

On Letting Go Without Giving Up

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 10th, 2016 (for the Holy Supper)

Jesus said ... “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

As you heard in the children’s talk, when the Lord called together His 12 disciples and sent them out to preach and to heal people He was very specific about what to do and what NOT to do. They were *not* to go into “the way of the Gentiles” nor enter any city of the Samaritans, but they *were* to go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” They were to preach repentance, heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons. But they were NOT to take any money, nor a bag for their journeys, nor anything more than a single staff and what they were wearing (Matthew 10:5-10). In short they were to give up all their worldly possessions and just count on the people they served to provide for their needs.

It’s pretty hard for us to contemplate such a life literally. For a start we’re very possessive by nature and we like having our things around us. In any case, as a practical matter it would not be very useful, prudent OR kind of us to just quit work and leave all our responsibilities. Heavenly life itself is based on useful service, and this involves material and economic realities, including interactions with people of other faiths. We also have obligations to our families – husbands, wives, children or other dependents – and caring for them is part of loving the Lord.

Then again, even if we understand these teachings in a spiritual sense they are still hard to imagine. If the way of the Gentiles is a way of life that is not genuinely good, and a city of the Samaritans is a way of thinking that is inconsistent with the Word, we can surely try hard to avoid these temptations. But to give up all that we possess suggests letting go of all our own ideas, all our own affections, all our own initiative, and just doing what we’re told – in this case focusing entirely on getting rid of evils and falsities, in ourselves and others. Think of the list: preach repentance, heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons. Where are the *positive, uplifting* uses for us to think about, strive for and do?

Well, it’s like this: in the end, we simply do not naturally know what is good for us – or what is really true. We have to learn everything, and we learn it either from natural or from spiritual sources. Some of these sources are flawed, some are inspired, but all of them are subject to interpretation. So we have to practice what we learn and gradually grow into an appreciation for what is best in the long term. A little truth leads to a little good, practicing that good leads to a better understanding of the truth, and that leads in turn to a deeper, more lasting good. The Writings call this “the circle of life” (DP 29:3)

The thing is, when we learn any particular truth it exposes an opposing falsity, and when we learn and do what is genuinely good we have to confront the opposing evil. This is why our focus *seems* so negative. And yet it’s *not* negative at all, it’s entirely based on a living awareness of goodness and truth. And if in our confrontation of the evil we think about the Lord as our role model and our source of inspiration, even our attention to the disorders in our lives will be positive expressions of commitment to Him.

Think again of the Ten Commandments. Don't do this, don't do that: nine out of ten are cast in the negative – but *why?* Because He is God and He loves us, and He knows we can only receive His blessings when we get rid of the obstacles in our self-centered lives.

Now of course, if we put all our focus on the evil we will have a pretty depressing life. Not only that, but it will be hard to avoid getting mired in it – either directly or indirectly by feeling overwhelming shame and incompetence. But again, when we think of removing the evil to make way for the good, and focus on the Lord providing that good, our struggles, like victories in any competition, can be incredibly rewarding. And by the way, this applies to memories as well as current states. Dwelling on the past without recognizing that the Lord can control even this aspect of our lives is just asking for trouble. Thinking about it, on the other hand, with an acknowledgment that the Lord can use every experience in our lives for some good, allows us to maintain our composure, confidence, peace of mind and hope, even as we struggle.

In our high school classes just now we are doing a brief overview of the books of Acts and the Epistles. Here we read about the apostles doing exactly – literally – what the Lord told them to do, and even though we know that the miracles they performed are not possible in the same way today, we can't help but be powerfully affected by the absolute conviction with which these men spoke and acted. They had seen and continued to see the power of the Lord with their own eyes, and they had no doubt about it. So they lived in hope and confidence no matter what they suffered outwardly – and they did suffer incredible persecution.

How different might our own lives be today if we had the same confidence in the Lord?

Well, the truth is, we can! The only difference in our more sophisticated age is that the sight of our natural eyes no longer has the power to convince the way it used to. If modern psychology has taught us anything it is that we can't trust our sensory perceptions without the compelling evidence of reason – and multiple sources of confirming information. So instead of turning to our outward experience for our faith in the Lord we need to turn to the inner experience of rational understanding – which the heavenly doctrines provide for in abundance.

That said, it is still true that the Lord asks us to deny ourselves and take up our cross in order to follow Him. It is still true that if we try to save our own life we will lose it, but that if we lose it for His sake we will find it. The only question is, what, exactly, does this mean? And how, realistically, can we let go of our own loves and ideas without giving up our whole identity?

The answer will seem paradoxical at first but it's really quite simple. We are not the good or bad people we think we are. All the good and evil that we have is from the Lord through angels or, in its perverted form, through evil spirits. It is only ours to the extent that we freely choose it and act on it as if it were our own. So in a nutshell we are what we choose, or even more accurately, ***we are our choices***. Knowing, therefore, that the Lord is constantly working to conjoin Himself with us and so make us truly happy, we don't really lose a thing when we choose to follow Him, not spiritually, anyway; we just let go of the miserable stuff that stands in the way, and then when His love and wisdom do flow in we identify with Him, and receive them as our own.

So we have the statement from our third lesson this morning that “the more nearly a person is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more evidently does he recognize that he is the Lord's.” Why? - “because the more near-

ly he is conjoined to the Lord the wiser he becomes.” Besides, as the lesson pointed out, the Lord does not flow immediately (that is, directly) into our perception or thought, but rather into our *affections...* and *through these* into our thoughts, and because we identify most of all with our affections we think of the Lord’s wisdom as somehow coming from ourselves!

To lay down our lives for the Lord, then, is not really to lose anything of our own. ***It is to make a new decision about what we want.*** It is to let go of all the limitations that bind us to the world – the shiny gold and silver and copper of appearances that are not really true or good, the bag (today we might say “baggage”) of thinking based on those appearances, and all the extras – the second tunic, the second pair of sandals, the second staff that all represent our back-up plans in case the Lord doesn’t come through for us. The staff in particular is emblematic of our sense of power and support: ONE staff represents one source of strength, the Lord, and as long as we think we need another “just in case” we are not really giving ourselves to Him to lead us on our way. Same with the tunic and the sandals: the tunic was an inner garment, representing the truths we hold most closely to our hearts. The sandals were of course the “clothing” for the feet, the most external aspects of our spiritual lives, the realm of application. And again, as long as we’re not really ready to let the Lord provide for us, as long as we believe we need to “cover ourselves” with alternatives in case it doesn’t work out, we’re not really ready to be His disciples, ***we’re not really settled in our new decision.***

Does this mean we have to give up all our sense of prudence and judgment? NO. Absolutely not. ***But we do need to be clear that this is what we want.*** We do need to be clear that the Lord can and will provide us a new will, a new understanding, and a new life. If we are, then we can be sure that great miracles will open up – not necessarily natural, physical miracles; we’re in a different reality now than that of the original disciples – but surely spiritual miracles: real healing from the sickness of selfishness rather than mere worldly disease, real cleansing from the corrupting influence of profanation rather than the merely natural problem of leprosy (which is easily cured by natural medicines today), spiritual regeneration instead of resurrection into still more natural life, and yes, the casting out of real demons, which we talked about last week.

Now then, what does all this have to do with the holy supper, which will be offered in a few minutes?

“The holy supper,” we read, “was instituted by the Lord, that through it there may be conjunction of the church with heaven, and thus with the Lord. Therefore it is a most holy act of worship” (NJHD 210).

Simply put, it is like a signature on a contract that says, YES, ***I want this***, I am ready to receive it and I am putting my faith, hope and trust in YOU to make it happen – not instantly, we know that won’t work, but little by little, day by day, line upon line, precept upon precept, as we actually DO what we say in our hearts that we want to do. This is why we keep coming back, and doing this at least a few times every year. We need the reminder, we need the encouragement, we need the feeling of closeness that the holy supper can provide as we think about the Lord Himself breaking bread with His disciples and sending them on their way filled with the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Lessons: Selections from Matthew 10 or Luke 10
 Children's Talk on "What to Do and Not Do" (by the Rev. Michael Ferrell)

 Psalm 51:1-13
 Divine Providence no. 42 & 44

The third lesson for this sermon
Divine Providence no. 42 & 44

"The more nearly a person is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does he appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more evidently does he recognise that he is the Lord's. There is an appearance that the more nearly anyone is conjoined to the Lord the less he is master of himself. This is the appearance with all the wicked, and also with those who from their religion believe that they are not under the yoke of the law, and that no one can do good from himself. For all such are only able to see that not to be allowed to think and to will evil, but only good, is not to be master of oneself; and as those who are conjoined to the Lord are neither willing nor able to think and to will evil, they conclude from what is an appearance to them that this is not to be master of oneself; when nevertheless this is quite contrary to the truth."

"The more distinctly a person appears to himself to be master of himself the more clearly he perceives that he is the Lord's, because the more nearly he is conjoined to the Lord the wiser he becomes, as was shown before. This wisdom teaches and also perceives. The angels of the third heaven, because they are the wisest of the angels, also perceive this; and, moreover, they call it freedom itself. But to be led by themselves they call slavery. They give this as the reason, that the Lord does not flow immediately into what belongs to their perception and thought from wisdom, but into their affections of the love of good, and through these into the former; and that they perceive the influx in the affection from which they have wisdom; and that then all that they think from wisdom appears to be from themselves, and thus as their own; and that in this way a reciprocal conjunction is effected."

A prayer for this service

Heavenly Father, as we enter fully into another new year in this natural world, grant that it may be a new year also for us in our spiritual lives. Give us strength, focus and determination, we pray, to overcome the illusions of a merely natural life so that we can receive what is infinitely better from You.

As we face the challenges and opportunities of each new day, we ask that You will nourish and sustain us through the truths of Your Word and the love of the angels You have ordained to support us. Grant that we may be attentive to the things of eternal life even as we go about our daily routines in this world, knowing that You can and *always will* provide for us if we will only trust and follow Your directions.

Amen.