

Keeping it Real

Being Honest with Ourselves

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“All things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”
~ Matthew 21:22

Now here’s a remarkable thing: we know that the Lord is in charge, that He created us and that without Him we can’t do anything. We know our job is to follow Him and that for the most part we’re not very good at it. And yet somehow a lot of the time we seem to think that we deserve or have some right to a better life than what we are experiencing right now.

Why is that?

One factor certainly is the appearance of tremendous unfairness, not only in our own lives but in the lives of millions who for no other reason than the circumstances of their birth suffer all sorts of illness, persecution and pain. Still, we know that the purpose of life is not peace and comfort in this world. It is preparation for the peace and happiness of eternal life in heaven. This qualifies everything. Of course that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t *strive* to do better – for ourselves and for everyone around us – but the fact is that even if we are born into wealth and privilege (and perhaps especially if we are) we will still have to struggle to overcome our loves of self and the world, pride, arrogance, resentment and so on, and those struggles can be very painful.

Another factor may be that the Lord has promised us more than we have, and we may mistake that promise for some sort of entitlement. Hearing His teaching, for example, that “whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive,” we might easily jump to the conclusion that we can have whatever we want. After all, He said this a number of times in a number of different ways. There’s also a wonderful statement in Psalm 37 that seems to convey the same idea, where we read,

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord, *and He shall give you the desires of your heart*”
(vv. 3-4).

The critical issue here, however, is not that the Lord gives us *whatever we want*, but that He gives us *what to want* when we commit ourselves to Him. It’s the same with our faith and belief: what we ask in prayer, *believing in the Lord*, we can receive precisely because it will be in harmony with His love and wisdom concerning our eternal life. Worldly disappointments are not just inevitable but necessary as means to this end. Remember, the Lord in Matthew said, “Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” (Matt. 18:7), or again more potently in Luke (17:1), “It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!”

So what is it that we really deserve in this life? Anything? Could it be that in Providence we only deserve exactly what we have? What does entitlement really mean, anyway?

Interestingly, our civil society is quite polarized these days between some we call liberal and

others we call conservative (although these may really be misnomers). Among other things liberals are inclined to say we all have a right to affordable health care, and conservatives that we all have a right to carry guns. *Rest assured, we are not going to argue politics here, the question is, what constitutes a right?* In this context it is defined by civil law mandating one thing or another in a given jurisdiction according to the best judgment of voters or of people in authority. ***But actually in civil and in social life there is no such thing as a right, only responsibility,*** and that responsibility is defined primarily by the Lord in His Word.

Do we, for example, have any responsibility individually or in a corporate sense to care for one another? Of course we do; it's the second of the Two Great Commandments. The only question is how best to do that. Do we have any responsibility to defend ourselves against abusive force? Yes, of course we do, but in the context of the Lord's clear teaching it is not primarily about protecting *ourselves* but about defending what is good. Can we protect against abuse by withholding care? No, not really; it's a matter of *what kind of care* is most effective. And so it goes. The arguments are not so much about rights as they are about defining our responsibilities.

To give just one more politically charged example, we have in this country the division over the so-called right to life or the so-called right to choose, both of which terms unfortunately tend to mask the real issues of responsibility. Who is responsible for what, and when – and how?

The trouble with responsibility, though, is that along with it the Lord has given us freedom, or at any rate, free will. And the teaching on Divine Providence is that people act in freedom according to their own reason (i.e., their own rationality – DP #71 & 74). What this means is that *the only real "rights" we have are the internal rights to think and will as we please.* We can do this constructively with the welfare of others in mind, or we can do it with arrogance. We can do it in the spirit of truth and understanding or we can do it based on misunderstanding, lies and self-deception. Either way, it is almost inevitable that we will believe what we are doing is fully justified, if not totally correct. And that is a problem.

So how do we solve this problem? How do we find common ground when we disagree fundamentally about what is good or evil, true or false? In democracies we vote on it and in most cases the majority wins. In theocracies and dictatorships the people are simply told what to do. But how can we deal with this in the church? It's great to know that the Lord has revealed the truth to us, and told us what is good and evil, but the literal sense of the Word alone is over 1,000 pages long, and the Heavenly Doctrine covers more than 18,000 pages, so it's a big challenge to know and understand it all. Besides, we are only ever really enlightened to the degree that our loves allow it. So if we're in a selfish or resentful state it's pretty hard to know the truth. We can do it, of course: the understanding can be raised into the light of heaven even when the will is not – thank goodness! – but unless we apply a great deal of self-discipline to this process we will end up right where we started, with no lasting improvement. This is why the Writings are so urgent in their appeal to us to shun the evils of all kinds that we find within ourselves as sins against the Lord before we even try to follow Him.

So if we're facing some tragic or offensive situation, for example, we can be indignant or we can be, well, sad! We can be resentful or we can be concerned, and if we're concerned we should be thinking about what we can do to improve the situation. This almost always involves some degree of self-examination and, yes, repentance!

What? – you say? Why should we repent of someone else’s evil?

Well, let’s be clear: we CAN’T repent *of someone else’s evil*. In any case we are hardly ever responsible for the decisions other people make. That is obvious in most cases of deliberate and especially accidental evils. But if our first reaction is outrage, then we might need to think more deeply. We’re not going to be very helpful to ourselves or anyone else when we’re feeling angry or resentful. Think of the Lord, calmly accepting even His own crucifixion. Far from being upset about it He had predicted it numerous times, and when it came to pass He had nothing but compassion for those who did it, saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Outrage and indignation are not particularly useful emotions when it comes to understanding.

Sadness, however, and a deep sense of humility, recognizing that we are *all* inclined to evils of every kind, can lead us to compassion and open our eyes to the spiritual causes of our own problems and a whole range of unexpected resources to help others.

We all make mistakes. Just because we only get caught once in a while doesn’t mean we have a right to any special privileges. Rather everything we have is a gift from the Lord, just as surely here on earth as it is in heaven. Of course we have to work hard to get what we need, but that is not because it isn’t free; it’s because we need the sense of ownership that comes from *feeling* as if we’ve earned it, even though we know better. It’s because our sense of identity is all tied up with our decisions to do this or that instead of the other thing. And it’s because we need to learn how to work *together* to receive what the Lord provides.

But the bottom line is that we don’t actually *earn* anything. We don’t deserve anything, we’re not entitled to anything, and, by the way, of or from ourselves we can’t *make* anything good happen. It is *all* given by the Lord according to His Word. That is why we have the teaching of our third lesson today (AC #5957) and also *Divine Love and Wisdom* #335, emphasizing the importance of “humility, worship, thanksgiving and much else from a person,” not for His sake but for our own sakes, since then we are in a position “to accept good from the Lord, since then we are separated from self-love and its evils ***which stand in the way of our accepting it.***”

This is further elaborated in a striking passage from the *Arcana*, where the subject is the love of self, within which there is a kind of flame, “and from it a feeling of delight which so affect a person’s life that he can scarcely conceive of eternal happiness consisting of anything else.”

“Mutual love however, which alone is heavenly, consists in not only saying but also acknowledging and believing that one is utterly undeserving, and something worthless and filthy, which the Lord in His infinite mercy is constantly drawing away and holding back from the hell into which the person constantly tries, and indeed longs, to cast himself. He acknowledges and believes this because it is the truth. Not that the Lord or any angel wishes him to acknowledge and believe it just to gain his submission, but to prevent his vaunting himself when he is in fact such. This would be like excrement calling itself pure gold, or a dung-fly a bird of paradise. To the extent therefore that a person acknowledges and believes that he really is what he in fact is, *he departs from self-love and its desires*, and loathes himself. (And) to the extent that this happens he receives from the Lord heavenly love, that is, mutual love, which is willing to serve all.” (AC #1594:3-4).

Please note! The purpose of this passage is not to make us feel bad about ourselves, *it is to make us feel good about the Lord* and the fact that He really can replace our selfish loves with heavenly loves and so bless us beyond our wildest imaginations. What this also implies is that He can replace our sense of entitlement – including outrage, resentment or even quiet desperation – with a sense of real fulfillment in the good of love toward our neighbors.

It will not be easy. The love of self does not just passively concede to higher loves. It craves attention and will do almost anything to get what it wants, feeling lost without the acknowledgment it seeks. We try so hard.... If nothing else we want recognition! We want to feel appreciated. We want to experience affirmation for who and what we are, just as we are, not to mention what we believe, whether right or wrong!

But do we have a right to these feelings? Is it appropriate for us to believe that we *deserve* anything other than what we have? *Of course* we should strive for more! *Of course* we should strive for better! But if our striving is all about ourselves and not about the uses we can serve for others we're going to be in for a rude shock when we wake up some day in hell. And by the way that hell could be in this world, too. It is a world of constant competition and frustration, a world of regret and disillusionment, a world of greed, covetousness, opportunism, deceitfulness, and ultimately isolation.

But look on the bright side! Though we are, left to ourselves, really miserable creatures prone to all sorts of pain and disorder – much worse in fact, than animals since we are *not* born into the order of our lives – when we accept the Lord's goodness and truth we can be filled with tremendous love and wisdom! We can be His friends (John 15:15). We can be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world!" (Matt. 5:13-16). We can "heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons." (Matt. 10:8). We can be at peace even though our natural world is swirling in turmoil and disappointment (John 14:27). And we can be saved (Mark 16:16).

Just as surely as we can live in hell from day to day in this world, we can live in heaven. We can be in the sphere of angels encouraging us even as we encourage them. We can be free of all that anxiety people experience when they live only for themselves. We can feel truly fulfilled and affirmed in useful service to others – even though the benefits of our work may not be obvious.

To be saved is to be healthy and well. That is the real meaning of the word. And we *are* healthy and well in spirit when we cooperate with the Lord. We can't save ourselves. We can't pull ourselves out of a pit with a rope that isn't there. But when we accept the help that the Lord offers us He will pull us up. And then we can join the community of others who understand how to be helpful and who's real purpose in life is to do so.

Amen.

Lessons: *Luke 9:18-27*
 Children's Talk on giving up one life and getting another

Psalms 51:1-17 and Arcana Caelestia #5957