural terms it's a little like declaring bankruptcy. We admit we've failed, we restructure the debt, and we start over, doing the best we can, hopefully wiser and better for the experience. It's not ideal, but when we're in over our heads, what can we do?

As for the wheat, knowing the truth and how careless we have been in the past we can now brace and prepare ourselves for the temptations of the future, temptations we can now address with the Lord's help through this new awareness of our dependence on Him.

The conclusion of the parable clinches everything, but again in ways that may challenge our understanding. Here the Lord speaks about being faithful "in that which is least" and also "in the unjust mammon" and He says, "If you have not been faithful in the unjust mammon, who will commit to your trust the true? If you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?" The "least things" are the things of this world, and to be faithful in them is to use them for heavenly purposes, for "much." The unjust mammon is the knowledge we have gained for selfish purposes but which we can now use *unselfishly* or "faithfully" to perform uses to the neighbor even as we secure our own eternal life. Some translations have the Lord saying, "Make friends FOR yourselves BY the mammon of injustice;" but the truth is we need to make friends OF that mammon, using IT to guide our steps toward a heavenly life!

In the beginning all our spiritual knowledge is really "another man's," that is, the stuff we learn from others – including the Lord – and take advantage of even though our hearts may not be in it. In other words it's just "memory knowledge." But if we are "faithful" in that knowledge and do our best to live according to it, "when we fail," that is, when we mess up, and more importantly when we acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy, the Lord will understand, and will then be able to use that acknowledgement to effect a real transformation, a new and deeper personal commitment leading to eternal life because at that point we will really "own" His good and truth.

The punchline is, "You can't serve God and mammon." Everything we learn serves some purpose – either our own or the Lord's. We may not use the Master's goods with true integrity at first, but the Lord understands, He has provided for this, and He will *commend* us for exercising prudence by doing the best we can going forward.

Amen.

Lessons: *1 Kings 17:1-7*
 Children's talk on Elijah being fed by Ravens
 Luke 16:1-13 and *Divine Providence #281, esp. sections 2-3*