

LESSONS

1ST Lesson: Exodus 20: 18-21

18. Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. 19. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." 20. And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." 21. So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.

2ND Lesson: Luke 16: 19-31

19. There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 20. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, 21. desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 22. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24. Then he cried and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame." 25. But Abraham said, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented." 26. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us. 27. Then he said, "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, 28. for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment." 29. Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." 30. And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." 31. But he said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

3RD Lesson: Arcana Coelestia 8918:3, 4

[3] "Afar off" signifies remoteness from good and truth, which are from the Divine, thus remoteness from internal things, also in the following passages. In Luke: In hell the rich man lifting up his eyes saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Abraham said to him, Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; that those who would pass over from hence to you cannot; neither can those who are there pass over to us (Luke 16:23, 26). By "Abraham" is not meant Abraham, for he is not known in heaven; but in the supreme sense the Lord, and in the relative sense those in heaven who are in the good of love and faith in the Lord. They who are in hell are said to "see those who are in heaven afar off" because they are in a state most remote from good and truth. The "great gulf" between them denotes the remoteness itself from good, which also gives the appearance of an intervening gulf. [4] They who think from an idea of space, as do all men in the world, perceive no otherwise than that hell is far distant from man, and that heaven is so too. But the case is otherwise. Hell and heaven are near to man, yea, in man; hell in an evil man, and heaven in a good man. Moreover everyone comes after death into

that hell or into that heaven in which he has been while in the world. But the state is then changed; the hell which was not perceived in the world becomes perceptible, and the heaven which was not perceived in the world becomes perceptible; the heaven full of all happiness, and the hell of all unhappiness. That heaven is within us, the Lord teaches in Luke: The kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21).

S E R M O N

Why Draw Near To The Lord?

A Sermon by Rev. Michael E. Ferrell

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us (Luke 16:26).

Introductory Ideas:

Our life here in the natural world has spiritual implications. Our loves and the choices that we make shape who we are and our life in the world to come. So here we are, all together in the natural world. We share experiences. We talk and visit and over a period of time come to learn things about each other. But whatever it is that we observe or know about someone we must not make assumptions about any person's place in the spiritual world either in heaven or hell. We must refrain from making spiritual judgments.

Instead we can trust the Lord's Word that "everyone is born for heaven and no one for hell" (CL 350:2, HH 329). We may find comfort in knowing from the Word that "those who have led a good life enter heaven" (AC 8773). Whatever we do let's continue turning to the Lord so He may instill His good and truth within us. We can draw near to the Lord and willingly allow Him to lead us.

What's Ahead:

While speaking parables the Lord told the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man and Lazarus set before us a striking contrast between two people in the world. The rich man was prosperous: he dressed in expensive clothing; he indulged himself sumptuously every day. On the other hand, Lazarus was a lowly beggar. He'd find delight in feeding upon the crumbs falling from the rich man's table.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus also compares the final destination of both of them in the spiritual world. Angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom, which is according to the spiritual sense, to heaven where he could be joined with the Lord (AC 6804:2, AC 6960:3, AC 8918:3) and find comfort. The rich man went to Hades where he suffered torment. The rich man sought relief from Abraham who, instead of providing assistance, reminded him of the life he

had in the world: “remember that in your lifetime you received your good things.” Moreover, “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

The Lord uses this parable to describe what lies ahead for people when they leave the natural world. We know from the Heavenly Doctrine that “everyone's life continues the same after death” (HH 528). It is true that the kind of life we live forms the kind of person we are. In the spiritual world we will continue living as the same kind of person we had become while in the world. Therefore it is important that we draw near to the Lord. We can approach Him with an open heart and mind so that He may fill us with His good and truths. The Lord is present in His effort to craft heavenly qualities within us. We may draw near to Him and not stand afar off.

Afar Off:

After leading the people out of Egypt, Moses brought them to Mt. Sinai. It was here at the foot of the mountain that they experienced a spectacular but also frightening event: there were thundering and lightning; a thick cloud covered the mountain; the blast of a trumpet sounded and became louder and louder; smoke completely covered the mountain; the Lord descended in fire; and the whole mountain quaked greatly (Exodus 19: 16-19).

When the people saw these events transpire “they trembled and stood afar off” saying to Moses “you speak with us, and we will hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20: 18-19). The people stood “afar off” to separate themselves from God. The people themselves created a chasm somewhat between themselves and the Lord.

We can learn from the Heavenly Doctrine that the people standing “afar off” describe what can happen with a person. “Afar off” in respect to a person, “signifies remoteness from good and truth, which are from the Divine, thus remoteness from internal things” (AC 8918:3). Remoteness implies distance. When something is remote it is not close but far away. However, let's not be deceived because the Lord's good and truth are not detached from us. We can believe the Word that “the Lord flows in with good and truth equally with all” (AC 3994, AE 401:27); but everyone receives in different measure.

A problem arises when a person willfully does not receive of the Lord. He may then become uninterested in the Lord and heavenly things of the church. He may, as a result, not involve himself in serving heavenly uses. It is an uncaring or indifferent attitude toward what is good and true that steers a person away from the Lord's Divine. While the literal sense describes how the people reacted to a natural event, their standing “afar off” at the foot of Mt Sinai portrays a person's spiritual alienation from God. A person separates himself from the Lord and stands “afar off.”

Rich Man:

The rich man and Lazarus describe people although the literal sense is about two different individuals. The Heavenly Doctrine says that, in a good sense, the rich man clothed in purple and fine linen represents people “who are within the church” and who possess “the knowledges

of good and truth from the Word” (AC 9231:3). We are people within the Lord’s church. We possess the Word. We know the Lord. We know that “by good is meant charity toward the neighbor and love to the Lord (AC 10187). We’ve heard on many occasions some of the things the Lord requires of us such as: shun evils, avoid false ideas, do good, and obey the Ten Commandments.

The problem with the rich man however is that he “fared sumptuously everyday” and received his own good things. The teaching in the Divine Providence is that a person’s “own” or “native character, is evil, and a delight in evil perceived as good is what constitutes hell” (DP 93). Indeed we know what is good and true from the Word. But we must be careful that the “fire of hell” (evil, bad loves) does not prevail within us. This is important to know because when the Lord’s love flows into people “who are in things contrary [His love] is turned into the fire of cupidities [bad desires] which are those of revenge, hatred, and cruelty, springing forth from the love of self and of the world” (AC 6832:9). On a deeper, spiritual level the rich man depicts a person who willfully delights in his “own” that is, in evil.

Lazarus:

On the other hand, Lazarus the poor man represents people “within the church who are in but little good by reason of their ignorance of truth, and yet long to be instructed” (AC 9231:3). Each of us has wondered, if only for a fleeting moment, if anything good is within us. A person may sense that he is not somehow doing enough good and seems at a loss of discovering a solution. But, like Lazarus, if we desire to eat from the rich man’s table we can discover what to do.

As we turn to the Heavenly Doctrine we see that the desire to be fed with crumbs represent a “longing to learn a few truths” (AC 9231:3). Instead of standing “afar off” and alienating ourselves from the Lord, we can draw near to Him. We may approach the Lord in the Word and receive instruction in truths. We can pray to the Lord asking that He enlighten our understanding. We can pray to the Lord that He continue inspiring us to obey His commandments. It is important to draw near to the Lord in love and obedience because He is gradually implanting heaven within us. This is particularly significant because of our life to come in the spiritual world.

A Great Gulf:

Angels carried Lazarus [people in good] to heaven. The rich man [people in their “own” which is evil] descended into Hades. A great gulf separated them. This great gulf represents, in the spiritual world, “remoteness itself from good, which also gives the appearance of an intervening gulf” (AC 8918:3) between people in hell and angels in heaven.

Let’s consider two teachings stated in clear and uncertain terms in the Heavenly Doctrine. First, “the very life of man is his love, and as his love is [good or evil] such is his life” (TCR 399). This teaching (“the very life of man is his love”) is like a mantra to us. Second, “there is a heaven, and there is a hell; man will live to eternity, in heaven if he has done well, in hell if he has done evil” (AC 8637). Heaven and hell are eternal and we must realize this. The point here

is not to instill fear but to encourage us to remember that the Lord is coming to us, constantly urging and drawing us to Himself. Heaven and hell are open to all people, but according to their loves.

The Lord does not award heaven to some and condemn others to hell. He leaves each person in freedom to choose. As taught in the Heavenly Doctrine, “everyone goes the way of his love after death, to heaven if he has been directed by a good love, and to hell if he has been directed by an evil love” (DP 319:4). It is the person’s love therefore that determines his eternal, spiritual home. The Lord does not arbitrarily assign heaven or hell to anyone. In a sense, what the Lord does is allow each person to live his love in heaven if the love is good or in hell if the love is evil. But a great gulf exists between heaven and hell.

The significance for us while living our life right now is that as to our will, understanding, and life, we do not stand “afar off” from the Lord. We must not delight in evil loves and, from our own doing, create a great gulf separating us from the Divine. Therefore while we are here in the world we must draw near to the Lord so He may in love implant heaven within us and conjoin us to Himself.

Why Draw Near:

It is believed by some that upon entering the spiritual world a person could, for the first time, change his mind and choose heaven without any regard to the life he had lived. Heaven is what is within a person and not some “place” outside of him. Turning to the Word we see that “it is in accordance with the heaven that is within him” that a person receives heaven (HH 54). And furthermore, “greatly misled is he who believes that to come into heaven is simply to be taken up among angels, without regard to what one’s interior life may be” (HH 54). Heaven is OPEN. The concern is whether or not a person is open to the love and truth from the Lord’s Divine that characterizes heaven.

If for some reason upon arriving in the spiritual world a person would choose heaven and stop doing evil, what does it take to shun evils right now while in the world and draw near to the Lord and receive His good and truths? We’re here now in the natural world and not in the spiritual world yet or not completely in that world. We are in the spiritual world as to our interiors and are associated either with angels of heaven or evil spirits of hell. Without making a spiritual judgment about yourself you can get a sense of whom you are associating with:

A man can know among which he is, whether among the infernal or among the angelic: if he intends evil to his neighbor, thinks nothing but evil concerning him, and actually does it when he can, and takes delight therein, he is among the infernals, and also becomes infernal in the other life; whereas the man who intends good to his neighbor, and thinks nothing but good respecting him, and actually does it when he can, is among the angelic spirits, and also becomes an angel in the other life. This is the distinctive characteristic. Let everyone examine himself by this, in order to learn what he is. AC 1680: 2

The Lord said “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). If while in the world you love good and hate

evil, or love evil and hate good, you will continue to do so in the spiritual world. Remember, the life of man is his love (TCR 399). Now is the time to choose heaven and not indulge ourselves like the rich man.

We must choose to reject evil loves from hell and instead choose to receive good loves from the Lord. The choice to accept heaven whether in this world now or upon entering spiritual world is not a product of what a person understands or thinks. A person's loves (whether good or evil) influence the choices he makes. But again the choice is made now. As the Lord has said, "love remains inscribed on the life" (AC 9984). When he enters the spiritual world, "man's love remains with him after death" (AE 204: 3). So again, let's draw near to the Lord and allow Him to continue instilling heavenly loves within us and leading us to heaven.

Concluding Ideas:

"There is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here [heaven] to you cannot, nor can those from there [hell] pass to us" (Luke 16: 26). Angels carried Lazarus to heaven while the rich man took up his abode in hell. Lazarus and the rich man could not cross over to each other. It is absolutely true without a doubt that the Lord will not deny heaven to anyone or cast anyone into hell. The choice is ours to live according to the Word and cooperate with the Lord in building heaven within us. The choice is ours not to stand afar off or create a great gulf between us and the Lord. We must draw near to Him now.

The extent to which we draw near to the Lord impacts our life in the world to come. The Lord says "Everyone comes after death into that hell or into that heaven in which he has been while in the world" (AC 8918:4). As long as we continue living the life of heaven we make ourselves amenable to the Lord's good and truth that make heaven. Upon entrance into the spiritual world we will freely enter heaven because we have acquired heavenly qualities within us while we were here. We will comfortably enter heaven because, while in the world, we had become accustomed to living a heavenly life. Again, as the Heavenly Doctrine says "everyone's life continues the same after death" (HH 528).

The Lord is speaking to us now saying, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25: 34).

Amen.

