

The Lord's Leading: The Potter and the Clay

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Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. *Jeremiah 18:3-4*

Last Sunday's sermon was on the Lord's role in leading us like a shepherd. Another image for the Lord's role in our lives, less familiar than that of a shepherd, is the Lord as a potter working to shape and mold us (also Isaiah 29:15-16, 45:9, 64:8). He works to shape and mold us so that our lives can be ones of useful service.

The Lord had told Jeremiah to go see a potter working with clay. The potter that Jeremiah watched had in mind a useful article that he intended to create on his potter's wheel. But there was some flaw in the clay or some other problem and so the potter changed his goal and decided to work toward a different result than he originally intended. Perhaps the potter intended to make a large water vessel, but part of the side of forming vessel collapsed, so he cut it away and contented himself with making the remaining clay into a smaller vessel.

The Lord created each of us to become an angel in heaven. He created each of us with the capability of performing a useful role in an angelic community better than any other angel ever has or ever could. The ups and downs and the unique experiences of your life form a foundation for you to serve others. The clay of our lives that the Lord works to mold are the good things from which our minds are formed (*Arcana Caelestia* 1300). These good things can from the heavenly gifts of remains or remnants that the Lord provides us with starting in early childhood. They can be from the good things we have consciously chosen in our lives with the Lord's help. At each opportunity to be useful that comes before us the Lord works to shape our minds and from this our words and actions to be of service to others.

The happiness of heaven arises fundamentally from fulfilling a useful role to eternity. Consider the following quotation on this subject from the teachings of the New Church.

Latent in the affection of every angel's will is a certain inner tendency which draws the mind to accomplish something. By accomplishment the mind finds peace and satisfaction. This satisfaction and peace produce a state of mind receptive of a love of useful service from the Lord. From the reception of this love comes heavenly happiness, which is the life in the joys [of heaven]. (*Conjugal Love* 6)

But not everyone ends up performing their intended use. Some people live their lives in this world turning away from the Lord and turning away from serving their neighbor. They reject the values and life of heaven during their natural life, and so reject it in the life after death. They want to serve no one but themselves and their own pleasures. An amazing law of the life after death though is that all, even the worst devils of hell must perform some useful task. The following quotation from the *Apocalypse Revealed* describes part of the progress a person who

has led an evil life takes in the life after death until he arrives at his eternal place in hell. Previously this passage spoke of the jobs that these evil people try to fulfill shortly after arriving in the life after death. They don't like be useful and repeatedly fail at jobs and are let go of only to try another job at another community, which they again fail at and are let go of. It then states:

Out of weariness these people next go off and sit solitary and idle, and because, as we said, idle people are not given any food from heaven, they begin to hunger. They also begin to think of nothing else than how to get food and relieve their hunger. When they are in this state, some people come to them, from whom they beg assistance. But those other people say to them, "Why are you sitting so idle? Come with us to our houses, and we will give you jobs to do and feed you." They joyfully then arise and go away with those people to their houses, and each is there given his job, and in exchange for the work food. However, because all who have confirmed themselves in falsities of faith cannot do works of good and useful service, but only works that serve evil, and because they do not do the works faithfully, but only so that people may see them, for the sake of acclaim or material gain, therefore they abandon their jobs and care only to socialize, talk, walk, and sleep. And then, because their employers can no longer induce them to work, they are therefore forced to leave as serving no useful function. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 153:9)

Finally, these spirits find their way to huge caverns that are in reality eternal workhouses that they can never again leave. Even here they have to work. When they arrive they are told by their fate:

The master of the cavern then comes and says to them, "You cannot leave anymore. See your fellow inhabitants. They all work, and as they work, they are given food from heaven. I tell you this so that you know." Their fellow inhabitants say, moreover, "Our master knows for what work each of us is suited, and every day he assigns it to us. Every day that you finish it you are given food. But if you do not finish it, you are given neither food nor clothing. Also, if anyone does evil to another [they are harshly punished]. (*Apocalypse Revealed* 153:10)

All in the life after death must perform some work. The angels form a basis for all their happiness by serving their useful tasks. The evil spirits of hell do theirs only for the benefits they receive. They are not unlike some people in this world who do their work only for the sake of the paycheck or to avoid being considered a deadbeat. If anything occurred that would allow them to quit their job and still retain their income and their reputation, they would in a moment and from then on would consider little more than their own self-interest.

Why do some people have angelic values and habits forming through their lives and why do some have hellish values and habits forming through their lives? Some people seem to picture that their spiritual progress or lack thereof is the Lord's responsibility. They are not inclined to make any effort to be a better person. Sadly, this leads to a life in hell. We are told:

[T]he proper method is for us to do good as if on our own. We should not throw up our hands thinking, "If I can't do any good on my own, I ought to wait for direct inspiration; till then I should lie passive." This too is wrong. Instead we should do good as if we were doing it on our own, but when we reflect on the good we are doing (or have done), we

ought to think, acknowledge, and believe that the Lord working in us is actually doing the good. If we abandon all effort because of the kind of thinking mentioned, the Lord cannot work in us. He cannot act on those who rid themselves of every capacity for receiving the power to do good. It is like saying that you refuse to learn anything unless it comes to you as revelation. Or like saying that you refuse to teach anything unless the words are planted in your mouth. Or like refusing to try anything unless you can be propelled like a machine. If this did happen, you would be still more resentful for feeling like a lifeless object. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1712:2-3)

We are not a lump of lifeless clay and yet the Lord is constantly forming us and shaping our lives. He knows the tiniest details of our lives and works within these things to redirect our heart, mind, words and actions.

The Lord's foreseeing is the seeing from eternity to eternity that the case is so; but the Lord's providing is the directing that it be so; and is the bending of a person's freedom to good things, in so far as [the Lord] foresees that a person will allow himself to be bent in freedom. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3869:3)

The Lord has overseen the qualities that our physical body and natural mind have. He was acutely aware of the natural temperament we would inherit and have shaped from our parents and the home each of us grew up in. He knew the hereditary inclinations to evil that would be particularly powerful in our lives. He oversaw the states of good that we experienced from the very beginning of our lives. He has told us that our work of change is that of trying to conform our thought and life to what is true. Gradually changing our will is His job. We cannot tell ourselves to care or not care about something. We can try to think in wise and caring ways. We can make every appropriate effort to have our actions express these thoughts. But we cannot make ourselves want or not want something, or make ourselves feel completely patient, or feel loving. All we can do is work on the plane of our thoughts and actions with the prayer that the Lord change our will. This work is mostly a mystery to us. As the Lord told Nicodemus "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The Lord is constantly working within our lives to lead us to the greatest possible happiness and usefulness. But He will not make us into something we will not accept in freedom. No matter what, we will perform some use, some task, to eternity in the life after death. Like the potter that Jeremiah watched, if the original goal the Lord intended cannot be achieved, He will still help form us into something that serves. He invites us to feel the peace, comfort, and hope of knowing how much He is doing to lead us and those whom we love toward the happiness of heaven. And He wants us to know that our choices, our willing cooperation, our as-from-self efforts to be better, wiser human beings that a part of us wants to be, are absolutely necessary for a truly happy life. He daily guides and molds our life, seeking to get us to pay attention to what is good and true for our own sakes and for the sake of all the people our lives will touch. May we work together with him that His desire that we become useful and happy angels in heaven may be fulfilled. AMEN.

Lessons: Jeremiah 18:1-6, John 3:1-8, *True Christian Religion* 393

Jeremiah 18:1-6

¹ The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: ² “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.” ³ Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. ⁴ And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. ⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ⁶ “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the LORD. “Look, as the clay *is* in the potter’s hand, so *are* you in My hand, O house of Israel!

John 3:1-8

¹ There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

True Christian Religion 393

It is an unchanging truth that faith and charity cannot be separated, if we are to have a spiritual life and be saved. The truth of this is understandable to everyone, even people without the refinement of a costly education. Suppose someone says, “People who live good lives and have proper beliefs are saved.” No one could hear that without seeing it with an inner perception and therefore agreeing to it intellectually. Suppose someone says, “People who believe the right things but do not live good lives are also saved.” Any people who heard this statement would reject it from their intellect as they would remove a piece of dirt that had fallen in their eye. Their inner perception would immediately cause them to think, “People cannot have good beliefs when they do not live good lives.” What would those beliefs be except a painted model of faith rather than a living image of it? Likewise, if people were to hear, “Those who live good lives but have no beliefs are saved, they would turn this over a few times and then perceive and think that this does not make sense either.” They would think, “Every good thing that is truly and intrinsically good comes from God; therefore, living a good life comes from God. A good life without beliefs, then, is like clay in a potter’s hand that can be molded into forms that are only useful in the earthly kingdom, not in the spiritual kingdom.”