

Gratitude and Responsibility

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

26 October 2025

Children's Talk: Freely Give

Can you think of a time you were given something for free? What was that like? Can you think of a time you had something taken away from you? What was that like? The Lord tells us we have been given a lot of things for free, which is really incredible. But then He also says we have to give it all away too!

These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food." (Matthew 10:5-10)

Jesus told His disciples that they had to go out and serve other people. He also said that they did not need to take anything with them for themselves: the people they helped would support them and take care of them. Can you imagine going on holiday and not packing anything? That must have been scary: what if no one had looked after them? They may have been tempted to not trust the Lord and not share what he had given them. But they went out like He said, and He was right: the more they served other people, the more they were taken care of!

The Lord wants us to do the same thing: He has given each and every one of us qualities and talents and skills that He wants us to use to serve other people. What is something you have that you can use to help other people? But we can become afraid that if we focus on serving people all the time we won't have anything for ourselves. But I want to think about what would happen if everyone worked together to give away freely the things we had been given.

I want 7 volunteers to come up here. Each one of you take a stone. Imagine this stone stands for something really good. Now stand in a circle. Everyone give your stone away to the person to your left. Every single one of you gave away your

stone right? But how many of you still have a stone? You all do! Let's do that a few more times. We could keep doing this forever, and eventually you would have given away your stone thousands of times; and yet even though you would have given it away thousands of times you would still have more.

But what happens if someone decides not to give his stone away? Everyone except one give your stone away to the left. Now does everyone have a stone? No, you don't have. Let's do it again. Now two people don't have! Maybe someone sees that and so they stop giving theirs away too. Now we have a real problem: only a couple people have anything, and most people have nothing. It takes a lot of courage to keep giving when it seems like you have nothing, or will get nothing in return.

But here's the important point: even when you don't get anything from other people, the Lord will keep giving you things no matter what. As you give away the little that you have, the Lord will provide for you and fill you with the things that matter: love and wisdom and useful service, and even look after all your other needs too.

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We're going to carry on with the theme we began in the children's talk, but with a slightly different angle. I want to start by thinking of the things that you have earned in life. What I mean by that is the things that you have worked hard for, put a lot of effort into, and your efforts have borne fruit, and you now have something good in your life because of it. You can be proud of your own achievements; you can take satisfaction in the fact that you made choices and put in the effort to get you where you are today.

But in a very real sense everything good that you have in your life is a gift from the Lord, freely given. There is a parallel here with what the Lord did for the Children of Israel. He led them into the land of Caanan, wherein they would be able to benefit from all the things that were there. But He reminded them to keep in mind where it all came from:

So it shall be, when Jehovah your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant—when you have eaten and are full—then beware, lest you forget Jehovah who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Just like the Children of Israel who were given all these earthly blessings that they did not create themselves, we too benefit from all the things that the Lord freely provides. Even in the case of things you have “earned,” it was the Lord who gave you the love and the inspiration that motivated you; it was the Lord who gave you the wisdom and insights to be able to make a plan and carry it out; it was the Lord who gave you all the tools and resources and even your very body that enabled you to do what you needed to do to put your passion and your skills to use. All of it came from

the Lord, and He gave it freely, without any need for you to first earn or deserve it. It is easy to be grateful for the things that are an obvious bonus; it's a bit more challenging to remember to be grateful even for the things that we have worked hard for and feel like we have earned.

Now what's the point of remembering this? For one thing it's just the reality, and it is good to acknowledge that. It also gives us an opportunity for gratitude. But more than that, it can remind us of our responsibility to others. As the Lord points out, freely we have received, and so freely we ought to give. The recognition that we have something to be grateful for, something given as a gift that we did not have to earn, imposes an obligation to share with others, even if they have not earned it either. This responsibility to other people is the natural consequence of gratitude to the Lord.

Now it can be a bit scary when we start to think of how everything we have that is good is a free gift from the Lord. If *everything* is a free gift, does that mean we have a responsibility to give *everything* away? This thought can bring the fear that we will be left with nothing if we have to give so much away. But the desire that what we have should be shared with others is the essence of heavenly love. The Teachings of the New Church define heavenly love this way:

It is the heavenly of love not to desire to be one's own, but to belong to all; so that we desire to give others all that is our own; in this consists the essence of heavenly love.

That is an incredibly beautiful sentiment. It's also hard to fathom sometimes, that with all of our needs we could be so giving. But in this we should we remember that the Lord, who loves us, also has the same attitude. That passage continues:

The Lord, being love itself, or the essence and life of the love of all in the heavens, wills to give to the human race all things that are His; which is signified by His saying that the Son of man came to give His life a ransom for many. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1419)

The Lord desires everything that is His should be shared with us. That is, everything good in the entire universe. He is constantly striving to fill us up with Love, to inspire us with Wisdom, to guide us to be useful and of service to others. Above all, He gives Himself, His life, for us all; that isn't just a reference to what He did two thousand years ago. It refers to the fact that every single day, the Lord is pressing to serve you, alongside you in all your hardship, carrying you through all sorrow, and empowering you to succeed, even when you cannot feel it. If we are willing to work to give away all that we have been given, the Lord will fill us up with even more, and we will never lack spiritually.

Now this is easier said than done. What does it mean to see everything as a gift that is to be passed on to others. Are you supposed to take your entire salary and give it to charities? Dedicate every last minute of your day to your family's needs? I don't think that's the case. There may be something of an answer in a practice from the Old Testament around the firstfruits or the firstborn. Whenever the Children of Israel brought in a harvest, the very first part to be harvested was sacrificed to the Lord. Likewise when an animal gave birth, the first born was sacrificed to the Lord. The owner would then lose only one portion of the harvest or one animal. But the symbolism spiritually was an acknowledgement that *all* of the harvest and *all* of the animals were from the Lord and belonged to the Lord. None of it really belonged to the farmer or the herdsman; they were simply given the use of them, as stewards of their master's goods as it were. It is important that we literally give some of it away. It's equally, if not more important, that we remember that even the things we don't literally give away are not strictly speaking ours, and that we are obligated to use them in service to others. That applies to the most mundane of things: petrol so we can get to work, food for our families, extra money set aside for

a holiday. We don't need to give away these basic needs and desires; but we should remember that they have been given into our care so that we can better serve those around us and the Lord. On top of that we also shouldn't neglect the spiritual wealth that we have as well, which is the true spiritual meaning of these firstfruits (*Secrets of Heaven* §9223). We are responsible for using our skills, talents, passions, intelligence, and so on in service to other people.

So we've gone from an attitude of gratitude to one of responsibility. I want to end by just thinking about how these two attitudes rely on each other and work together. The Lord brings these two ideas together in the image of a fruitful branch:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:5-8)

The branch has to abide in the vine; but the branch does not just rely on the vine, it must bear fruit; and without a reliance on the vine, it would not be able to bear any fruit at all. Likewise we must both rely on the Lord and be of service to others. What would happen if one were lacking? If we simply bask in a sense of gratitude to the Lord, then we will become passive, and not actually do anything with what we have been given, and no one (even you) will be able to benefit from it. Conversely, if we put all our effort into responsibly using what we have without any reliance on the Lord then we will fall short of what the Lord wants of us, and even if we seem to succeed without the Lord our success will be tainted with pride in ourselves.

I am sure that all of us here have worked hard for some of the things we have in life. Especially as the parents and grandparents, you have poured so much loving care into your children. That you have been able to do that work and bear fruit in that

way is not just a responsibility or obligation. It is a gift from the Lord. At the end of the day, even the responsibility is a gift for which we can be grateful. We have the privilege of working together with the Lord, in some small way, and so making a difference for those around us.