

Dare to Give

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“Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Matthew 5:42).

KINDS OF GIVING

While He was on earth, Jesus urged His followers to “give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” Was Jesus talking about money? What else might He have been talking about? The first answer is obvious—we should help others less well off than ourselves, whether with money or other worldly things that we have and they don’t. It might be education; it might be shelter; it might be medical care. We should help, not so that the world will think that we are good, but because we want our fellow people to be happier than they presently are.

The second kind of giving is a little more difficult and a little deeper. We should give our time and our effort to people who ask for them, if they would truly be of help. Anyone can do this. The poorest person can give time—work for someone who is sick, listen to someone who is lonely, find out what someone else needs.

But it was the deepest kind of giving that the Lord was talking about: giving of ourselves. He said, “Give to everyone who asks of you” (Luke 6:30). The Lord has given each of us special qualities, and we have the power to share our special love and understanding and guidance with others. We also have the power to withhold these gifts.

Giving of ourselves is the most precious gift, and in one way it is quite different from the others. When we give money or time, we have only a certain amount to offer, and then it is used up. The fountainhead of our love and understanding is the Lord’s love and His wisdom, and the person who is generous to others finds in himself more and more which he can give. It never runs out; in fact, it increases.

HARD TO GIVE

Yet we find it hard to give of ourselves. We might give money, time, and effort quite willingly but shut people off when they ask for something deeper. So many of us are reserved. We hide behind a stern face, or silence, or we talk but don’t offer our minds, only some vague thoughts. We may talk but not listen. We may hear a person’s sorrow but offer no real comfort.

Why? Why is it so hard for us to offer those most precious things the Lord has given us? Why do we withhold human warmth when we must know it is the thing above all others that people want? Why do we keep silent when understanding and discussion would help? Why do we stand a long way from someone, or become estranged, when friendship is such a special gift?

There are probably two reasons. The first is incidental to this discussion, but it is still important. Some people don’t give because they don’t care to. They are interested in what they can take

from others, but they can't be bothered with the needs of those around them. If a person thinks of himself most of the time and spends his efforts getting what he wants, then he doesn't have the time or the energy to give to someone else.

A person who doesn't care to give of himself hasn't the time or the energy, but he also lacks something far more important. He doesn't have the power. There will be times when he sees a need, and he knows he ought to fill it, but his mind just doesn't have the strength. Many good intentions die because they just fade away before the wish gets translated into action. Something else comes up that's more exciting. You may have heard the quote, "This is the way the world ends; not with a bang but a whimper." All too often in our world people are crying out for help, and others see it and pass by on the other side.

KNOWING HOW TO GIVE

But there is a reason why *good and caring* people don't give enough of themselves. It is because they don't know how to give. Their attitude is all wrong! They would like to, but they go about it in the wrong way, and fear holds them back.

It is this attitude that the Lord was talking about when He gave some of the strangest teachings we find in the New Testament. "Don't resist evil," He said. If someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other one, and give him a second opportunity. If someone sues you, taking away your inner cloak, give him your outer coat too (see Matthew 5:39-41). If he makes you walk a mile with him, go two. "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."

The Lord explains these seemingly strange teachings in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church given through Emanuel Swedenborg. He points out that the statements are really about the tendency in all of us to hit back, not to give more than we need to, and to hold back whenever we feel threatened.

Often we are afraid to give because we feel we won't be appreciated. We are afraid someone won't accept the "wonderful" kindness we are offering or will scoff at us and hurt our dignity or our feelings. Or we are afraid to give because we are not sure whether the person we could help likes us.

The Lord added a whole new dimension to the concept of giving in the Heavenly Doctrine when He urged us to give of ourselves to others, whether we are appreciated or not. If someone slaps your face in anger, give him a second chance. If he wants to take something from you or belittle what you say, give him an even better opportunity by offering more. If he makes you walk with him and hear him out, then go further than he expects.

THE LORD PROTECTS THE GENEROUS SPIRIT

It is true that some people will not accept our efforts to give. (Of course it is also true that we shouldn't pry where we ought not to. For example, giving unasked-for advice is not what is meant here). When we offer something of ourselves to another person, we are taking the risk that we, and the special things we hold dear, will be rejected. Then the danger is that we will respond in kind, with anger, withdrawal, or maybe even the wish to take revenge.

However, if we give, and keep on giving, we cannot truly be hurt. For a person in charity is protected by the Lord as long as he stays in charity and doesn't turn to anger and revenge when he is attacked. That is what the Lord meant when He said, "But I tell you not to resist an evil person."

It can hurt us to stop giving, but never to go on offering ourselves. An ungrateful person cannot truly hurt a generous spirit, but he might in time be helped a great deal by that generosity which goes on being kind despite unkindness. The Psalmist said, "The wicked borrows and does not repay; but the righteous shows mercy and gives" (37:21).

We want to give to others because the Lord has set the pattern. He has given us so much, and the love and wisdom we receive from Him make us want to reach out to others. From Him, we have a wish to show forgiveness and kindness. We long for other people's happiness. We want to understand others' feelings and respect their wishes and hopes, to be available when they are sad, to sense when they are confused and maybe offer some of our thoughts. We would like to sense when people are bursting with joy and allow them to share it. There's so much we would like to give of ourselves because that's what being created in the Lord's image and likeness means.

But when we stop giving, when we draw back, then we block the Lord's inflowing love. Only when we start to give again is the fountain opened up. On the other hand, when we give, even if it does no visible good, we get more from the Lord than we ever offered. No one is made poorer by giving of himself. Giving makes us far, far richer!

The truest gifts are things that help others know some of the blessings of heaven, and these gifts are inside us. Our faith, for example. We can offer this—not force it on others, but offer its ideas and its blessings. We can share our conviction about the Lord's existence, His almighty power, the wonder of His Word, and His leading. We can give the things that faith produces—gentleness, understanding, sympathy, respect, and humility. These help others to sense a bit of the goodness of life. If we do it properly, we may leave someone a little richer than before.

EXAMPLES

Yet despite our good intentions, how often do we miss opportunities to give of ourselves because we are afraid or react wrongly? Let's look at two examples.

Someone is angry with you. You have offended or hurt him, and you hear about it. What do you do? Many of us stay away. We're afraid to approach the person in case things go badly. Maybe the other person will tell you just what he thinks of you! Or he might show his contempt by walking away. Knowing he's angry, we might stay away, or begin a war of nerves to see who's going to break the tense silence first. And then we start to assert our rightness—"What right has he to be angry with me?" We remember things he has done wrong, or we remember that we didn't mean to give offense, so now we are offended that he dared to be offended! From this it is a small step to anger and a wish to punish the other person. We have only ourselves and our close friends to talk to, and they agree with our side of the story, and we won't talk to the one person who could solve the problem.

The message the Lord gives is, “He’s angry with you. He’s smitten your cheek. Give him another chance.” Maybe he’ll strike again. How terrible! But what have you lost? If you acted from charity, you can’t be truly hurt because the very kindness you have shown is your protection. It comes from the Lord.

What can you gain? Everything, because approaching the other person might solve the whole problem and allow his anger to disappear. That is a big reward for so small a risk. Yet how often do we miss the opportunity to take away a big hurt because we are afraid of the tiny risk? We choose the alternative; we stay away and by doing this we convince the other person that we wished to give offense or hurt.

Take another example. Suppose you are approached by someone who asks your thoughts on a subject. You suspect he means to misunderstand you, and the subject is important to you: your beliefs, ideas about family life, or perhaps national responsibility. You speak to him, and he does misunderstand, maybe deliberately, perhaps even twisting what you have said. The temptation is to get angry, to fight back, and to show how wrong he was. If possible, you would like to make the other person appear stupid—perhaps by telling his friends what poor judgment he has.

But this impulse is worse than the original offense. We must not resist evil with similar evil! Instead, we can refuse to turn away in disgust. We can go right on speaking of our ideals, offering more thoughts, even though it seems likely that they will be misunderstood again. The truth isn’t hurt because someone doesn’t believe it. But the truth can be hurt if we, who do believe in it, become cruel in defending it. To have kindness and respect for another’s freedom, to allow him to misunderstand you and still show respect, is a special kind of giving. To go on lending your ideas, even if you suspect the motivations of the borrower, in the hope that they will help—that is the spirit of charity.

CONQUER THE FEAR OF GIVING

There are lots of fears in all of us, and they could prevent us from giving of ourselves. We are afraid of being misunderstood or disliked, of being criticized or rejected. We fear antagonism or opposition. We fear having things that mean a lot to us ridiculed or considered trivial. We are sometimes desperately afraid of showing love and having it treated lightly.

Rejection is hard to take, and it does hurt for a while. But the tragedy is that fear stops us from taking chances and giving when the Lord has provided so many opportunities for us to do so. Because we might be rejected, on the chance that we might be misunderstand, because we shrink from a momentary embarrassment, we deprive people of things they desperately need.

And really, there is nothing to fear. “Don’t expect evil,” the Lord says, “but if it comes, you are safe if you show charity. Give to him that asks of you, give without fear, and you will not be hurt. I will protect you.”

Certainly this takes courage. It’s far easier to pretend that we are tough and that we don’t care what people think, to stand off and maybe sulk if we are not appreciated enough. But when we learn to say, “I don’t matter; I don’t matter; giving what the Lord has allowed me to give is what matters; lending the ideas He has allowed me to see matters”—then we come closer to being an image of our Lord.