

The Worldwide Church, Part 2: Giving Freely

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

3 March, 2024

Children's Talk: Share the Wealth

- What should you do if you have a lot more toys than someone else? Share it!
- Story about a man who had everything, and another who had nothing, and what the rich man did (or did not do):

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 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. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

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." 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. 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."

Then he said, "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment." Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." 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." (Luke 16:19-31)

- Who here has a billion rand? No one?
- Who here knows how to be kind? Who here knows how to do the right thing? Who here knows how to be helpful?
- Knowing all those things is a kind of wealth
- But knowing isn't enough: we need to act on what we know, and so share that wealth with other people.

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If you won the lottery, what would you do with the winnings? I suspect that most of us would think about the fun things we could do with untold wealth; but I also suspect that most of us would pretty quickly give thought to how we could use that money to support family members; to fund a charity close to our hearts; to further the mission of the church; or any number of other selfless causes. That might not apply to everyone. But I think that if you were gifted such fabulous riches you would want to pass it on. Well believe it or not, in a sense, you have been so blessed. You have the Lord's Word; you get to learn truths from the church and put them into practice; you have here a community that hopefully is helping you do those things. We have freely received untold wealth in terms of spiritual knowledge, knowledge about how to live a good and happy life; and so we are called to freely give it away.

This is the meaning of the rich man in the story we read for the children's talk.

He is described as follows:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. (Luke 16:19).

Spiritually this represents those who are endowed with a great deal of truth and goodness and absolutely love to think about and reflect on that truth and goodness. They delight in it, just as the rich man delighted in his wealth, dressed in fine clothing, vigorously partying every day (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* §40). And in a sense there is absolutely nothing wrong with this: we should delight in the Lord's Word, and rejoice that we get to learn from it. The problem is that the rich man did all these things while a poor man languished at the very gates of his house:

But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. (Luke 16:20-21)

The full spiritual representation is then not just of someone who has plenty of truth and goodness and is grateful for the fact that he has it; the spiritual significance is of a person, or of a church, who is endowed with truths and goods that could make a difference for other people, but doesn't lift a finger to share the wealth with those who could most benefit from it.

We will get to what Lazarus represent in a moment, but I want to first think about why we might do this. What is it that leads us to hoard the truth instead of sharing it? Part of it is that we get complacent. It is the nature of every person, and indeed of every church, to want to be able to get by on faith alone, on merely knowing what is right and good, and being able to rest secure in the knowledge that what's in the mind is who I am, and I don't have to worry so much about all those hard life choices. You might think that people in the New Church would be immune to this, but hell has a way of twisting everyone towards faith alone. There is something of a paradox in this, but a person can think, "I, unlike so many other people, know that good matters just as much as, and in fact more than, faith! I have a church that requires truth to be lived, not just known!" Well those are some great ideas; but if they just stay ideas, and especially if they make one feel superior to others and despise them, it really makes no difference. You can fall right back into the same trap you are criticizing, the trap that because my ideas are right and good, then / must be right and good too.

The fate awaiting this attitude and this lifestyle is revealed in the story. No amount of wealth could save the rich man from hell. No amount of truth, no matter how pure and how good it may be, can overcome a deficit of life. The individual who proclaims faith alone and so does nothing to live a good life is just as much in faith alone as the individual who proclaims faith combined with charity and yet still does

nothing to live a good life. We only get “credit” as it were for the truth that we put into practice. If it isn’t practiced, you might as well not have it in the first place.

Let’s shift now to Lazarus though. Lazarus represents gentiles, in other words, people who are outside of the Church; specifically people who long for truth:

his "desiring to be filled with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table" signified his longing to learn a few truths from those within the church who had abundance of them; "the dogs which licked his sores" denote those outside the church who are in good, although not in the genuine good of faith; "licking sores" denotes healing them by such means as are within their power. (*Secrets of Heaven* §9231)

People who have no knowledge or awareness of the church might get along just fine with their own faith or philosophy of life. But there are those who suffer, much as we talked about last week; there are those who are desperate for the truths that the New Church teaches, truths that might radically change how they relate to the Lord and how they navigate life. It is true that no matter what their connection to a church is, they may get help and support; as that passage says, that is what is represented by the dogs that lick Lazarus sores; there is such healing as is thithin their power. But not enough to satisfy Lazarus’ craving for even a crumb, nor to properly heal his wounds; in other words, there are people, who although they do get something from their faith, still sffer from being deprived of what the New Church, or the true Christian church, has to offer.

It’s all well and good to say that there are people out there who would benefit greatly from the New Church and so we should freely share the spiritual wealth we are blessed with. But *how* we do that is a tougher question. When we think of “sharing our faith” I think our minds go to the idea of actively trying to convert people. There is even a place for that, but often it is not what people need, especially when they are struggling. More broadly though it can simply mean talking openly about your own faith, and what it means to you, and how it affects your own life.

Just a very simple example: when someone is going through a hard time and feeling despondent about anything getting better, you don't have to say, "well, as *Secrets of Heaven* §1503 says, you ought to pray, and then trust in Providence! And come to my church too!" But you could say, "when I'm feeling despondent about the future, and feel like nothing is ever going to get better, I find prayer helps a lot. It doesn't change my outlook immediately, but it does help me remember that my view of things is limited, and the Lord is working to make things better in so many ways that I can't possibly be aware." That is what it can mean to share your faith. The nature of angels is to communicate, or share, all of what they have with others:

It can be seen how great the wisdom of angels is from the fact that in the heavens there is a communication of all things; intelligence and wisdom are communicated from one to another, and heaven is a common sharing of all goods; and this for the reason that heavenly love is such that it wishes what is its own to be another's. (*Heaven and Hell* §268)

We have been blessed in the New Church with a wealth of knowledge about spiritual things, about how to live a good life; our desire should be to share that wealth with as many people as are willing to receive it!

One barrier to doing this is the idea that we cannot actually fix people. And that is true! But we are still called to do our part, even knowing full well that we won't be able to perfectly fix someone else's problems. This is represented in the story of the Good Samaritan. I assume you know the basics of the story, so I'll go right to the end:

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you." (Luke 10:33-35)

The Samaritan's actions represent something very specific about helping other people. This is how they are described in the Teachings of the New Church:

"to bind up the wounds and to pour in oil and wine" signifies providing a remedy against the falsities that have injured his life, by instructing him in the good of love and the truth of faith...

"to set him on his own beast" signifies according to his understanding so far as he was able...

Notice that this is talking about helping with his own understanding of things, as far as he was able; in other words, not completely, or perfectly; but still he did something! It continues:

"to lead him to an inn and to take care of him" signifies to lead him to those who are better instructed in the knowledges of good and truth, an "inn" being a place where foods and drinks are bought, which signify the knowledges of good and truth, thence spiritual nourishment which is communicated by instruction;

Although this doesn't say so directly, that sounds an awful lot like a description of the church. Even if you personally don't have the answers for someone, welcoming them into the church might get them the help they need. Then lastly:

"he gave to the host two denarii's, and said to him, Take care of him, and whatsoever you spend more, when I come back again I will repay you," signifies all things of charity in the measure of his ability and capacity. (*Apocalypse Explained* §444:14)

All things of charity, in his measure and capacity. You don't need to be perfect. You don't need to fix someone. You don't need to represent the church one hundred percent fully and completely. You can still practice charity in the measure of your own ability and capacity. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Do what you can, when someone is struggling, to reach out and share your faith to the best of your abilities, in the ways that most make sense in the moment. You won't get it right every time; it won't go the way you want every time. But if you never do reach out at all, you may be leaving someone out injured on the side of the road, someone who's life could be changed through contact with the Lord's church.

At the end of the day, we want the church to be much like a hospital: a place that is known for helping people when they are in need. If no one knows about a hospital, it won't do much good, since no patients will ever enter it. Every who is spiritually sick, everyone who is living evilly or suffering from false ideas, is called to come to the church to find healing. As Jesus said,

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Mark 2:17)

We can be part of that call, as a church, through sharing the wealth of knowledge we have been giving, lovingly sharing our faith to the best of our abilities, and inviting people into this community.