

LESSONS

1st Lesson: 2 Kings 5: 9 – 14

9. Then Naaman went with his horses and chariot, and he stood at the door of Elisha's house. 10. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you, and you shall be clean." 11. But Naaman became furious, and went away and said, "Indeed, I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy.' 12. Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. 13. And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean'?" 14. So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

2nd Lesson: Matthew 20: 1 – 16

1. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4. and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. 5. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 6. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' 7. They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' 8. "So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' 9. And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. 10. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. 11. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, 12. saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' 13. But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14. Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' 16. So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

3rd Lesson: AC 6119

Spiritual death takes place because of the lack of truth...What is implied by the notion that spiritual death takes place when there is a lack of truth is that spiritual life consists in

deeds carried out in accordance with truths, consequently in useful services. For people endowed with spiritual life possess a yearning and desire for truths with life in view - that is, their end in view is to lead a life according to those truths - thus with useful services in view. Therefore the extent to which they can absorb truths, in accordance with which useful services are to be rendered, determines how much spiritual life they possess, because it determines how much of the light of intelligence and wisdom they possess.

S E R M O N

Life Really Is Fair

A Sermon

by

Rev. Michael E. Ferrell

Take what is yours and go your way. Matthew 20: 14

The concepts of fairness and equality are embedded in our culture. In our modern society, as diverse as it now is, we frown upon things like prejudice, injustice and bias. We're taught to strive for equality because treating people with decency and respect is a virtue.

One area of life in which fairness and equality are particularly important is the payment of wages. This is especially so when a laborer "honestly, justly, and faithfully carries out the work of his occupation or employment" (Charity 158). Therefore, as the Heavenly Doctrine teaches, "one of the duties of charity" is "the payment of wages to workmen" (TCR 432).

But let's turn to the literal sense of the Word for basic simple truths regarding the payment of wages. The Arcana provides us two reasons for taking this approach. One, a person "first learns truth from the literal sense of the Word, which is general truth accommodated to the apprehension of the external man" (AC 9034: 3). And second, "the literal sense of the Word is for people who are being introduced into more internal truths of faith" (AC 9025: 2).

The Lord teaches in Leviticus, "you shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning" (Leviticus 19: 13). A simple truth is do not delay the payment of wages to laborers who have provided services to you. Otherwise the laborer is denied use of his earned money by which he provides for himself and his family, and pays taxes and other civil assessments. The failure to pay his wages can impede a laborer's opportunity to continue serving society in general.

Consider the Word in Deuteronomy: "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy" (Deuteronomy 24: 14). Taking unfair advantage of a laborer can obstruct the laborer's commitment to faithfully do his work. Cruelty directed toward a laborer could

result in taking away or stealing his motivation and enthusiasm. Oppression of a laborer can also deny society of the use and benefits of the laborer's services. In a sense, it is like stealing from society when a laborer is unable to dutifully perform his work because he has been oppressed or treated unfairly.

In describing the kingdom of heaven, the Lord told a parable about an owner of a vineyard who seemed to have cheated his workers. At first glance this parable implies that the kingdom of heaven is a place where people will be deceived. The appearance is that the man who governs heaven commits fraud and does not care about how he treats his workers. Now, in a symbolic sense the landowner is the Lord. But we know that "the Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works" (Psalm 145: 9). Without exception, He loves everyone dearly.

Near the end of His life in the world the Lord left Galilee and came south into the region of Judea. Multitudes followed Him as was the usual case (Matthew 19: 1-1-2). As was their habit the Pharisees tested Him, on this particular occasion, about divorce (Matthew 19: 3-10). A young ruler questioned Him about inheriting eternal life; the Lord told this young man to sell whatever he had and give to the poor (Matthew 19: 16-22). Then Peter lamented "we [the disciples] have left all and followed you...what shall we have?" (Matthew 19: 27). Indeed, the disciples had forsaken all to follow the Lord: their families, friends, homes, and even their occupations.

So the Lord told a parable about a landowner who hired laborers to work in his vineyard. This landowner hired laborers early in the morning and at the third, sixth and ninth hour. There were others standing around idle at the eleventh hour; so he hired them also. The landowner had agreed with the laborers to pay them a denarius for their work. Therefore at evening time he paid them all a single denarius. Assuming that they would receive higher wages, those laborers who were hired earlier complained: "these last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day." So, they protested because (to them) they had been cheated.

But the landowner reminded those workers who grumbled, "did you not agree with me for a denarius?" Therefore, he said to them "take what is yours and go your way." Under the circumstances, these words seem cold and harsh, even crude. The landowner (who symbolically represents the Lord) appeared uninterested in the concerns of his laborers. Perhaps the Lord is telling us that life is not fair. Actually life really is fair. So as the Lord says to everyone, no matter the hour at which a person begins his labors, "take what is yours and go your way."

That which is "yours" is your "own." In the Heavenly Doctrine the Lord speaks unfavorably about "man's own." He describes "man's own" in terms such as: evil and falsity; in itself dead; love of self and the world; nothing but blackness; and as hell (AC 215, AC 597, AC 2041, AC 3994, AC 9954: 5). The Lord goes on to teach in His Word that your "way" signifies truth leading to good (AE 652: 2).

So again, the Lord says “take what is yours and go your way.” Surely the Lord does not desire that we continue in such a life as so disgustingly described by “man’s own.” On the other hand, since our “own” is characterized as evil and false we must go our “way.” In other words we should allow the Lord’s truth to continue leading us to do what is good. As long as we are obedient to the Lord’s truths we are turning away from our evils and falsities. Meanwhile and ever so gently the Lord substitutes our “own” with a heavenly “own” from Him.

On the surface the parable is a simple narrative about a landowner and his laborers. But within this story the Lord has stored spiritual realities for the salvation of our souls. So we turn now to what is important for us to know.

First, a vineyard is a plot of land where grapes are grown and harvested. The dirt must be cultivated; the vines must be watered and pruned; all the while weeds must be uprooted and cleared away. The owner must protect the vineyard from animals and people who would trample it down or come in and plunder the fruit.

But then a vineyard has a deeper meaning. The Lord teaches in His Word that a “vineyard” signifies the spiritual church, and with man spiritual life” (AE 194:2). So we may conclude that it is within the Church where we learn of the Lord and of His kingdom. It is within the Church where we learn truths that are serviceable to our spiritual life.

We’ve heard the phrase “spiritual life”. Its meaning is quite simple. The Heavenly Doctrine defines “spiritual life” as “the life of truth, that is, life according to truths, or according to the precepts of the Lord in the Word” (AE 196). We may see then that our task is to turn to the Lord in the Word. At the same time we should allow Him to teach us His truths by means of which we may acquire the life of heaven for ourselves.

And now we turn to the second thing we need to know. In order to acquire spiritual life we must labor in the vineyard. This labor is the work we must do in the church. According to the Word, “laboring in the vineyard [the work we do in the church] is acquiring for oneself spiritual life by the knowledges of truth and good from the Word applied to the uses of life” (AE 194:2). Two basic steps describe how we may acquire spiritual life from the Lord. First, we have to read the Word to learn and gain knowledge about what is truthful and good. But this knowledge in and of itself is not sufficient. Therefore, the second step is we have to allow truths to shape how we perform our uses.

But notice that it is only after the laborers had worked in the vineyard that the landowner [the Lord speaking to us] says “take what is yours and go your way.” As said earlier, “man’s own” is nothing but evil and falsity. Yet we must work to learn truths, work to shun evils as sins, and work to apply truths to life by living according to the Word. Then and only then may we acquire spiritual life. But the hour in which we individually begin our labors varies from person to person.

This takes us to our third idea. We may know from the Word the meaning of the “hour” in which each person is called. Hour refers to the time of day; time in the natural world is delineated by days, weeks, months, and years. But in the spiritual sense “hour” signifies state” (AE 194: 2). The Word goes on to say that “hours mean, in the world, times, but in heaven, states of life, since in heaven there are no hours, because times there are not measurable and divided into days and these into hours, as in the world” (AE 194: 2).

The third, sixth, and ninth hour (at which the landowner hired the laborers) define our state of life and more specifically signify “a full state or what is complete” (AE 194:2). Consider how a person learns from the Word, then sorts out for himself what is good and evil and then when he is ready, in freedom chooses to do what is good. In the course of this development the person rises to a full or complete state or to a point in which he is then ready to apply truth to his life and continue to do so throughout his life in the world.

Continuing with the parable we note that at the eleventh hour the landowner also called people who stood by idle. An idle person is one not engaged in useful activity. Someone who is idle may be looked upon as lazy or slothful. While idle has a negative connotation, those who were idle are described by the eleventh hour at which they were called.

The Lord says in the Word that “eleven signifies a state not yet full, and yet a receptive state such as there is with well-disposed children and infants” (AE 194: 2). Surely our “own” is nothing but evil and false. Yet within our fallen human nature there is a part of us that still is able to respond obediently to the Lord. Yes it is true our human nature is impure in so many respects. But it is also true that we are often prayerful and reverent and otherwise receptive of the Lord. It is when we are open to the Lord and willing to be led of Him that we may be disposed to do the work in the vineyard. This is the eleventh hour. But why, we ask, is it important to even know about these hours and a person’s states of life?

First, our state of life is not constant. In Conjugal Love the Lord reveals to us that “from infancy to the end of life, and afterwards to eternity, a person’s state of life is continually changing (CL 184). The hope is we are making progress along our path of spiritual development. In life we pass through one interest to another. We may even discover inspiration in many useful endeavors. Meanwhile softly and silently the Lord can mold our loves and thoughts so that we may shed unhealthy states that do not agree with heaven.

Second, consider Naaman who had leprosy. After Elisha’s servant instructed him to wash in the Jordan River, Naaman became furious and went away in a rage. After some prompting by his servants Naaman dipped in the Jordan River seven times “and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” We learn from the Heavenly Doctrine that Naaman’s flesh being restored like the flesh of a little child signifies “spiritual life, such as those have who are regenerated through Divine truths” (AE 475:18).

Now once again, after the laborers had worked in the vineyard the landowner [the Lord speaking with us] says “take what is yours and go your way.” And remember, “laboring in the vineyard [the work we do in the church] is acquiring for oneself spiritual life by the knowledges of truth and good from the Word applied to the uses of life” (AE 194:2). Acquiring spiritual life by laboring in the vineyard and by means of regeneration through Divine truths is a lifelong process.

And finally, our state of life is important because of the implication for the world to come. We learn from Heaven and Hell that when a person’s spirit separates from his body and passes into the spiritual world, which takes place at death, he continues living as a human being just as before (HH 312). After death every person’s state of life is just as it was while in the world. As long as we’re laboring in the vineyard we make it possible for us to acquire spiritual life from the Lord. Yet the quality of this spiritual life upon entrance into the spiritual world is the culmination of learning truths, shunning evils, doing good, and overcoming our own individual challenges.

When we come before the Lord we bring with us our own individual state of life. This life evolves out of our individual histories. Many variables such as our hereditary disposition, affections, strengths, and weakness determine our character. Also, a whole range of experiences have influenced our choices and developed us into the kind of person we are.

The Lord is always calling us into His church. The time or hour at which each of us is called will vary. Some are called early in the morning, while others are called at the third, sixth, ninth, or eleventh hour. The time at which we are called determines the length and amount of work we must do. But, no matter the hour we are called, it is when we are ready to respond to the Lord’s voice and do the work of obedience to the Word that “as of self” we may acquire spiritual life. The Lord says “if anyone desires to come after Me let him take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9: 23).

Life really is fair. If we acquire spiritual life by laboring in the vineyard [in the church] we may receive the kingdom of heaven but not that we merit heaven. Heaven is the Lord’s free gift. Each one of us has different challenges of our own to overcome. It may appear that your path is hard while the path of others seem easy. Or, the fact that something is not a particularly difficult challenge for one person does not mean it is not problematic for someone else.

No matter what our own individual challenges may be, the Lord is with each and every one of us. This is fair. Each and every one of us has opportunity time and time again to turn to the Lord for help. He does not ever refuse anyone. This is fair.

“The Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Psalm 145:9).

Amen.