

Thanksgiving for Opportunities to Serve

A Family Service Message in Two Parts

November 23rd, 2017

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1. Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents

Today we have come before the Lord to give thanks for our blessings, and to share a small portion of those blessings with others who are needy. But you know, there are many things we can be thankful for besides the food or other natural blessings that might come to mind. This story from the Word helps us think about this.

In most copies of the Word this lesson begins, “*The kingdom of heaven* is like a man travelling to a far country....” But in fact it’s not the kingdom of heaven, it’s the LORD: “The Lord is like a man traveling to a far country....”

Why is this important? – because it’s teaching us about the Lord, and what He expects of us. Yes, it’s about heaven, too, because when we cooperate with the Lord we can be in heaven, *but it’s really personal*: the Lord is teaching us HOW to cooperate with Him and so receive the blessings of heaven.

And so in the parable He tells us that what we need to do is USE the talents He has given us to be productive and get results – for Him. And He promises a special reward for those who do this, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”

OK, so what is a parable? What is a talent? And what is this reward?

1. Well, first of all, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, a natural story with a spiritual or mental meaning. So this story in the Word is true in two ways at once.

2. A talent in Bible times was an amount of money determined by weight. A talent of GOLD in the time of the Lord would have been worth about \$300,000 in our money today, a talent of silver somewhat less – but still a LOT of money! So you can see that in this parable the Lord was talking about TRUSTING His servants with a LOT of money, hoping they would use it well.

But remember, this has a double meaning, and the OTHER meaning is even more important because it tells us something about heavenly life. In this meaning a tal-

ent is just what we normally think: it's a skill or ability. In particular, if it's a silver talent it's the knowledge of what is true; if it's a gold talent it's a love for what is good, both of which give us the ability to do useful things. And the Lord gives every one of us talents of this kind, some more, some less, but remember, even just ONE talent is worth a small fortune and can bring us great happiness *if we don't just bury it but use it well.*

So this is our first lesson today: the Lord doesn't just give us the food or other material things we need to be safe and healthy in the world, although we can be very thankful for these things, too, and share them with the needy as we have done today. The *more important things* that the Lord gives us for which we should be *especially thankful* are the *skills and abilities*, the *knowledge and love* we need to be useful to other people. These are the things that can make us truly happy both here on earth and in heaven. And THAT is why when the Lord praised and blessed the servants who used their talents well He said, "You were faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things."

3. To be a ruler over many things is NOT to sit around just telling other people what to do. In fact the Lord didn't say the reward would be to rule over other people at all, He said it would be to rule over "many things" – which means He will give those who use their talents *even more talents to do even more useful things*. And we need to understand that this is the greatest gift the Lord can give anyone because it is the one thing that can make us all feel really happy. It's NOT just "more work" in a way that feels hard; it's more opportunities to feel good about what we can do to serve the Lord by helping *other people* also feel blessed.

So again, this is our first lesson today – that the Lord has given every one of us some special knowledge, some special loves and skills so that we can have the pleasure of doing positive things and feeling really useful. And let's not ever forget that this is NOT just about people who are healthy or rich or super smart; it's about every person, young or old, strong or weak, rich or poor, whether we go out a lot or mostly stay at home, whether we are students or teachers, leaders or followers.... EVERY ONE OF US has gifts of talents from the Lord that we can use to serve Him and so enjoy the happiness of heaven. Let us be thankful to Him for these precious gifts and pray that we may use them well every day.

Amen.

2. Arcana Caelestia #997 & 7038: selections

The Blessings of Being Useful

There are many places in our church teachings that inform us about worship, which includes thanks and praise of the Lord for all the benefits He gives us. But here, in these teachings we learn especially that TRUE worship is not *just* attending church services, it is DOING what the Lord teaches us every day.

Of course attending church services (like this one), singing together, praying, hearing the Word and listening to sermons – all that is important, too (AC 1618, DP 171-172), but it is all for nothing if we don't do what the Lord teaches us right through the week. This is not to say it's all hard work and we never get to rest; the truth is that if we really do love the Lord and love what He teaches we would be miserable if we could NOT do these things. But when we do it feels great, and the REASON it feels great is that we were created for this reason. We were created to receive the Lord's own love and wisdom, which is ALL ABOUT serving others.

Now we may think we are happiest when we don't have to do anything, when we can just sit around and have other people do everything for us. But it's not true! – not really. In fact there is a story told in two places in the New Church Writings (CL 1-24 and TCR 731-752) about 6 groups of newcomers to the spiritual world who were really looking forward to life in heaven. One group thought that the joy of heaven was all about just getting in, as if “Aha! We made it!” was all that mattered. Another group thought that it was all about socializing and having great conversations. The third figured that it would be all about having feasts with the important people of the Bible, like Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, and the fourth had in mind that they would just be in beautiful paradise, and not have to do anything!

And then it got really interesting. The fifth group had the idea that they would all live like kings with incredible wealth and power, being in charge while other angels did all the work. And the sixth said that the joy of heaven for them would be having worship services, listening to sermons, glorifying and praising the Lord all day every day – forever!

So then, one by one, they were all allowed to actually experience their ideas of heaven. Some lasted a few days, some only a few HOURS, but they ALL ended up begging to be let out of these imaginary heavens. The people in the church were the funniest. After just a few days they were so anxious to get out that they could hardly stand it. But the doors had been locked and the preachers kept preaching at them and urging them to keep on praising until they finally broke

down the doors and ran away as fast as they could. And then they were taught, and they learned from experience that the REAL joys of heaven are the joys of service – of doing useful things for one another.

Now remember, worship is important, but not all day every day! To feel really free and happy we need to have useful work to do, work that lets us use our hearts, express our loves and find real meaning and purpose in our lives.

And again, this is what the Lord has provided for everyone in this room, everyone in this community, everyone in the country and everyone in the world. Everyone has a special gift of understanding and desire to contribute in some way to the good of others. We may not *think* so. We may not *know* quite what that is. And we may even *bury* that knowledge so that we don't have to think about it, believing that we don't have to *do anything* to be happy. But most of you know that when you do that your happiness doesn't last very long. You get bored; you get depressed; you get upset when people don't GIVE you what you want; and sometimes you even get sick or injured because you're not getting enough exercise.

This happens to all of us at least a little bit at one time or another. But in the Lord's love and wisdom one of the reasons it happens – just as it happened for those newcomers in the spiritual world – is to help us wake up and realize the truth: ***we are created to be useful***. We need to get out of ourselves and do something positive for another human being – and for the Lord.

It might be something artistic, something clever, something written, something baked; it might be a new way of organizing something, or building something, or just saying kind or encouraging things. It might be nothing more than just going to work and doing our jobs really carefully and well, or paying close attention while somebody talks so that he or she knows that we are really listening and appreciate what that person has to say. Whatever it is we can be thankful to the Lord that He has given every one of us a special ability to do this – in a way that nobody else can do in quite exactly the same way – and that *when we do it*, right in that exact moment, we can experience the real joy and happiness of heaven.

Amen.