

First Things First

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, November 28th, 2010

“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear ... But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:31, 33).

On Thanksgiving Day we read together from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 26, about the offerings of first fruits that the tribes of Israel were to bring to the Lord when they entered the promised land. Today, reading from Joshua, chapter 24, we heard a recitation of the Lord’s care and provision for the tribes both prior to and during the conquest of that land, and noted especially the verse where Joshua, speaking for the Lord, said,

“I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant” (v. 13).

Of course it is true that although they didn’t build or plant any of these things they still had to fight for them, so they certainly had what we might call a vested interest. And were it not for the several defeats they suffered when they assumed too much, thinking they could conquer the Canaanites without the Lord’s help, we can easily imagine them taking credit for their victories and feeling as if they were OWED everything they gained, rather than having it given to them. But we know the truth: *they owed everything to the Lord*, for without Him they would have remained slaves in Egypt. This is the point of both of the lessons – from Deuteronomy and from Joshua – and it was in order to reinforce that point that they were commanded to make an offering of the first fruits of their new land, giving it *back* to the Lord.

Again, on Thanksgiving we took note of the fact that the Lord commands such acts of gratitude for our own good, and that when we acknowledge our blessings and give thanks we actually do become happier and more fulfilled in many ways than we would be otherwise.

Now, today, as advertised, our subject is priorities, and specifically the difference between what is essential and what is merely instrumental, or between the end and the means. In short, we all have LOTS of things we’d LIKE to do, but a conscience from the Word teaches what is really important, and what is really important really ought to be number one on our list of things to do.

What we will try to do today is tie these ideas together, that is, the idea of giving of the first fruits of our labors in thanksgiving to the Lord and the whole concept of establishing priorities.

In 1 Kings 17 the prophet, Elijah, was sent to a woman of Zarephath and told that she would provide food for him during the famine that was plaguing the land. But when he asked her for some bread she told him frankly that what little she had was almost gone and that she was preparing one last, little meal for herself and her son before they would perish. So imagine her wonder – and her faith – when the prophet told her to make HIM a small cake first, and then, afterward, make some for herself and her son! Of course you know the conclusion of the story:

“...she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord...” (vv. 15-16).

There is a similar story in the Luke about a woman who put only “two mites” into the treasury of the temple, as distinct from the wealthy who put in much more. And Jesus said, “Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty has put in *all the livelihood that she had*” (Luke 21:1-4).

In another story He told a rich young man to “sell all that he had and give to the poor,” and that then he would have treasure in heaven (Mark 10:17). But of course the Lord does not mean that we should sell every *natural* thing we have and so make *ourselves* objects of charity; He was referring to the man’s pride, and as He later said, his TRUST in riches, saying by comparison that other things – spiritual things – are far more important.

Remember the woman who used a whole bottle of very precious oil to anoint the Lord’s feet, and Judas complained about the “waste.” But Jesus said, “Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. *For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always*” (John 12:8).

So in Matthew the Lord said “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (6:33). And again, “What is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (16:26). The teaching in this context is that the Lord really does ask us to lay down our own lives for His sake, to practice self-denial and to follow HIM despite whatever losses we may suffer.

Now obviously some of these losses are going to be material. People who are rigorous about the truth and who honor the Lord above themselves may not get all the benefits that others do. And the very fact that they willingly give as offerings to the Lord of the first fruits of their material wealth pretty much ensures that they will have less to start with than those who don’t.

But the Lord persistently tells us that the benefits of doing this far outweigh and far outlast the short-term gains we get by keeping everything – as if we earned it all without His help and deserve every bit of it.

Now if you think you see where this is going, and you’re bracing for a lecture about tithing you can relax. As far as I can see the doctrines of the New Church are crystal clear that the tithe, or 10% of one’s income that the literal sense of the Word requires as an offering to the Lord, is a purely representative figure. It is not to be taken literally any more than the teachings that we should sell *everything*, or take up a cross, or cut off a hand or pluck out an eye if it offends us. Nowhere in the Writings does it say we have to give 10% of our income to the church.

On the other hand, what the tithe represents is *everything*. We are clearly and repeatedly told in every form of Divine revelation that we owe a debt of gratitude for *everything* we own, and that this debt is to be paid in the form of offerings of the first fruits of whatever we gain – in other words, the first thoughts we have about any new venture, not the last ones after we’ve already

committed ourselves, the first affections, above any affections for ourselves or even our own family members, the first work we do, that we may honor and recognize the Lord's commandments in our outward lives, and yes, the first dollars, too, not the last ones we have left when everything else we want has been paid for.

As everybody knows, time is money, so the first fruits of our labors may also be the first hours of the day or week, not the last ones if it feels convenient or we're not too tired.

But speaking of time, the Writings explain that there are two ways in which things can be first, namely, *first in time*, as just mentioned, or *first in end*, that is, the ultimate goal or objective. In this connection we are taught that our conscious spiritual development, or regeneration, begins with learning and understanding the Lord's Word. Only by first knowing what is true can we then make a conscious decision to live according to it. So, the Writings say, truth with us is first in time. But good, or the life of charity from love to the Lord, is first in END, so all the time we spend learning the truth dedicated to the end or purpose of doing what is good includes that good from a spiritual point of view and blends the two "firsts" together.

And since these are the things that get us started on the whole process of regeneration the first fruits mentioned in the Word actually represent all the *goods and truths* we get from Him and that we ought to dedicate to Him. Thus the offering of first fruits as we understand it is not in itself an offering of time or money, it is the dedication of everything good and true that we get from the Lord back to the Lord.

But what does this mean?

Well, first of all it means acknowledging Him and not taking credit for what HE does for us. How else, apart from pure arrogance, can we account for all the little miracles that put us in the right spot at just the right time for something really good to happen? At the same time it means recognizing that our lives are in His hands so that when we co-operate with Him good things can happen, no matter what problems or mistakes we may have suffered in the past. And it means looking for the good and accepting the dispensations of Providence even when they do not suit us. After all, we have a lot to learn, and some of it can only be learned in the school of hard knocks. Look back, and consider what you have gained from the hardships you have endured.

But now, here's where it gets interesting. For the spiritual aspects of our lives in this world always rest on the natural. They cannot be separated. As the old saying goes, "We value what we pay for," whether we pay in time, toil or treasure. So if we value what the Lord provides for us we will take the time and make the effort to pursue it. And if we recognize the good – even the potential good – that the Lord can do through the church (not just in our own lives but in the lives of thousands in our neighborhoods alone) we will do whatever we can to support it first, and then see what's left for other discretionary uses. Remember, the church, and specifically the New Church, is the only institution in human society dedicated completely to teaching about the Lord. It may be flawed but it's all we've got, and every member can help it do better.

As the saying goes, "He who loves or wills the end must also love or will the means" (TCR 13, 43, 142, etc.).

But consider the third commandment – to honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Even though our calendars say otherwise, most of us tend to think of Monday as the first day of the week. It's not. Sunday is. And the reason we start the week with Sunday is so that we can offer the Lord the first fruits of our labors by participating in some kind of worship and instruction. If we value the bonds of common ideals and mutual support we will worship together and hear the same words of instruction together so that we can share and discuss them together. But whether in a congregation or on our own the act of worship requires a commitment on both the spiritual and the natural level. We have to dedicate the time, we have to focus our attention, we have to create the space, and we have to pay the bills to make this happen. We have to make it a priority.

But when it is a priority other things fall into place, for then the life of the proprium, or self-will, is set aside so that the Lord's life can flow in unobstructed, and the Lord's life includes all the wisdom we will ever need for this world and the next.

Now of course worship is not just going to church, or even doing pious things at home. Worship in the spiritual sense is living according to the Lord's Word. But that also requires our natural commitment, discipline and self-sacrifice, all of which are means to the end. It means making time to read the Word and learn and understand the stories. It means looking for the good in others, which (let's face it) is sometimes a chore, overlooking their idiosyncracies and faults, helping then even when it's inconvenient, and so on. It means speaking the truth from love and not from anger or resentment, which is often a struggle for us, and doing what is good for goodness' sake, whether we like the people who benefit or not. In short, it always involves what seems to us like a big sacrifice, even though what we are giving up is really stuff we don't need anyway because the Lord always gives us more and better in the long run.

Again, consider running a business. If there are shareholders a primary goal of the company will be to make money. But is that the whole end in view? Of course not! The end in view is that the company will provide useful products or services, that it will do this with integrity, and that all the employees and customers will get the satisfaction of good work well done. The money earned will be a means to the end, to keep the company going and to provide the owners and stockholders the further means to do their own good works, whether obligations or benefactions.

All these are just examples. But they illustrate the principle of offering the first fruits of our labors to the Lord – setting aside our own loves and opinions and doing whatever we do for His sake because it is the right thing to do.

In the letter of the Word there are plain statements of the truth and veiled statements filled with symbolism that we must learn to understand. This Thanksgiving weekend we will all be richer, happier, and better off in every way if we will recognize this as a plain statement of the truth: –

“Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear ... But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:31, 33).

Amen.

Lessons: Joshua 24:1-15, Matthew 6:25-34, True Christian Religion 336:1-2