

# Belonging to the Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

26 January, 2025

## Children's Talk: What can we do without the Lord?

Where does everything come from? It all comes from the Lord. Everything in the whole universe is from the Lord.

But it seem like we make things too. I can build here a little tower. Who built this tower? Well I did, right? It certainly seems like that! But even when people build or make things, it is important to remember that it is really the Lord doing the work.

If we don't cooperate with the Lord then the work we do is empty or pointless. Psalm 127 compares it to building a house or protecting a city. A person can build a house without the Lord, or protect a city, or so it seems. But he can't really do those things without the Lord:

Unless Jehovah builds the house,  
The work of those who build it is pointless  
Unless Jehovah guards the city,  
It is pointless for the watchman to keep watch.  
It is pointless for you to rise up early,  
To sit up late,  
To eat the bread of pain;  
For so He gives His beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:1-2)

Any time we do anything good, whether it's build a tower, or clean up our rooms, or share with a friend, or give a hug, or decide not to harm someone, all of that is actually the Lord working with and through us.

That could sound a little disappointing: what's the point if the Lord is the one actually doing it all? But it also could be very exciting! When you do good things you aren't working on your own. The Lord, the God of the universe, is working with you! How special must you be that the Lord has chosen to build and create with your help? All things are from the Lord. And we get to be a part of that.

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It is human nature to want to be independent and free. It is true that we especially prize these values in Western culture, but the desire goes deeper than just culture. By our very nature we have a sense of self, and that self does not want to be annihilated by subordination to others. We are born self-centred. As a result we love our freedom, particularly the freedom to do as we please with the things that belong to us. No one has a right, we may assume, to dictate to us in our own homes, in our own private thoughts and feelings. It is after all *my* mind, *my* heart, that we are talking about. When we have this attitude collectively it becomes the idea that it is my family, my group, my church. There is some truth in this, especially as regards what other people can do or say to us. Yet if we remain in the notion that we have sole ownership of ourselves and the things that are “ours”, we miss out on the true owner: the Lord.

The Lord told a parable about mistaken notions of ownership. It begins with a householder who established a vineyard:

There was a certain householder who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit.  
(Matthew 21:33-34)

Notice that not only was the householder the owner, he is also described as the one doing all the work: he planted, set, dug, and built. We might assume this is merely a turn of phrase, and of course he himself did not do the manual labour. But in the Word, the phrasing itself carries meaning. The vineyard stands for the church, and individually, for our minds, and in this the Lord does indeed do all the work. All the tools and resources provided for us to function, all the work of gathering together and

leading, all the bits and pieces that go into making a church work, and even into making an individual member of the church work, all of it, is done by the Lord alone.

When we have insight, good ideas, successful endeavours, compassion and love, all the good things that go into making the church the church, we can never claim credit. These things are in fact the Lord's in us. The Teachings of the New Church explain that this is the meaning of the parable of the vineyard:

The fact that wisdom, intelligence, reason, and knowledge are not man's but the Lord's is quite clear from what the Lord Himself taught, for example in Matthew, when the Lord compares Himself to a householder who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and let it out to tenants, Matt. 21:33. In John,

The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak. He will glorify Me, for He will receive from what is Mine and declare it to you. John 16:13, 14.

Also in the same gospel,

Man cannot receive anything unless it is given him from heaven. John 3:27.

Anyone who has been granted knowledge of merely a few of heaven's arcana knows that this is true. (*Secrets of Heaven* §124)

All that being said, these things are given into our care. In the language of the parable, the vineyard was leased to the farmers. But of course it was *leased*, ownership was not transferred; and part of the agreement was that the workers would render the harvest back to the owner. Likewise, for all that we have been given independently functioning minds, and given the freedom to decide our direction as individuals and as a church, we are still required to render to the Lord the fruits of His gifts.

In the parable each piece of the vineyard represents some tool that we have been equipped with for the purpose of producing good things and rendering them back to the Lord. According to the teachings of the New Church, the hedge or wall represents the truths that protect. Truth protects our minds from going astray, and the church from losing its way. A winepress, dug into the ground and used to extract

the juice from the grapes, represents our ability to examine what we do and intend, to dig into it, to turn over in our minds the best course of action as well as our intentions, and then to act, producing good works and useful endeavours. The tower rising over the vineyard represents our ability to lift our minds heavenward, to rise above the distractions of the world and focus on spiritual reality. The whole vineyard is a picture of how we as individuals, and as a church, have been equipped by the Lord alone to grow spiritually and contribute to society and to the Lord's Kingdom through various uses.

As beautiful and helpful as it is that the Lord has given us all manner of tools to become better people and create a better world, we can chafe under His rules when we realize that we are commanded, rather than recommended, to use them a certain way. Think of it this way: when you freely choose to do some good for someone else it feels great, and since you did it of your own free will, you swell a bit with pride. You didn't need anyone to tell you what to do! But if someone orders you to act a certain way, you resent it. How dare they presume to know what you ought to do with your life!

Yet as this parable points out it isn't really our life at all. It's the Lord's life, and He lent it to us with very specific intentions and purposes. We do not get to feel like we went above and beyond the call of duty simply because we used the Lord's gifts to do exactly as He intended for us to do. When we look at it like this our natural, superficial selves can start to get grumpy. When the time comes to put our skills to use, we can resist, believing that if we were only our own masters we would find true happiness.

This attitude shows up in the Lord's parable through the way the workers responded to the householder's request for the goods that were owed him:

Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. (Matthew 21:34-39)

The literal meaning of this story becomes morbid, even ridiculous: how could they believe that they could get away with killing the heir and so become the owners of the vineyard?

Spiritually though it represents an attitude that we can have towards the Lord: the belief that somehow if we could break free of His control and act exactly as we pleased, we would then be free and happy. If we eradicate His control over our lives then we might no longer have any cares or worries. The problem here is that this attitude results in destruction, both in the parable and spiritually in our own lives. It was obvious even to Jesus' original listeners that the workers would not succeed. Having told the story, Jesus asked,

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"

They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." (Matthew 21:40-41)

The meaning is not that if we reject the Lord's right to direct our lives then He will smite us; rather, the message is that if we fail to listen to the Lord's guidance, and to heed the directions He gives us, then we will bring destruction on ourselves. The illusion is that apart from the Lord we would have a happy and content life; the reality is that apart from the Lord we have nothing but pain, loneliness, emptiness, and all the consequences of evil.

Imagine for a moment, however, what might have been; what would have happened if the workers had honoured their master and his messengers and his

son? Remember, the master was not home all the time watching over their shoulder, micromanaging their every move. He had gone to a far country! All he wanted was the produce he was owed! Otherwise they were left to their own devices, working with the goods he had lent them. They essentially *could* own the vineyard, provided they produced something with it.

Likewise, although submitting to the Lord feels like losing ourselves in a kind of slavery, it actually allows for real freedom and ownership. The paradox is that the more we submit to the Lord, the more we find ourselves and real freedom. As we freely do the Lord's will, we come to enjoy and even love doing it; and so we feel free in it. In fact, it is the Lord's will that we feel this way:

...conjunction with the Lord causes a person to appear to himself free and so to be his own person, and the closer the conjunction with the Lord, the freer, and so the more his own person.

He appears to himself more and more distinctly to be as though his own person because Divine love is such that it wills what it has to be another's, thus to be a person's or angel's. That is the nature of all spiritual love, especially of Divine love. (*Divine Providence* §43)

All the good and true things that the Lord has planted in our minds, all the resources of love and wisdom He has given to the Church, is for the sake of His specific end or goal. And yet when we freely accept that calling and subordinate our own desires to His, we find a real sense of ownership in those very things. We are the Lord's, and so we get to feel His joy as if it were our own.

In spite of Western notions of individualism, and more importantly, in spite of human nature to the contrary, we produce none of the good things that come through us. All of it is from the Lord alone and is to be returned to Him through the choices we make. But if we make that choice, to follow the path He has set before us, then we will enjoy the full freedom of loving what we do and enjoying the reward

inherent in it. We are not our own, but the Lord's; and that is what makes it possible to feel the greatest joys in the universe.