

Letting Go and Getting More

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, April 29th, 2018

Jesus said to His disciples, “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. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:24-25).

There are some curious ironies in the Word, not least of which is the idea that self-sacrifice is a way of providing for one’s self. It’s related to what we call delayed gratification, or giving up something of lesser value for something of greater value. It’s not really about denying yourself at all, but rather getting more and better things *for* yourself.

And yet the Lord talked this way a LOT. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, is full of such teachings: beginning with the beatitudes we’re taught to endure pain and hardship not only for the sake of others but *for our own sakes*, that we may “inherit the kingdom of heaven.” We’re taught over and over that the reward for doing good will be the peace and blessing of eternal life. Work now, rest later. Give now, get later. Struggle and suffer now so you can enjoy life in the future. It almost sounds like a savings account or an insurance policy: pay now, benefit later.

“These things I have spoken to you,” Jesus said, “that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

In fact, He said, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matt. 19:21).

In the same vein He told the disciples who were arguing among themselves about who would be the greatest, “If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35); and again to James and John specifically, “whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be *slave* of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

So strong and so convincing was the Lord’s message on this point that the earliest disciples willingly suffered every imaginable form of hardship and persecution as they shared their faith, often to very hostile audiences.

In all these situations (and others, too!) the Lord appealed directly to the disciples’ self-interest, almost *bribing* them to abide by His teachings for the sake of reward. The only real difference between this and any other kind of self-interest is that it promises *spiritual* blessings, not material ones. But that is a *critical* difference, because as we know, the Lord’s whole purpose in creation is that there should be a heaven from the human race, which means that He really does want every one of us to be fulfilled and happy, even if it takes some suffering to get there (see TCR 43).

In fact, the Lord’s tactic here is an accepted principle of all education, namely, that we can only learn new things when we can relate them to things we already know. Likewise our interest or affection can only be directed to new things when we can relate them to things we already love

or find interesting. And since we are all born with strong inclinations toward the loves of self and the world, it is only by an appeal to these loves that we can be led to better things.

So the kingdom of heaven is compared to many different very appealing worldly things – like treasure hidden in a field, or a pearl of great price, or a wedding feast... or a whole city made of solid gold, with foundations of precious stones and gates of pearl. And we are taught that if we do what the Lord tells us to do we will be blessed. So we tend to think we will be blessed in a worldly way.

But despite these analogies the Lord clearly tells us that it's not so, at least, not in the long run. Most of us *will* struggle in this world, we *will* suffer, and we *will* have to lay down our natural lives in order to get this blessing. More importantly, we will have to do it for His sake, because He said so, because real happiness is not only about ourselves, it's about our relationships with others, and taking direction from Him is the only way we can keep from being stuck in our selfishness. Yes, He can bless us, and yes, it's important to want that, but the desire to be blessed is only a means to the end, which requires that we think of the Lord first and really commit to giving up the things that stand in the way. This is hard!

What, for example, does it really mean to us to “sell what we have and give to the poor”? In Mark's Gospel the Lord is quoted as saying we must sell not just *what* we have but “*whatever* we have,” and not only that, but “take up the cross” and follow Him (Mk. 10:21). And you know, the cross is not a symbol of redemption, it is a symbol of torture, thus the temptations we must face and overcome if we want to inherit eternal life. But please note, this teaching clearly is not just about material things, though we will all – sooner or later – have to let go of the stuff of this world. On a deeper level it is about what we “own” internally, that is, the stuff of our own thoughts and affections, or, as the Writings refer to it, “the proprium.”

So what exactly is this “proprium,” and why is it a problem? We know that it's important for us to “own” the thoughts and feelings we experience even though we should acknowledge that they come to us from sources outside of ourselves. The problem is that of or from ourselves we have no idea what will really make us happy. We *think* it will be *this* or *that*, and so we figure we're entitled to feel grumpy and resentful if we don't get what we want – which just makes things worse – when in fact we're probably wrong anyway.

For example, in marriage a man may think he deserves better treatment than he's getting from his wife, or that he deserves *a better wife*. Well, why is that? Did he not choose this wife for reasons that were important to him at the time? Did he not commit himself to her? Suppose he made this decision for foolish or self-centered reasons: does this justify a new decision to think he deserves better? What about that commitment? What about making himself a better husband? If indeed the decision was based on poor judgment or unrealistic expectations, or even without full knowledge or understanding of himself OR his partner, why should he now expect this *other* person to change? Should he not rather pray to the Lord to understand how he himself can do better in his marriage, even if it means giving up those foolish expectations?

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Or suppose you have great plans and expectation for your career. Surely there's nothing wrong with that! The hope of success can be a great incentive; in fact it's very important to prevent

discouragement in the face of all the hard work and the inevitable failures you may face on the way to that goal. But things change: the demand for certain goods or services may evaporate, or you may find that working in that field is not as rewarding as you thought it would be. It may even be that after working in that field for some time you find the goal itself to be unworthy, unimportant or inappropriate for some reason. What then? Well, then it's time to let go of your old goals and set a new, more appropriate goal. But there's no need to look back and think of the past as a waste of time; like the disciples who at first followed the Lord for the wrong reasons we can look back and appreciate *and be thankful* for what we've learned, and even for the Lord's providence in letting us figure this out in our own time, as if of ourselves.

The same can be true in many other situations. Even participation in sports teams can serve as an illustration: players are encouraged to train hard and compete as a team for the sake of a winning season, a trophy, prestige or even financial gain. But in the process they learn teamwork, self-discipline, a whole lot of practical skills and, hopefully, sportsmanship. They may also make life-long friends. On one hand it's just a game, and the immediate goal is winning. On the other hand it can be a means of learning practical co-operation.

But really what we're talking about here is whether our goals lead us to heaven or not. So in the sports analogy striving to win *at all cost* could lead to all sorts of evils. This we must *avoid at all cost!* But striving to win with integrity can build character and positive relationships and lead to heavenly blessings, and this we can embrace as what the Writings call a "mediate" or intermediate good, a legitimate means to a heavenly end.

So the Lord said,

"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire" (Matt. 18:8-9).

Now let's think about this. Does a hand or a foot or an eye really offend? No, not usually. It's the mind that directs these organs in appropriate or inappropriate ways. And by the way it's not about doing these things to *other* people; it's about ourselves! So if we use a hand or foot to do something hurtful, it's not really the hand or foot that has to be cut off, but the *intention* to do that harm. And if we look at someone or something in a licentious or covetous way, it's not the eye itself that has to be plucked out; after all, it's only a lens, but the licentiousness or covetousness that uses the eye in this way: that's what has to be removed. The hands and feet in Scripture correspond to the functions of the natural level of *the mind*, specifically the level of planning or intending to do something, and the eye corresponds to understanding. These are the things that we need to address if we want to be blessed.

But again, this is hard, and in some ways really painful, hence the metaphor of the cross, and of cutting off a hand or foot, or plucking out an eye. In fact, who could even do these things to himself unless perhaps he was caught in some kind of hopeless bind and it was the only way to free himself and save his life? ...*Oh, wait*. Spiritually speaking that's exactly what we're talking about: getting free and being saved. It's just that most of the time we don't realize how serious the situation is.

So let's go back to some of the practical issues we face and thoughtfully ask how they might be preventing us from experiencing the happiness we want, and then also ask what we can do about them.

Of course it goes without saying that the issues of *your* concern may have nothing to do with marriage or your career. Instead they might have to do with various fears and insecurities, poor health, financial stress, anger, resentment, bad habits or any of a hundred other personal disappointments. And like a lot of people you may be asking, "What did I do to deserve this?!"

Well, the answer is, maybe nothing. Or maybe something. The point is to think about it, reflect on what real happiness is, and LET GO of the stuff that gets in the way. This is the first principle of regeneration. We all know it, we just have a hard time doing it. "Shun evils as sins," then good can flow in from the Lord and transform us. There are several principles that can help us with this if we will just remember them:

1. Real life is spiritual, it is not natural or physical at all. You can't take it with you.
2. Real happiness is about being useful to others, it is not about getting what you want.
3. All of our thoughts and affections flow in from the spiritual world; we only make them our own by choosing to accept them. Choosing is easy.
4. All power comes from the Lord, and the Lord will do the work if we ask Him nicely.
5. We are social creatures; we need the inspiration and support of spiritually-minded friends in this world. We *are* stronger together. This is one of the uses of the church.

All that said, you may actually feel that you're doing pretty well: you may not have any major worries, your finances may be reasonably secure, you may not have any major pains or health issues, your personal relationships may all be in good order and you may not find anything in this world particularly upsetting. Well, if that is so for you, **congratulations!** Just remember, a person's quality of life in this world is NOTHING compared to his or her eternal life. Even if everything is going well on the natural level it may be prudent for us all to consider whether there is anything missing on a deeper level: -

- Is the Lord real and present to us in His Divine Humanity?
- Do we read, know and reflect on the Word as we should?
- Are we comfortable in a conversation about spiritual knowledge and affection?
- Do we engage in real, interior self-examination?
- Is private prayer a daily part of our lives?

This list is not meant to be threatening or intimidating; it's just a reminder that we do live in this world, and that it takes a serious, conscious effort to refocus our thought and affection for the real blessings of spiritual life, both now and in the life after death. Can we do it? OF course we can! – But only with the Lord's help and guidance, through His Word, and with daily practice.

Amen.

Lessons: 2 Kings 5:1-14
 Children's Talk: The Lord has a better plan.
 Psalm 33 and True Christian Religion #530