

The Happiness of Heaven

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but when men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares.....” (Matthew 13:24)

It is a curious fact that most of the parables about the kingdom of heaven occur in Matthew, and though a great many comparisons or likenesses to heaven are given, *not one of them literally refers to it as a place*. Rather, the Lord said, “the kingdom of heaven is like a man...” or “like a mustard seed...” or “like leaven,” or “treasure hidden in a field” or a fishing net. Again, “the kingdom of heaven is like a king...” or “like ten virgins...” and so on. Of course, heaven is a spiritual place, but that’s just the point: it is characterized entirely by our spiritual states, including the degree and quality of our acceptance of the Lord.

There is an important lesson right there, right in the literal sense of the Word. For if heaven is like a man, or like a seed, or like leaven or any of those other things, *and not like a place*, then we need to start thinking about it in terms of what those things represent in our lives, and how they are embodied in us, and get rid of the old idea that heaven is some place where we go.

One important parable about heaven begins in our translation with these words: “*The kingdom of heaven is* like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.” You know the rest of the story: the man who got five talents invested them and earned five more, and the man who got two invested them and got two more. But the man who got only one buried it, for fear of his master, and when the master returned he had nothing to show for it. This last man was punished, but to the first two the master said, “Well done, good and faithful servant(s); you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things” (Matthew 25:21).

But something you should know is that the first verse in Greek does not say “the kingdom of heaven.” The subject in fact is not stated, but implied, and should be “HE,” meaning the Son of Man who is referred to in the previous verse. It is HE who is like the man in the parable, for He is the one who gives us the “talents” we need to prepare for heaven. Still, the story is about the quality of heavenly life.

And what do we learn from it? Of course, we learn that heaven is a kingdom of uses and usefulness, not mere idleness. At first we might think otherwise, for we might think that “ruling” is merely giving orders, and sitting around while others do the work. But anyone who has ever had a position of responsibility knows that this is not the way it works. On the contrary, greater authority brings greater responsibility, and even though a person may do less physical work at higher levels he still works, and the hours are often longer and the work more challenging than for those at lower levels. The point of the parable is that when we do well, then we are given the opportunity to do even more, and the great pleasure, the great blessing, the great fulfilment of heaven is that we get to enjoy the enormous satisfaction of being truly useful to others - and to the Lord!

You see, heaven is not a reward in the traditional or childish sense of that word. It is not

something that is “given” to us as pay back for all the “good deeds” we may do during life in this world. Neither is hell a punishment for all the bad deeds we do in this world (but we’ll get to that another time). Rather, the reward of heaven is the freedom and delight of knowing the truth, doing what is good, and being useful according to the will of God.

This is why the Word so persistently describes the rewards of heaven as going to those who keep the Lord’s commandments. Think for example of His teaching in John, chapter 15, and note that *everything He says here relates to the present*, not the future, not some other world or far off place to which we may or may not come when earthly life is over: -

“If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. *These things I have spoken to you that My joy may remain in you*, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:10-12).

Again, there is no question that heaven is a real place, that we are intended to go there after the death of the natural body, and that life there is going to be incredibly rewarding! The questions are: what *kind* of place is it, *how* do we “get” there, and what is *the real nature of the reward*, in terms that we can understand and use today? In the book, *Heaven and Hell*, we are shown that mere actions are not in themselves virtuous, and do not in themselves merit any spiritual reward, as any robot or “automaton” can go through certain motions. Also, as we know all too well, some human actions can be deceptive, looking good even though they express an evil motive. So the real spiritual value of any action lies in the purpose or intention that is within it (HH #472).

So the reward of heaven is according to the inner quality of the deeds done, in fact it is according to the ruling *love* that a person cultivates *and also maintains in his or her life after death*. There is therefore no thought in the doctrines of the New Church that the Lord is somehow keeping a balance sheet and weighing the good against the evil that we do, to see which is greater. Rather He is looking in our hearts to see what we care about, what we love, and what we are trying to achieve. These are the things that carry over into our eternal life and so these are the things that determine the quality of that life. They are reflected in the deeds we do, but the deeds themselves are only outward signs of what is within.

And here’s the best part: the reward of heaven is *inherent* in the love itself, for when we are free to pursue our life’s love, and do so, we are experiencing the happiness of heaven.

What then is heaven like? Well (see the list of quotations attached), it is “like a man who sowed good seed in his field...” It is a state of hope and possibilities, a state of the expectation of fruitfulness and plenty, and the joy of working toward that end. Sure, weeds grow: bad things happen in the course of life despite our best hopes and efforts, but the way of heaven is to let the bad things go, to overlook them as much as possible while they play themselves out, as we focus on the good and do our best to nurture and cultivate that good (see AC 1079).

It is “like a mustard seed, which indeed is the least of all the seeds, but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and nest in its branches.” In other words, it is a way of life that grows from tiny seeds of truth, with the affection for that truth branching out to embrace all our thoughts about the spiritual world.

It is “like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.” Ordinarily leaven corresponds to falsity, but here we see an important positive symbolism, as it represents the uplifting power of a heavenly attitude within us, slowly growing and influencing every aspect of our lives.

It is “like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” The doctrines remind us that we may not recognize the states of heaven within ourselves at first; we may even fight against them, craving worldly things instead. But when we do finally discover what life is all about we won’t settle for anything less, and we invest everything we have in that life. A “field” in the Word corresponds particularly to the doctrine in which the heavenly life can be cultivated. So we don’t just buy the treasure, we buy the whole field, knowing that the treasure is there!

Again, “the kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea....” The Lord earnestly desires the salvation of ALL of the human race, but not everyone can be saved. Some avoid the net, others come in without regard to the quality of their lives and so are rejected, but the point is that the Lord works to include everybody, casting a wide net with the help of His disciples in the world.

Indeed, “the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And ... one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents (a huge amount of money!). But he was not able to pay.” You remember the story: after pleading his case he was forgiven by his master, only to go out and threaten another man who owed him a much lesser amount of money. The lesson here is that of forgiveness and a generous heart: freely we have received, freely we must give (Matthew 10:8) or we are not worthy of heaven. In fact, heaven is not in us, and so we have no place in heaven.

Thus, “the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard....” Again, you know the story: he hired some early, some at the third hour, and then again some at the sixth, the ninth and the eleventh hour. But he paid them all the same! Surely we can see that the Lord is here recognizing the willingness to work, and not the work itself, thus the attitude, the will, the love, as all these men who were hired were in fact *looking for work*. What more evidence do we need that the Lord looks on the heart, not the act alone, and judges according to our intentions?

But the parable of the wedding feast may raise doubts: why did the king throw out the man who came in - as it seems so innocently - without a wedding garment? The reason is that the custom of the day was to provide wedding garments on entrance to the feast! The fact that this man was found without one shows that he had snuck in some other way. On a deeper level, of course, garments correspond to truths, and we cannot be received into heaven unless we receive the truths upon which heaven is established - essentially the truths of His Word in its spiritual sense.

It is the same - but with an emphasis on good - in the parable of the ten virgins. They, too, were invited to a wedding (and remember, a wedding corresponds to the heavenly state of the marriage of goodness and truth), but five of them brought no oil for their lamps. Oil corresponds to the goodness of love, and we certainly cannot get into heaven without that. In fact the light of understanding can’t even shine from the lamp of doctrine without the oil of love.

So where are we left at the end of Matthew? We are left, in the parable of the separation of the sheep and goats, with the powerful and over-riding thought that the kingdom of heaven has been prepared for us from the foundation of the world; that the Lord intends nothing less for any of us, and works constantly to provide every possible opportunity for us to enter into it *with joy*. Indeed, as the doctrines show, we are all “predestined” to heaven (DP #329) even though we can reject this predestination and choose hell if we choose the attitudes and purposes of hell.

But why were “sheep” accepted into heaven and the “goats” not? For one simple reason: those described as sheep cared about other people, and not just about themselves. So, the Lord, said, they cared for *Him* as *He Himself* is present in the lives of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the bound. Of course we know that each one of these conditions represents a state of spiritual desire and need, but the key point is that we recognize these needs in others and care enough to do something about them. So we honour the Lord as He lives in them, and we obey His commandment to love others as He loves us, if necessary laying down our own lives for their sakes – not grudgingly, not resentfully, but earnestly, with conviction, purpose and joy.

Again, as we see in the stories at the beginning of Conjugal Love, heaven is a kingdom of uses and usefulness, not one of idleness or endless worship or partying or conversation. We are built and “programmed” from the beginning to achieve our greatest possible happiness and blessing by serving others, and ultimately by serving the Lord in His efforts to make every human being happy. When we do this we are IN HEAVEN, for then *we can all get what we want* (see HH #399); there is no lack, there is no frustration, there is no jealousy, resentment or fear, “no death, nor sorrow, nor crying, and no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Our trust in the Lord keeps us from being anxious about anything we might need (Matthew 6:33, AC 8478), and our understanding of the Word keeps us focussed on eternal life, the spiritual life within our natural experience, so that we are not overwhelmed by any challenges arising from this world.

And the thing is, once heaven is established in us, then we are in heaven, and the transition from this world to the next is no different for us than simply passing from one place to another.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 13:24-30
Children’s talk on the parable of the wheat and tares
CL #8:selections, and #10:7 - OR - HH #399

(Printed on a card for the service)

“Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed some seed fell by the wayside... Some fell on stony places... And some fell among thorns.... But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop...”

- *Matthew 13:3-9 & 18-23 (heaven not stated but implied)*

- *also Luke 8:4-15 (heaven not stated but implied)*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept his enemy came and sowed tares...”

- *Matthew 13:24-30 & 37-43*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...”

- *Matthew 13:31-32*

- *also Mark 4:30-32 (but “the kingdom of God”)*

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...”

- *Matthew 13:33*

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...”

- *Matthew 13:44*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls...”

- *Matthew 13:45-46*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea, and gathered some of every kind...”

- *Matthew 13:47-50*

“...Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven...”

- *Matthew 18:3-5*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But he was not able to pay...”

- *Matthew 18:23-35*

“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

- *Matthew 19:14*

- *also Mark 10:14-15*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard...”

- *Matthew 20:1-16*

“The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come...”

- *Matthew 22:1-14*

“The kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them...”

- *Matthew 25:1-13*

“(The kingdom of heaven) is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one...”

- *Matthew 25:14-30*

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then he will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides His sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on His left. Then the king will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’”

- *Matthew 25:31-46*

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how...”

- *Mark 4:26-29*

“Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

- *Mark 10:23-27*

On the Delight of Heaven from the doctrines

“One can confirm how great the delight of heaven must be from the fact alone that it is the delight of everyone in heaven to share his delights and blessings with others; and as such is the character of all in the heavens it is clear how immeasurable is the delight of heaven. It has been shown above (n. 268), that in the heavens there is a sharing of all with each and of each with all. Such sharing goes forth from the two loves of heaven, which are, as has been said, love to the Lord and love towards the neighbour. To share their delights is the very nature of these loves. Love to the Lord is such because the Lord's love is a love of sharing everything it has with all, since it wills the happiness of all. There is a like love in every one of those who love Him, because the Lord is in them. From this comes the mutual sharing of the delights of angels with one another. Love towards the neighbour is also of such a nature, as will be seen in what follows. From this it can be established that it is the nature of these loves to share their delights. It is otherwise with the loves of self and of the world...” (Heaven & Hell #399).