

## **The Value of Work**

by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

*Everyone who has been faithful, sincere and just in his employment and work in the world is received in heaven by the angels... (Divine Wisdom XJ:4).*

Throughout the Scriptures we find an emphasis on the importance, the value, of work. In the creation story we are told that “the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Even in the very beginning, the Lord expected people on earth to work, to take care of things. Later, in the fundamental principles governing life—the Ten Commandments—the Lord says, “six days you shall labor and do all your work.” One day is for the Lord, but the others are for our work (see *True Christian Religion* 301). And when the Lord sent out seventy of His followers to proclaim the Gospel to all, He told them not to take much money or garments, “for the laborer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:7). He expected that they would be rewarded. “A tree is known by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33).

It is not hard to see how valuable work is in our lives. Vacations are delightful, but where would we be without work? When we are forced to be idle due to extended illness or unemployment, how do we feel? Is it not frustrating? And how often does it lead to depression? For the feeling of being useless, of having no meaning, can rob us of our self-esteem and destroy our desire to do anything. This is why retirement can be a challenge to many. People who had been accustomed to hard work suddenly find themselves without any need to get up in the morning. Until a sense of usefulness in other ways is discovered, retirement can seem a pointless waste.

The hellishness of being without any use in life can be seen both in the faces of the long-term unemployed who seem to have surrendered, and in the excessively rich. Now wealth has nothing whatsoever to do with whether one gets to heaven or not. But people who lead useless lives here because of wealth which enabled them to avoid all useful employment, find little happiness in the spiritual world. For we are told that often they have spent their days finding new and more exciting ways to amuse themselves, usually in destructive ways. They cared only for themselves, and looked down on others who labored hard (see *Spiritual Experiences* 2501). While some people may complain about having to work to earn a living, it is actually a blessing of Providence that we need to find jobs and are not tempted through wealth to be useless.

Being able to work, to find gainful employment outside the home, or to devote one’s attention to rearing a family and taking care of a home, is a vital way the Lord has provided for us to learn to be useful. For what value would our lives have if we sat around waiting to be entertained? We can talk and talk about what we believe, about what ought to be done, but if we do not do it, what is the point? Genuine charity, genuine love for others, exists in what we *do* for others. And our jobs, when we perform them justly and fairly, become our life of charity (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8253e). To have regular work establishes a pattern, a structure for our lives. As the Heavenly Doctrine notes in the book called *Conjugal Love*,

*the love of use and devotion to use holds the mind together lest it melt away and, wandering about, absorb all the lusts which flow in from the body and world through the senses with their allurements, whereby the truths of religion and the*

*truths of morality with their goods are scattered to all the winds (16:3).*

Put simply, having to work keeps us out of trouble. It occupies our time; it keeps us busy.

More than that, working is a means the Lord utilizes to teach us to be useful (see *Doctrine of Faith* 25). Providence oversees the process of growing up and finding work so that we all might be productive. Initially, each child has a delight in learning. In the course of education most students discover subjects or skills that draw their attention. After graduation, their delights lead them to find work in these areas. As novices, though, they are not particularly capable (who would trust a first-year doctor with complicated brain surgery or an untried mechanic with an engine overhaul?). There is much more to learn. More information and experience is required. But, as that is gained, as there is some mastery of the business at hand, then that initial delight is renewed. An affection for the work grows, which is an affection for being useful. From work, people are able to learn how to help others, how to be productive, how to do something useful.

This is especially seen in the story of Jacob. Jacob had to flee his home after he had stolen the birthright and blessing from his older brother, Esau, who rightfully deserved them. Without land, without herds, he had nothing; he was nothing. Then he saw the beautiful Rachel, the woman he desired for a wife. Her father Laban agreed to the marriage and to Jacob's offer to work for him for seven years for Rachel. "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed but a few days to him because of the love he had for her" (Genesis 29:20). Unfortunately for Jacob, after the seven years he found himself married to Leah, the older sister. But after agreeing to another seven years of labor, he was permitted to marry Rachel also. Then, in need of flocks and herds, he agreed to work for Laban for another seven years so that he might acquire some. Thus, at the end of over twenty years of work, Jacob returned home a wealthy man.

What happened in those years? In addition to acquiring a family and wealth, the work was the means the Lord used to change Jacob, to mature him. For when Jacob finally returned home he submitted himself before his older brother, recognizing his seniority. This could not have happened unless he had grown through the work, unless he had developed a new set of priorities.

As Jacob learned to be useful through work, we do also. Often we have selfish goals at first, yet, as we put effort into our jobs, as we learn to be more productive, the Lord can change our attitudes. He can gradually shift our emphasis away from reward to a joy in doing something good for others. This is the delight in being useful. It is a heavenly quality. It is actually being of service to the Lord.

In the book of Revelation, letters are written to seven churches. The church in the city of Ephesus is given praise: "I know your works, your labor, your patience.... [A]nd you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (2:2-3). Spiritually, laboring for the Lord means striving with zeal to do what is right and to speak what is true (see *Apocalypse Explained* 102). This is done in all our works when we attempt to act fairly with others, and to provide goods and services which will benefit them.

This also means that all uses are ultimately derived from the Lord. As we perform to the best of our abilities in our jobs, we are serving the Lord, doing His work. For all uses have their life,

their value, because they are part of the Lord's way of helping people. The Lord enables people to participate in His Providence. He operates through human efforts to bring about heavenly ends. So He is present in every single aspect of useful interactions between people, guiding them so that spiritual life may grow.

For this reason, there is no meaningless labor on this earth. Each job, from the most poorly paid menial work to the most exalted executive position, contributes to the Lord's purpose in creation. He will use every facet of our labor and efforts to do our jobs well, to further in some way a heaven from the human race. Although in a materialistic culture we tend to measure our worth by what we are paid, that is not how the Lord looks at us. Rather than looking at how highly or lowly our position is esteemed, the Lord sees in each of us how fair we are trying to be, how dedicated we are to doing our jobs well. This determines our quality, the true worth of our labors.

*What job we do is then not as important as our approach to it. Is it simply a way to earn money to buy more things? Or is it a way to be of service? There are many people who, although they are poor and may be seen as less productive members of society, develop heavenly qualities because they "are content with their lot, and are careful and diligent in their work...love labor better than idleness, and act sincerely and faithfully, and at the same time live a Christian life" (Heaven and Hell 364).*

While many jobs are relatively unrewarding in this world, our attitude toward them can make them better or worse. If we focus on the money earned, the prestige acquired, or the rapid advancement possibilities, we are likely to become dissatisfied. But if we focus upon the use we are doing, then almost any job can have its delights, its sense of reward. If our love is for being useful, then we will search for better ways to do it—perhaps by changing jobs or seeking higher positions—but these will be only means, not the end itself.

Through our work we can participate in the Lord's Providence, we can learn to care for others, and can have heaven created within us. This is why the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that "everyone who has been faithful, sincere and just in his employment and work in the world is received in heaven by the angels." This does not mean that just by working hard we can somehow buy our way into heaven. It means that through our labors, our service to the Lord, the truths of religion can come to life in us.

As the psalmist said, "Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you" (128:1-2). We eat the labor of our hands as the rewards of use become manifest in our lives. From a love of serving others, we devote ourselves to our work. We seek ways to help. We grow in our delight in being useful, in bringing others happiness. And we are blessed with a happiness that the angels know, a happiness which can exist only where there is love for one another, even as the Lord has loved us.

Amen.

Readings: Psalm 128; Luke 10:1-12; *Arcana Coelestia* 7038