

Doing the Impossible

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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There is an old saying that God never gives us more than we can handle. *It's not true.* In fact He often gives us way more than we can handle – by ourselves. And one reason for this is so that we will learn to put our faith in Him, and seek the help that only He can give us.

As a theme today we are looking at doing the impossible, mainly (considering the self centred, often worldly-minded people that we tend to be) the challenge of getting into heaven or a heavenly state of mind. In that connection a single verse of Mark's Gospel stands out. It is about the rich young man who came to the Lord asking what he should do to have eternal life. And when this man was told to sell all that he had and take up the cross and follow Him, the disciples, we read, "were astonished beyond measure, saying among themselves, 'Who then can be saved?'"

"But looking at them, Jesus said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'" (Mark 10:26-27).

A similar teaching is given in the very next chapter of Mark, where we find the disciples astonished again, this time at how fast a certain fig tree withered up after the Lord cursed it. And then, to emphasize the power of faith in God He said,

"...Assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says.

"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them." (Mark 11:23-24).

Finally, all these statements echo something said by the angel, Gabriel, in the beginning of Luke's Gospel when he told Mary that she would be the mother of the Lord. As she wondered how this could be, the angel told her about her cousin, Elizabeth, who like Sarah in Genesis had been barren but was then pregnant in her old age, "For," he said, "with God *nothing* shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

Still, the challenge to any thinking person with these teachings is to see how they can be true without the whole order of the universe being totally destroyed, or at the very least one person's prayers interfering with another's. Two men – or three, or five – might want to marry the same woman; several men and women may, and usually do, want to be elected to the same political position, and often hundreds apply for the same advertised job, *but only one gets what he wants.* Illustrations could fill pages: one man prays for rain while another prays for sun – both for good and just reasons; soldiers on one side pray that they will win the war, soldiers on the other side that they will win; some pray for liberal government, some for conservative; and thousands pray they'll win the lottery, *but generally speaking only one wins.*

Is it really just a matter of who prays the most earnestly, the most sincerely, the most faithfully, without any doubts? Or does the answer lie elsewhere?

In the New Church we know that this teaching is really directing us to spiritual things. How do we know this? Well, the most obvious reason is that He was constantly challenging His disciples to rise *above* worldly things, saying, for example, “What is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Again, He clearly said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). In fact the Gospels are full of warnings to the disciples of persecution, involving great pain and hardship in this world, but the promise is that “He who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13), in other words, these things are unavoidable, and to be expected, the reward being in heaven, *not necessarily on earth* (see Matt. 5:10-12)!

Another reason we know that this teaching about prayer has to do with spiritual things is that the promise in its literal sense is so outrageous it couldn't possibly be done without completely disrupting the natural order of things! (Well, alright, with enough determination, money and influence, you could move a mountain into the sea – truckload by truckload perhaps, or with tons of high explosives, but the point really is that for the simple Galilean fishermen this would have been as impossible as driving a camel through the eye of a needle (Mk 10:25).) But with God it is entirely possible – by means of an earthquake, volcano, meteorite, or any other cosmic event of His choice. Still, even for God to move a mountain on the strength of one man's prayer would be to violate the laws of nature, making the world utterly unpredictable, as our environment would change from moment to moment with every change in people's attitudes, perceptions and faith!

What, then, is the point of this teaching about doing the impossible? Going back to Mark 10 and the rich young man, isn't it obviously about eternal life? And if so, isn't it obvious that the mountain referred to in chapter 11 is a metaphor, in effect an obstacle to spiritual life that must be removed so that we can find our way to heaven?

And yet even this - especially this - truly is impossible without the Lord! That is the reason behind the disciples' astonishment. In fact, that's the whole point. Just as there is no way we can move a mountain on our own in this natural world, so there is no way we can remove the obstacles to our spiritual life on our own. We need the Lord's help, indeed we need the Lord to do it for us.

What, then, is this mountain? Well, of course, mountains in the Word correspond to very positive states – good states, elevated states of enlightenment and broad perspective. But they can also represent something opposite. So in this case a mountain represents pride, arrogance or conceit, the feeling that we are “above” others in our world. Stepping back to the 10th chapter of Mark it is exactly like the wealth of the rich man that the Lord said makes it so hard to enter the kingdom of God. In general wealth represents knowledge, in this case the *conceit* of knowledge, the thought that we can rely on our knowledge to get us to heaven. And, of course, knowledge helps, but the idea, the attitude that we are self-sufficient is a huge obstacle in our spiritual lives, a major problem that is extremely hard to overcome. This is the mountain that must be cast into the sea. And this is the mountain that WILL BE cast into the sea (which in this case represents the falsity and turmoil of hell) *if we ask the lord in faith, believing*.

But how can we do this? And how does the Lord remove that mountain for us? If you really think about it you will almost certainly find that we all tend to like our own ideas better than others' and to think well of ourselves compared with others. But even when we don't, then another problem

emerges as we tend to take unhealthy responsibility for our own states of inadequacy and depression, blaming ourselves and then feeling even more depressed, as if we really had the power from within ourselves to change. This simply isn't true! We can't change our own loves or attitudes any more than we can do heart surgery on ourselves!

The key to this whole dilemma, the Writings teach, first of all is to acknowledge that of or from ourselves we are nothing! – nothing, that is, except vessels receptive of life from the Lord. If we can “get” this, and also get the corollary that this life can be perverted by the hells, then as we read in our third lesson (DP 320) we can relax and get a sense of peace about what is going on within us. We can understand that WE are neither good nor evil, but that the goodness or the evil flows into us from the other world and is counted as ours only to the extent that we accept it and identify with it.

But then, how do we dissociate ourselves from the evil, and keep ourselves from taking credit for the good? Again, the answer is extremely simple. We have to shun evils as sins against the Lord and do what we are taught according to the Word. These are outward actions as well as the disciplines of our natural minds. We can't help what flows into our thoughts, any more than we can keep birds from flying overhead, but when they flow in we can decide in a moment whether to welcome or reject them, just as when we see black birds coming we can shoo them away, and certainly keep them from making nests in our hair!

This is in accord with what the Doctrines call the second law of the Divine Providence, “that a person should, as if of himself, remove evils as sins in external (life); and thus and not otherwise can the Lord remove the evils in the internal, and then at the same time in the external” (DP 100). For us to suppose that we can hold back the power and influence of the hells, that is, the evils and falsities that press upon us from the hells, with our meagre strength, would be like thinking that we could singlehandedly hold back the enormous pressure of the sea as it bears down on a levee or a dike (AC 1661). It can't be done! But then, with the Lord's help it's easy!

Let's look at some examples. And remember, the Lord said, “All things, (meaning all spiritual things) whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matt. 21:22).

Suppose you have a tendency to be resentful of others, and to feel somehow that the Lord doesn't care as much about you as He does about the people who have some advantage over you. A first step in your effort to attract the Lord's help with this might be simply to acknowledge that you have these feelings, and that they are bad. A moment's reflection, then, will serve to remind you that these feelings have come into your mind from the hells; they are not your feelings until or unless you take credit for them, or ownership of them, and even if you have taken ownership of them you can still disown them, and send them away. But you can't yank your own heart out of your body and replace it with a new one; you have to ask the Lord for help, which is done primarily by turning to His Word, and to the doctrine drawn from His Word, so that you can see how to co-operate with Him. Now, if you shun that evil, not because you hate it or find it depressing or see that it is interfering with your enjoyment of life, but *because it is a sin and offensive to God*, He will inspire you and strengthen you and hold you in the process of rejecting it. Then at the same time, little by little (so He doesn't wipe out your sense of identity) He will create a new heart, a new will IN the understanding free of resentment and filled instead with gratitude for what is yours from Him.

A similar thing might apply in the case of a troubled marriage. Of course in this case you can only do *your* part; your partner must also seek the Lord's help, but *your* first priority is to do *your* best, and pray to keep from blaming your partner for all the problems. The result of this, done in all humility, is that it will make *you* a better person for your partner, which MAY help the other person to do better. But even if this doesn't follow, and things come apart, the net result is that *you* will still be a better person for it, and will grow spiritually through it.

Again, suppose your challenge is that you like everything done your way, and you have trouble letting go, letting others have their way, and most important, really enjoying the fact that they are *having* it their way. If we attempt to address a problem like this from within ourselves we will find that it is as impossible a task as moving a mountain, or adding a cubit to our height. Our self-will is that strong! But if we welcome the fact that it is impossible, rather than fretting about it, and ask the Lord for help, He will be there in all His power and He will do the work with us and for us.

The same steps apply as in the resentment we just discussed (see TCR 530). The first thing is to acknowledge that you have this problem, then acknowledge that it is a problem; remind yourself that it's not your problem unless you accept it and buy into it, ask the Lord to help you (by going to His Word for guidance, not just – merely – by praying), then shun that evil because it is a sin and offensive to Him. You will be amazed at how the Lord gets the job done. Indeed, you may be startled by what happens, as the first disciples were astonished by the miracles they saw.

One more example: suppose you really struggle with your basic faith in God! Is He or isn't He? Does He or doesn't He...? How can He allow this or that...? Why should I compromise my intellectual honesty to make that leap of faith? To this the doctrines reply, "If anyone thinks within himself, or says to another, 'Who can have that internal acknowledgment of truth which is faith? I cannot,' I will tell him how he may have it: shun evils as sins and approach the Lord, and you will have as much as you desire" (D Faith 12). How? Why? Because when you approach the Lord sincerely, and honestly and deeply consider what He says, you will see that it is true, and your doubts will fly away. – But you have to give your doubts to Him.

In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Matt 6:7-8).

The trick is to ask the right questions – about eternal life, not just about this worldly life; to seek the Lord and His righteousness – not just the pleasures of our own fulfilment; and to knock at the door of opportunity and determination to do what is right for the right reasons – because the Lord knows best! If we respond in these ways to His promise of "anything in (His) name," He will give it and we will have it, "For with God all things are possible."

Amen.

Lessons:

Genesis 22:1-14, with a children's talk on the Nature of Temptations

Mark 10:23-27 & 11:12-14, 20-24

Divine Providence #320