

“Sell Whatever You Have and Give to the Poor”

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me” (Mark 10:21; see also Matthew 19:21 and Luke 18:22).

Buying and selling (and also borrowing and lending) are common themes in the Lord’s Word, sometimes with very positive connotations and sometimes very negative ones, depending on the context. In Revelation 3:18, for example, we read, “I counsel you to **buy** from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” And way back in the Old Testament you may recall that Elisha told a certain destitute widow first to **borrow** containers from all her neighbors, and then to **sell** the oil that miraculously filled those containers so that so could pay her debts and live on what was left over (2Kings 4:1-7).

In Isaiah 55:1 we read, “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, **buy** and eat. Yes, come, **buy wine and milk** *without money and without price.*” And yet in Revelation 13:16-17 we read about a terrible beast that “causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that **no one may buy or sell** except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.” Again, going back to Genesis 37 we read the discouraging story of the plot by his brothers to **sell Joseph** to a band of Ishmaelite traders.

There are many other references in the Scriptures to buying and selling things, and the point is that in addition to whatever literal meaning there is in these transactions there is also some important symbolism. For example, in one place (Luke 22:36) just before His crucifixion the Lord tells His disciples “...he who has no sword, let him **sell** his garment and **buy** one” but then just hours later when one of them cut off a soldier’s ear with a sword He told them not to use it. Why this apparent contradiction?

Well, in that case, selling means getting rid of something that is not needed, and buying means acquiring something that is needed. And what is not needed here is one’s own sense of what is true, represented by the garment, and what is needed is the truth itself of the Word, represented by the sword. But the truth of the Word is not needed to attack even one’s enemies; rather it is needed to provide for what is good and to preserve one’s own integrity. Sometimes selling implies sharing, that is, providing for others what they need but do not have, but usually it has to do with exchanging one thing for another.

So in our lesson this morning from Matthew, Mark and Luke about the rich young man who approached the Lord asking how he could obtain eternal life, we read about what he had to give up ***not just by selling but by giving away the profits from that sale.*** And what is it that he had so thoroughly to remove from his life? – whatever he had! In Luke it says ***all*** that he had. But now, what does this ***really*** mean? Are we to become like monks, begging in the streets? Is a true Christian obliged to forsake all wealth and worldly comfort? Let’s think about this.

The Lord’s teachings often make use of what might be called hyperbole, that is, a gross, almost ridiculous exaggeration to make a point. For example in this same story He said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Some have speculated that this “eye of the needle” is a low gateway through which a camel might have to crawl – an impossible feat. But even that is hyperbole, if indeed it’s true. The point is that this is impossible. *And what is meant by riches?* Clearly the teaching here is about the pride of self-intelligence, the feeling that we have it all figured out, that we have the means of our own salvation and preservation. *And nothing prevents the influx of the Lord’s love and wisdom more than this particular delusion.* So we read,

“That he should ‘sell all that he had and give to the poor’ signifies in the spiritual sense that he should alienate and cast away from himself what is his own [proprium], thus it has the same signification as ‘denying oneself’ in [other] passages [in the Gospels]; and to ‘give to the poor’ signifies in the spiritual sense to do the works of charity. The Lord said this to him because he was rich; and ‘riches’ signify in the spiritual sense the knowledges of good and truth, but with this man, who was a Jew, the knowledges of evil and falsity, since they were [mere] traditions” (Apocalypse Explained #893:4).

Again, let’s think about this; there’s a lot to it. For one thing, the Lord has given us powerful teachings about the importance of our sense of self: - our freedom, our rationality, our unique individuality and use. He guards these things as a man guards the pupil of his eye. But He also tells us that we can have TWO wills, and TWO ways of understanding things: one flows in from the Lord through heaven and the other rises up from the love of self and the world. Our freedom is the freedom to choose which of the two sources we will accept as our own. So the Lord never forces the issue, He simply tells us what we need to do *if we want to “inherit eternal life,”* and that is to reject self-centered, worldly priorities in favor of heavenly ones from Him.

But practically speaking, what does this *mean*? Are we not supposed to care at all about ourselves, or about worldly things? Are we meant to give to the poor no matter whether they are good or evil? If so why did the Lord elsewhere say not to cast our pearls before swine? Why did He say we should be as wise (or prudent) as serpents, or “judge with righteous judgment”? Again, noting the Lord’s use of hyperbole, does anyone seriously think that if his right hand offends him he should cut it off, or that if his right eye offends he should pluck it out - literally? Yet the Lord said these things to drive home the important contrast between the values of natural and spiritual life. The real concerns are all in our minds. The literal images are simply metaphors and correspondences. Still, they represent enormous challenges, and THAT is the real theme of this lesson.

For example, an act of genuine, spiritual charity would be to give out of the wealth of our knowledge about spiritual things to others who are “poor” because they lack such knowledge. But it’s pretty hard to teach a spiritually needy person if he doesn’t want to learn, and dangerous to do so if he’s likely to take what he learns and turn it against you or others. Besides, to give, or sell, our knowledge with the idea that others need what WE have may or may not be a kindness; we may not really know what they need, and pushing ourselves on them may not be appropriate. That’s why the selling part comes first in the Gospels, *and then the giving.* The selling in this case means getting rid of our proprietary attitude, letting go of our own ideas, and then giving what

comes from the Lord instead. This also illustrates the familiar New Church teaching that the first of charity is to shun evils as sins against the Lord, and the *second* is to do the good that He inspires after that. If we try to do the good first, the evil that is already there will corrupt it.

But let's consider a few more examples.

Let's say you make – or inherit – a pile of money: much more than you need to live comfortably for the rest of your time on earth. What will you do with it? Feather your nest? Pass it on to your children (not knowing how they might use it)? Or perhaps give it away? And if you give it away, who or what are you going to give it to? Surely not just the first person or thing that pops into your head? You'll need to think about it, and consider the use. And whatever you do you will have to consider your priorities, which is where the crux of the matter lies.

You see, it's not so much a matter of what you do with the money that matters, it's the love that drives your decision. If it's mostly about yourself, your comfort, your prestige, your own family and so on, then you're not really preparing for heaven. This doesn't mean you can't treat yourself or provide for your children; the question is to what degree? In short, who is at the top of your priority list, and who is getting the leftovers? *Why?* Even family members surely will respect your decision to donate to a very worthy cause, and if not, well, *why not?*

But let's say your wealth is in your heart or mind, not in your wallet or your bank account. How are you using that wealth, and for whom? (These are serious questions! And the answers can tell you a lot about your spiritual state.) In one notable passage from a book about the interaction of the soul and the body Swedenborg wrote personally about this, saying,

“Now since it has been granted me to be in the spiritual world and in the natural world at the same time, and thus to see each world and each sun, I am obliged by my conscience to communicate these things. For of what use is knowledge unless it be communicated? What is it, but like collecting and storing up riches in a casket, and only looking at them occasionally and counting them over, without any intention of applying them to use? Spiritual avarice is nothing else” (ISB 18).

In this case Swedenborg's writing is a positive example of selling. The rich young man in the Gospels, however, had a *problem* with his wealth. Note, it says the Lord, “looking at him, loved him,” but He also said, “one thing you lack....” He loved Him because he obeyed the commandments – at least the ones in the second table concerning the neighbor. What he lacked was respect for the key teachings of the *first* table – about HIM. And what we see here is a very common phenomenon in the world today, including churches... including our church! We pay attention to the rules and try to do the right thing, generally for reasons that have a lot to do with common sense and practical advantage or, as they used to say in the 19th century, enlightened self-interest. We're actually fairly pleased with ourselves that we're law-abiding citizens and we tend to be pretty judgmental about those who aren't. But are we doing what we do *because of what the Lord has said? Or are we taking credit for it?* If the latter then we have some other, more internal work to do, and we'd better get on with it.

In fact, this work of selling whatever we have, this “alienating and casting away from ourselves what is our own” and thus “denying ourselves” for the Lord's sake is a *pretty big deal* if like that

rich man we want to inherit eternal life. So what is involved?

Well, for a start, let's think about the way we spend our discretionary time. Of course we all have obligations that keep us busy through most of the week. And we all need “down time,” creative enjoyments, exercise and recreation. But then what? How much time – literally – do we give the Lord in a week? If we assume approximately 8 hours of discretionary time per day, the total for a week is 56. Okay, maybe that's unrealistic. Let's say 40. If you were to tithe, or give 10% of that to the Lord, you would need to spend about 4 hours a week paying attention to HIM, that is, reading, reflecting, attending worship or classes, maybe discussing His teachings with other people. And you would need to do this without any thought of reward or merit, either for yourself or the church, but just because you know you need to do it *because He said so*.

And the teaching is – for those of us who are endowed with the enormous riches of the new Revelation – that this will be hard. It will be a source of *grief* and consternation. Indeed, *of ourselves it will be impossible*, “but not with God; for with God all things are possible.”

Compared to literally billions of people all over the world we live very comfortably, *and we belong to a very comfortable church!* Our teachings are logical, reassuring, tolerant and incredibly merciful. But when you drill down and really come to the heart of it all, you find that they are also seriously challenging. They ask us to think deeply, not just about the laws of order, correspondences, degrees, the true nature of marriage, heaven and hell, the Lord's glorification, and so on (which is hard enough for some), but even more importantly *how these teachings play out in our own inner lives*. This is not child's play. This is not something we do easily and without sacrifice. We have to make time for it. We have to make space for it. We have to prioritize and clear away the obstructions that prevent us from truly internalizing these things.

Unlike some in more primitive parts of the world we are not likely to lose our natural lives on account of our religion. But if we're not careful we can lose our spiritual lives by losing our focus on what is really important. We need to be prepared to take up our cross, that is, to let go of our worldly concerns, and really, truly follow the Lord. “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for His sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25). On the other hand, as He also said,

“Assuredly... there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions – and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

In other words, there will be blessings – incredible blessings – and also hard times in this life, “be he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13).

Amen.

Lessons: Mark 10:17-31
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