

God's Bounty

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“He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (John 4:36).

From most ancient times people have recognized that the produce of the earth is really a free and bountiful gift of God. Over time, the annual yield of fruit and grain has indeed been increased through scientific knowledge and skill, but without the living seed and fertile ground, without sun and rain in due proportion, human toil is unproductive. Over these things we have no control. The Lord alone disposes them according to His will. Even human strength, and the intelligence needed to direct our efforts into fruitful channels, are purely Divine endowments. The harvest, therefore, is truly a miracle that bears testimony to the life-giving presence of a Divine Creator, whose infinite love and wisdom alone can provide what is needful to sustain human life. This is why in all ages, especially at the harvest season, people have turned to the Lord in worship, with glad thanksgiving.

In the sight of the Lord the real harvest is not the fruit of the earth, but the spirit of thanksgiving in human hearts, because the Lord, in all things, looks to what is eternal. Material food is essential to the life of the body, but gratitude is a vital necessity for the nourishment of the soul. It alone can open our minds and hearts to receive eternal blessings. The reason is that thankfulness inspires love, and with it the desire to make a return for benefits received. When this love is directed to the Lord it impels us to inquire how we may truly serve Him. This is what enables the Lord to feed us with the bread of heaven, providing that spiritual harvest to which He referred when He said to His disciples, “He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.”

The Lord, from His infinite love, seeks to impart everlasting joy and happiness to all humankind. Everything in the entire universe, from the greatest to the least, is designed to contribute toward this supreme goal of the Divine Providence. To make such a contribution is the only reason for anything's existence and is called its use. Use, therefore, is the heart and soul—the living essence—of all creation.

Human beings are also created to perform uses—each one a very special and individual use. Our very life consists in this. Our life is our love, and our use is the end for which that love spontaneously strives. The achievement of that use is where our life finds all its delight. If our love is deprived of this fulfillment, it languishes; life loses its zest, becomes flat and pointless, a hopeless burden instead of a joy. The body may continue to live for a time, but the spirit dies, and when this happens, even the physical functions rapidly deteriorate. The scripture is true: “man shall not live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Natural life, the life of the external mind, is sustained by the hope and the ambition of self-advancement. The love of self feeds on the acquisition of wealth and power, dignity and honor, the pride of supereminence over others. Laboring for these, our minds may acquire the knowledge and the skill to attain their ends, but the uses thus performed bring no return of inmost happiness. They only fill our minds with an insatiable longing that can never be satisfied.

This is because self-love finds no delight in service to others, but solely in their defeat and degradation, in subjecting them to its own will, and compelling them to promote its own ambitions. It has no regard for the freedom or the welfare of the neighbor, except in so far as this may suit its purpose. For this reason, any success self-love may achieve is only temporary and apparent, for the Lord does not permit the spiritual freedom of any person to be violated by another. Against the protective power of His providence no mortal man can possibly prevail. All who attempt it are restrained by punishments, so that in the end the love of self is frustrated and rendered impotent, although the love remains a burning flame of unfilled desire. Such is the living death of those in hell.

Spiritual life, the life of the internal mind that leads to heaven, is sustained by love to the Lord, which is one with the love of self-effacing use to others. When the Lord's love is received it inspires the delight of giving increasing joy and happiness to the neighbor. Under the impulse of this love, we do not act contrary to the Lord's will, but in accord with it. We seek to serve the Lord, and to make the only possible return to Him for all the benefits of His merciful providence. Therefore, the Lord says of all who perform uses to the neighbor from love to Him, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

No person, from his own intelligence, can possibly know how to perform uses of lasting benefit to the neighbor. Whatever we do from our own intelligence, however charitable it may appear in outward form, is secretly inspired by the love of self. The quality of any use, in the sight of heaven, is determined not by what we do, but by the love that prompts it, the spirit in which it is done. In the last analysis, therefore, it is not we who perform uses but the Lord. The Lord's love, received by us, moves our hearts, forms our minds, directs our thoughts, and thus governs our actions toward ends that are far beyond our comprehension. The means whereby the Lord performs uses are the truths of His Word, the laws of His kingdom, for these spring from the infinite wisdom of His love, through which alone the ends of His providence may be achieved. When we, from love to the Lord, submit our own intelligence to Divine instruction, then the Lord can first act in us, and by means of us, impart the everlasting blessings of His mercy.

The secret of all the uses of heaven and the church is therefore contained in the truth of Divine revelation. When the Lord, at His coming, makes that truth manifest in a form adapted to human understanding, He offers us, freely and for the asking, the joy and the blessedness of eternal salvation in heaven. This is the real harvest for the sake of which all else exists. When the Word is given, the way is open, the means are provided. We are given the power, if we will, to avail ourselves of these means. This is why the Lord said to His disciples, "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together" (John 4:35-36).

To reap is to gather from the Lord's Word the knowledge and the understanding of how to keep His law and do His will. It is to learn the revealed truth, impelled by a love that will not rest until it goes forth in deeds of charity and use to others. This is the life of religion that yields an eternal harvest. In reaping this harvest we enter into the joy of the Lord's Word, that "both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together."

“He who sows” is the Lord. He not only gives the seed of Divine truth, but in marvelous ways He secretly prepares the soil of human minds for its reception. He inspires the love that nurtures the truth, and imparts the understanding, which, like the gentle rain from heaven, makes it grow. On our part, we must till the soil by a persistent effort to learn and understand the truth. He must plant the seed by a continual effort to guide his life according to the truth. We must tend the growing plant by striving to remove every impulse of self-love from our thoughts and will. But while we must appear to do these things ourselves, the truth is that the Lord, in a thousand secret ways, does them for us. For the removal of evil from the human heart, and the implantation of good, by which regeneration is effected, is a purely Divine work. The Lord alone has the power to restrain the hells, so that they may not attack with overpowering strength beyond our ability to resist. He alone can provide a balancing influence from the heavens, so that our freedom of choice may be preserved (or so that when it is temporarily lost it may be repeatedly restored).

We have no conscious knowledge of this Divine protection, yet it is unceasing from the first moment of our life, even to eternity. In spite of all the bitter conflicts that the life of religion demands, in spite of the appearance that the outcome depends altogether upon our own strength of will and determination; the spiritual harvest, like the produce of the earth, is a miracle of Divine omnipotence for which we can only lift up our hearts in thanksgiving to the Lord.

The appearance is that “he who reaps,” in the text, refers to us—to human beings. This is true to the extent that we, of our own free choice, must open our hearts to the Lord and hearken to the teaching of His Word. The Lord does not coerce this freedom. He leads, as far as we are willing to follow, but He never compels. He provides that we may choose the way to heaven, and may sustain the conflict of temptation as if by our own power, because only in this way can we enjoy the happiness of heaven as our own. To this end, the Lord most carefully conceals the operations of His providence, so that when the goal is attained, “he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.” But in a deeper sense, the Lord both sows and reaps. His love sows the seed, and His wisdom reaps the harvest. We make the choice, but the Lord alone gives us the power to do so. He tempers the influx of the hells and fights the battle of regeneration for us, even while He leaves us seemingly alone in the hour of temptation.

We can understand and acknowledge this truth from the teaching of the Word, although we have no manifest perception of it. To make that acknowledgment does not take away our freedom, but instead exalts it. Indeed, we are told that the more perfectly the angels perceive that of themselves they are nothing and that all their happiness and use is the Lord’s free gift to them, the more fully do they feel that they are free, because they will to have it so. In this is the true spirit of thanksgiving, which opens the doors of our hearts to the Lord’s entrance, so that He may fulfill His promise given through the prophet Malachi: “Prove Me now in this, says the Lord of hosts, ‘If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it’” (Malachi 3:10).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 145:10-21; John 4:25-38; *Arcana Coelestia* 5293:1-2.