

Works of Charity

by the Rev. Thomas Kline

I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.

Matthew 25:36

Our text begins with a vision of the Son of Man sitting on a throne with all the nations gathered before Him. As they come before Him, they are separated, the sheep on the right and the goats on the left. He tells the sheep that they shall inherit the kingdom prepared for them, because they had given Him food, drink, taken Him in, clothed Him and visited Him. To the sheep He says, "You shall inherit the kingdom prepared for you." They ask, when did we do this? And the Lord answers, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

Then the Lord says to the goats, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire...." They ask when they did *not* do these things. And the Lord answers to them, "Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me."

This is not a *literal* picture of our judgement, for we each judge ourselves through the gradual process of finding a home in heaven or hell. But how are we judged? Is it by our faith? By our love? Is it a matter of which church denomination you belong to? (Many churches teach these doctrines.)

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, when it treats of this passage, makes a special point that the Lord, in this parable, purposefully identifies "works of charity" as the barometer between life in heaven and life in hell: doing good works toward our neighbor...feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and so on (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4663.3).

Does this mean that we can earn our way to heaven? If we simply do external works of charity, regardless of our motive, will the Lord reward us with everlasting happiness? Suppose we feed the hungry, not because we really care about them, but just because we want to appear righteous before others. Does this gain us heaven? While there may be many spurious and sometimes hypocritical reasons why people do good works, we must never lose sight of the fact that acts and deeds of charity are the foundation of our spiritual life.

Let us examine some teaching from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church about works of charity:

1. To counter the argument that we are saved by faith alone, the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that,

The reason why solely the works of charity are mentioned by the Lord (here in this 25th chapter of Matthew), is because anyone who practices the works of

charity, or what amounts to the same, leads the life of faith, possesses the ability to receive faith, if not during his lifetime, then in the next life (Arcana Coelestia 4663).

When you do an act of charity, in that very act is an expression of the faith that you have received from the Lord. And in that very act is the potential for receiving more faith.

2. The Heavenly Doctrine says that in an act or deed of charity, “the internal man is present in the external in a corresponding fashion” (*Arcana Coelestia* 3934). We might interpret this to mean that the internal man *can* be present, because there are certainly times when we do an act of charity, and we are only in externals. But picture yourself, visiting a person who is sick, and in that physical act of reaching out to them there is an embodiment of interior loves. The passage continues, “works are done by the external man while charity and faith-rooted-in-charity dwell in the internal man.”

3. What is the good of charity? We read that “Every good that is called a good of charity consists in nothing other than useful service, and useful services are nothing other than works done for one’s neighbor, country, Church and the Lord’s kingdom” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6073). We are to ask, “what can I do for my neighbor, my church, for the Lord’s kingdom?”

4. This passage also seems to suggest that we don’t really have love until we express it through some action: “Regarded essentially charity does not actually become charity until it passes into action and becomes a work; for loving someone but not doing anything good for him when the possibility exists is not really loving him” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6073).

Finally, we are told that the angels, who are governed by good received from the Lord, have no greater desire than to perform useful services. These are the very delights of their life, and, in the measure that they perform useful service, they enjoy blessing and happiness (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6073).

There are many places in the Old and New Testaments which speak about the Lord judging and rewarding us solely according to our works, because our works can encompass everything of our spiritual life, from the most interior loves down to the acts and deeds of service. We read in the gospel of Matthew: “The Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father together with His angels, and at that time He will repay everyone according to his works” (16:17).

So, are we simply to take care of the physical needs of those around us? Is this the extent of our service to the neighbor? How many communities in the modern world have solved the problems of hunger, thirst, and clothing, and yet still lack the values of the moral and spiritual life that bring true happiness? This is why the Heavenly Doctrine, when it speaks of meeting the needs of our neighbor, says that they are more than just physical needs. While meeting the physical needs of the poor and needy is an important foundation for the growth of our spiritual life, at the same time we are to see our neighbor’s moral and spiritual needs as well. Therefore, when the Heavenly Doctrine speaks about the list of needs in the 25th chapter of Matthew—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned—it says we are to elevate our

thought and see this as a list of the spiritual needs of our neighbor. When we go forth in act to meet these spiritual needs as well as the physical needs, then we are in true charity.

What are these more interior, spiritual needs? Sometimes, in order to be sensitive to the interior needs of our neighbor, we merely have to look at the same needs in our own lives. Take, for example, a time when you have been emotionally or spiritually hungry. Perhaps picture a couple experiencing difficult times in their marriage, when they hunger for conjugal love. That hunger is just as real, or even more real, than physical hunger. Another example is that a tiny infant who hungers for love and care on an emotional level, will die, physically, if he receives no love at all. Such is the reality of mental and spiritual hunger.

Or take thirst. How often have we thirsted for a right answer? Perhaps we have come to a crossroads in our life, with a major decision to make, and we long, we thirst, for the correct answer. If someone would just come and point to the right direction, our thirst would be quenched. A little child thirsts for knowledge.

Think of a time when you felt naked. We all have private areas of our lives, facts and things about our life that we really don't want others to know. We feel naked and exposed when these things are suddenly made known. Just coming into a new situation, or going into a room filled with people we do not know, we can feel naked.

Finally, what one of us has not experienced the prison of a bad habit, an evil that just won't go away, a compulsion, or even an addiction?

So the Lord is also speaking of more interior needs when He asks us to go forth and serve. Picture yourself elevating your mind to this interior level of the spiritual needs of your neighbor, your country, the church, the Lord's kingdom...and going forth to serve them. Here are some spiritual definitions given in the Heavenly Doctrine (see *Apocalypse Explained* 118):

- The poor and needy signify those who believe that of themselves they know nothing.
- The hungry and thirsty are those who continually long for truths, and long to be perfected by means of truths.
- The stranger pictures those outside of the church, but who wish to be instructed and to receive the doctrinals of the church and live according to them.

The statement by the Lord that “inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” is a beautiful teaching. To serve and love the neighbor is also to serve and love the Lord. The two great commandments—to love the Lord with all your heart and mind and your neighbor as yourself—are really one and the same. To love and serve the neighbor is to love and serve the Lord. This is why the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that it is the good in others which is the true neighbor to be served (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2417). When we see and love good in another, and then go forth in act and deed to serve, we find spiritual life and joy.

The Lord hungered and thirsted—from His Divine love He willed and desired the salvation of the human race. The Heavenly Doctrine goes on to say that people can give Him to eat and drink, “and this is done when from affection they receive and perceive good and truth from the Lord,

and by means of the life appropriate them to themselves” (*Apocalypse Explained* 617). We give the Lord food and drink when we receive good and truth and bring them into our lives.

An act of charity is holy in the Lord’s sight, it is an act of worship. Let us make an individual commitment to serve our neighbors. Let us continue to discover new ways to serve others: the physically hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned, and the spiritually hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. And as we go forth and serve in a spirit of charity and faith, we will find that kingdom the Lord spoke of “that kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world.”

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 40; Matthew 25; *Arcana Coelestia* 3419.2-3