

The Vine and the Branches

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Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. 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 (John 15:4, 5).

There is a paradox that runs throughout the history of religion. Who saves us? If we are free and responsible for whether we are saved or condemned, then, as we strive to obey God, salvation appears to come from our own efforts. It can be easy for an obedient disciple to credit his developing spiritual life to his own good decisions and to feel that his salvation is something he earns through living a wise and good life. And if the person persists in this fantasy, he comes into very unheavenly states of meritorious good, in which he believes less in the Lord than in his own wisdom and goodness.

On the other hand, if we acknowledge that God, who alone is good, is the only source of salvation and that we have no good inherent in ourselves, then our own role can seem to diminish to nothing, as if only His mercy and love are needed. Confidence that God alone saves can seem to reduce how we choose to live to spiritual insignificance. Yet if our choices are the determining factor, how can we avoid the false self-confidence that we ourselves have earned some sort of reward?

An Historical Perspective

How a person, or a church, resolves this paradox determines spiritual character. For example, the historic split between Catholics and Protestants focuses largely on their differing responses. Over many centuries Catholics developed a reliance upon seven sacraments and innumerable works of piety that left little doubt about the belief that obedient human efforts assure salvation. People were encouraged to earn spiritual rewards by meritorious works of worship and deeds of charity.

Protestants followed the experience of Martin Luther, a disillusioned monk who believed that endless rituals alienated him from God. He felt that he was a hopeless sinner—in spite of all his prayers, confessions, and attempts to earn God's good graces. Luther recognized that salvation must come from God because human beings cannot from themselves deserve spiritual reward.

The Protestant argument is that everything we do has some benefit for ourselves as its goal, so how can the self produce anything genuinely good? Therefore, they believe that God alone saves us by His own grace and mercy and choice, and we have nothing to do with it. This ends up in faith alone, with good works thought of not as the way to salvation, but as a sign that one is saved. Even faith was a pure gift of grace, and its reception by a person was determined by God, not by any human effort. For those who stress that God alone is the source of every particle of good and truth, Divine grace and predestination have often become necessary, so as to exclude an active human role in salvation.

But what happens when an individual excludes his daily life from the question of salvation? We can see the results all about us, in history and in ourselves. And, if people do not see their decisions in life as determining their eternal happiness or unhappiness, how can human society realistically

expect any serious improvement?

“Abide in Me”

To this perennial paradox the Lord responds in our text: “Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. 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.” This is one of the best-known passages of the New Testament. Here the Word in the letter reveals spiritual truth plainly: from ourselves we can do nothing (see *Coronis* 25). The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church cites these verses more than a hundred times to explain an amazing number of different doctrines.

The most direct teaching of our text is just what the vine-and-branch metaphor implies—to produce real good we must be organically united with our Lord Jesus Christ. The fruits or good works we, as branches, produce are really brought forth by Him working in us. Goods that we do from ourselves are not good internally, even if they benefit other people. Only good derived from Him *who is Good* is genuine.

We cannot earn or deserve our salvation, but we can receive life from the Lord and do good from Him. Martin Luther was correct that salvation comes of the Lord’s pure grace and mercy, not out of our own efforts. But he missed the freedom and active human response implied in our text. The Lord does urge us to abide in Him and to bear fruit from the life of the vine. Though we do nothing good without Him, the entire fifteenth chapter of John (our first lesson) exhorts us to do genuine good from the Lord, to obey His commandments and to love others.

Our Free Reception

Since we have no life of our own—no love or wisdom originating in ourselves—and are receptacles of life from the Lord, the work of regeneration is really a work of reaction, of active reception—a work done in freedom. We put out effort as though it comes from ourselves, but in fact the good effort originates in the Lord, as the vine gives life to the branch. We are taught that the Lord comes to us, not we to the Lord. He makes Himself present with us; we do not make ourselves present with Him (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9415:2). Our text does not mean that we conjoin ourselves with the Lord, but rather that He conjoins Himself to us as we reject evils from our lives. For when a person “ceases [from evils], then there is brought about the reciprocal conjunction of truth...and of good...from the Lord, and not at all from the person; for from himself a person can do nothing of good...” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10067:8)

This concept of free and active reception, acting as if from oneself, is the real answer to the historical paradox. The doctrine of acting freely, as if of oneself but really from the Lord, is one of the most important teachings of the Lord’s second coming in the Heavenly Doctrine, because it enables humans to play a full role in their spiritual rebirth while also acknowledging that it is the Lord alone who does the real work of salvation. Salvation is solely of the Lord’s grace and mercy—not by faith alone, nor by works alone, but by a union of faith in the Lord with a life of love that produces good works like fruit from branches.

Now this wonderful work of regeneration doesn’t take place just because we know the doctrine about it. (That would be faith alone.) Nor will it occur just by our trying as much as we can to do

works commanded by God. We cannot save ourselves, however many good works we accomplish. Since the Lord alone saves, we must also deliberately look to Him and acknowledge that all good and truth are from Him and are His. This is why charity must be joined by faith, since it is through faith that we accept the Lord's primary role in our spiritual growth. It is faith that brings the Lord's presence and grants us the light, power and inspiration we need to live as we should. Besides living by a doctrine of life, we need to receive a doctrine of true faith that sees the Lord as the source of everything good and true. Without faith we may benefit others, but we make *ourselves* the origin of the benefits and come to believe in ourselves, not God, as good.

Meritorious Good

Any person or church that accepts free will as central to salvation is susceptible to thinking that salvation is from self. We can believe something like this, even if we know from doctrine that it is untrue. The age-old threat of meritorious good is a possibility for any branch which strives to reject evils and do goods. Seeking rewards is a large part of natural life. And, at the beginning of regeneration, it is the easiest thing in the world to credit ourselves with the good we do (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4174, 4145:2) . Good certainly feels like our own. Shouldn't we get credit for it?

Yet we are told that true heavenly happiness

vanishes as soon as [people] think of reward, for thought about reward renders [mutual] love impure and perverts it. The reason for this is that they are then thinking about themselves and not about the neighbor, that is, about making themselves happy and not others except insofar as it affects themselves. Thus they convert love toward the neighbor into love toward themselves, and so far as they do this, so far joy and happiness from heaven cannot be communicated to them, for they concentrate upon themselves the influx of happiness from heaven, and do not convey it to others... (*Arcana Coelestia* 6388).

“What's in it for me?” The natural person in us can't avoid this thought when approaching religion. And, in early spiritual growth, it does not condemn. However, if it persists, a focus on self can more and more negate the good flowing from God into our religion and life. The more we try, the more we can reflect on “our” good and think, “Surely a just God will reward it.” Perhaps this is why, historically, it has been in their more mature years that theologians of the doctrines of grace and predestination have developed ideas stressing the Divine role in salvation—perhaps as an antidote to belief in oneself as the source of good. Probably younger people should focus first on what they should do to be reborn, while the experience of years of effort should hunger to understand how the Lord does all good.

The Delusion of Merit

In any case, remaining in the illusion that our own efforts regenerate us can become condemning, through the fallacy that our own works are good and deserve reward. A person who thinks good is from his own decisions comes to believe that he is better than others. He will even grow contemptuous and condemning of those who are his apparent spiritual inferiors. Confident in his own goodness, such a person is unwilling to accept that everything good is of Divine mercy, and the humility he needs for the Lord to work in him gradually disappears. No matter how grand his spiritual life may appear in externals, in temptation he fails.

The purpose of spiritual temptation is to bring us to acknowledge that there is no good in ourselves and that we are helpless without the Lord. We should remember that perceptions of our own failures and unworthiness are allowed by the Lord *precisely* to break the hold of our confidence in our own goodness and worth. The Heavenly Doctrine also teaches that meritorious good produces continual discontent and indignation about others receiving greater rewards: “if they see others more blessed than themselves, they are sad and find fault.” Such people make their happiness consist in being great and having power and control, rather than in serving others and wishing to be least (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5758:2, 3994:2, 3993:5, 3956, 6393:2, 1679e, 2273, 2380:4, 1661:4, *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 158, etc.).

The qualities of meritorious good are too familiar for many of us to ignore. The deadening delusion that our own efforts make us good and deserving of reward can turn anyone who tries hard into a spiritual woodcutter. Spiritual woodcutters are somewhat fearful for their own salvation. They continuously strive to cut wood—to do more good works—hoping that they can amass a large enough collection of them to be found worthy of heaven. But the confidence they want eludes them, until they seek it from the Lord as the fountain of all good.

It is a great blessing that the Lord’s solution to meritorious works is simple. He asks only that we turn to Him as the doer of all good in us and believe there is no good except from Him. True faith destroys merit-seeking, and denying that good can come from ourselves removes any false sense of responsibility that we must accomplish our own regeneration. A person in the meritorious delusion is, after all, already trying hard to be good. The problem is not faith-alone but not enough faith, not enough trust in the Lord’s part in saving us, not enough understanding of how the Lord works within us, and, perhaps, not enough doctrine to give real confidence in the Lord’s saving power.

Trusting in the Lord

True beliefs can take away illusions of power and control over one’s own life, and replace conceit and trust in self with humility and a willingness to follow the Lord. At first the loss of feeling in control may seem like a surrender to helplessness. But the Lord wants us to trust that He will regenerate and save us, so long as we continue to strive in the areas He leaves to our freedom: ceasing from evils, doing goods for others, and trusting that He will renew our internals. When we give up our illusions of power over ourselves, we will enjoy less sense of grandeur. But a growing awareness of the Lord’s work should make us stronger against the anxieties of temptation and give us more overall spiritual peace and contentment.

Now, the Heavenly Doctrine’s underlying theme that all good is from God does not merely explain this for our intellectual edification. The doctrine that all good and truth are from God is an essential truth. We should study, reflect on, understand, and accept it as a central pillar of faith, to dissipate a belief in the goodness of self. We are urged to believe that prudence from oneself is nothing and everything good is from the Lord. It may be that we will be given to accept this only in full regeneration, by attending always to the Lord’s truths in preference to self-intelligence and by pursuing always the Lord’s good rather than goals for self. In the meantime, as we progress, true beliefs are the saving faith that acknowledges the Lord as the vine of which we are branches.

Living as God commands is our proper focus, but faith is not just an optional addition. A saving faith in the Lord is indispensable for receiving the life of heaven, because the Lord Himself is the reward

of heaven. We won't want Him as our reward unless we come to understand and believe that He is the only source of good. We need to reflect on the nature of influx and human freedom to see how our good decisions are, in fact, motivated not by something in ourselves but by loves that come to us from Him, as life from the vine.

God's Love

Together with shunning evils and living a life for others, a saving faith in the Lord will open us to the delights of heaven. The Heavenly Doctrine says merit is easily removed from those who are imbued with charity, through their acting faithfully and justly in daily work (see *True Christian Religion* 442e). The perception that we deserve reward is really a curse from hell to make us anxious, demanding, and envious. As faith frees us from this lie, our hearts can be open to the joy of serving others without thought for ourselves, and then we come into heaven. In heaven, the delight of doing good to the neighbor is itself the reward (see *True Christian Religion* 440). When we receive this delight we receive the Lord's own life and thus the Lord Himself. We abide in Him.

As the disciple John wrote in his first epistle,

Let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.... In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us.... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.... God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him.... We love Him because He first loved us (I John 4:7-8,10,11,16,19).

The branches truly abide in the Vine by receiving love. In receiving His love, we come into the Lord Himself, even into His body. To welcome this heavenly life of love, may we strive to understand, with rational truth, how all is from Him. As we read in the gospel, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven" (John 3:27). To accept this principle in our living we need faith in our Lord as well as a good life.

"He who abides in Me and I in him bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

Amen.

Lessons: John 15:1-17; *True Christian Religion* 439, 440 (selections)