

The value of ordinary work

A sermon about one of the miracles of everyday activities.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, March 12, 2023

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Matthew 16:24, 25

The question of what it means that we need to lose our life to find it may be a hard one to grasp. It may be even harder to see why it was that the Lord needed to lose His life to save the

human race at Easter. As with Peter, it is hard for us to see how this makes sense.

But this principle might not be so hard to understand and accept if we think of it in terms of devoting our lives to a cause or purpose. While we are seldom in situations that require us to literally give our lives, or risk our lives, for someone or for some cause, almost everyone in some way or other devotes their lives to something. We even say that we give our lives to our business, family, or whatever cause or purpose is very important to us.

There is a saying that no one on their deathbed says *“I wish I’d spent more time at the office.”* But this isn’t necessarily true. It is true that people often especially think about their families and loved ones as they approach death, and may wish that they had spent more time with them. But they also think about the causes and purposes that their lives have been centered around and that they have served – most often in their place of work.

The Heavenly Doctrine has remarkable things to say about the effect that that life of service has on a person, and it seems that it is especially a life of service that is meant by the Lord’s words that *“whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”*

Our topic this morning is how it is that we go about finding our life by losing it, what it means that we should deny ourselves and take up our cross, and why it is, therefore, that the Lord gave up His life



on the cross and in so doing completed His defeat of the hells.

There is some magic, or something miraculous, involved in how this works. It might best be illustrated by this somewhat counterintuitive teaching in *True Christian Religion*, speaking about the things that we do

for our families:

“It is a different kind of love which urges each person to these duties from that which urges them to the duties of their employment. In the case of a husband's duties to his wife and a wife's to her husband it is the result of conjugal love and dependent upon this. In the case of a father's and mother's love for their children, it is the result of the instinctive love everyone has, what is called parental affection... [2] But conjugal love, and the love for children, together with their duties and the fulfilment of these duties, do not create love towards the neighbor the way the fulfilment of our work-related obligations does.” True Christian Religion 431

This last part may seem like a surprising teaching given how central conjugal love is said to be in every person’s life. It is *“the fundamental love of all loves in heaven and the church”* (*Conjugal Love* 65).

So in what sense are its duties less beneficial than the duties of our employment?

The passage goes on to say that these duties are less beneficial because they are the result of instinctive loves that everyone has, whether bad or good, or because they depend on the state of the relationship between husband and wife. Other passages describe these things as being related to taking care of what is our own, even as an extension of taking care of ourselves (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 6933-6938).

This is why these things “do not create love towards the neighbor the way the fulfilment of our work-related obligations does.”

It is an amazing thing that the work of an employment can “create” or “produce” in us something that was not there before. Surprisingly, the fact that we are paid for our work, and that we often do it mainly because we are obligated to do it, does not seem to remove this effect.

How does work change us?

This is not to say that the motivations that lead us to work are always good, and there are even employments themselves that are bad. We may not even like our jobs. But most forms of employment serve a genuine purpose and there are aspects of working that mitigate our natural motivations.

“It is easy for the Lord to erase people's idea that they deserve (reward and) credit, provided those people attain (this love or) goodwill primarily through working justly and faithfully in the position, business, or line of work they are in and with the people with whom they interact.” True Christianity 442

This follows from the definition of charity that is given to us, which is that it “is doing good to our neighbor daily and constantly - not only to our neighbor as an individual but also to our neighbor collectively. The only way to do this is through practicing goodness and justice in our position and

work and with the people with whom we have any interaction, because these are things we do every day. When we are not doing them, they still stay in our minds all the time; we think about them and intend to do them.” True Christianity 423

The emphasis here is on what we do constantly and repeatedly. The constant repetition of useful actions tends to change us. “Act precedes, our willing follows” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4353). Over time we become accustomed to whatever work it is that we do, we become better at it, and we may come to have an affection for it that may not have been there at the beginning. We will miss it when we stop.



The same must also be true of the work we do for our own families. This is said to “create” charity in us to a lesser degree only because it is instinctive and because it is an aspect of taking care of ourselves. But if our purpose in doing this work is to have a household and family that serves the Lord and

society in general, then the effect is ultimately the same. Love for the neighbor is created.

The miraculous effect of effort.

The Writings talk about how things become second nature to us:

“It is well known that habits form a kind of second nature, and therefore what is easy for one person is difficult for another. It is easy for manual laborers, porters, and farm workers to work with their arms from morning till evening, but a delicate person of the nobility cannot do the same work for half an hour without fatigue and sweating. It is easy for a forerunner with a walking stick and comfortable shoes to ply the road for miles, whereas someone used to riding in a carriage has difficulty jogging slowly from one street to the next. [2] All artisans who are devoted to their craft pursue it easily and willingly, and when they are away from it they long to get back

to it; but it is almost impossible to force a lazy person with the same skills to practice that craft. The same goes for everyone who has some occupation or pursuit.” True Christianity 562

Many people have had the experience of watching someone at work and realizing that they couldn't do that job for half an hour. Or when we first experienced having to work an eight-hour day or longer at some kind of physical labor we may have wondered if it was even possible. Yet within a few weeks or months we got used to it. The effect of doing something repeatedly or being involved long term in some kind of cause or project, changes us in ways that we do not realize. What may be happening is that the old person is fading away and a new person is being born. This is what is meant by taking up our cross and following the Lord.

The mechanism for this to happen has to do with effort. It is put this way in Arcana Coelestia 1937:

“A person ought to compel himself to do what is good and to speak what is true. The arcanum lying within this is that in so doing a person has a heavenly proprium bestowed on them from the Lord. This heavenly proprium is formed within the effort of their thought.” Arcana Coelestia 1937

The new person is formed within effort. The effort itself is not ours but is from the Lord. Still, we choose in freedom to use it, and the Lord attributes it to us. When effort is employed to do something useful, love of the neighbor is being created where it did not exist before - in a miraculous way.

This same passage notes that we don't feel this freedom or this love while this is going on, because it is masked by the discomfort and feelings of compulsion that go along with most forms of effort.

Enter by the narrow gate.

We commonly want to avoid excessive effort, which is the reason for today's recitation:

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and confined is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” Matthew 7:13, 14

That is, it appears to be easier to avoid work than to do it, and it is natural to chafe against the confining sense of obligation that work imposes on us. It is impossible to avoid this appearance and these feelings, and there *is* such a thing as working too

hard. Rest and recreation are important. But there is no new life without effort, and the happiness of heaven is closely linked with a willingness to serve.

“Unless one is active there is no happiness in life. Angelic life consists in use, and in good deeds of charity... Consequently, angelic happiness consists in use, stems from use, and is proportionate to use, that is, to the good deeds of love and charity.” Arcana Coelestia 454

This principle applies to every area of life. In marriage, for example, we read in Conjugal Love that “*an absence of focus on any pursuit or business*” is a significant cause of unhappiness:

“By pursuit or business we mean any effort to be useful. When as a result a person is engaged in some pursuit or business or other useful activity, his mind is fenced around and circumscribed as though with a circle, within whose bounds it is progressively ordered into truly human form... Because of this, conjugal warmth lasts better and longer in such people than it does in others.” Conjugal Love 249

It may seem narrow and confining, but the opposite is true. It is a method that creates love miraculously.

This is why the Lord said that whoever desires to save his life will lose it. He means that whoever desires to find happiness without being willing to serve will lose that happiness. But whoever is willing to give up their own happiness for the sake of doing something useful will find it.

Laying down our lives for our friends.

Peter symbolically resisted this process by saying that it should not happen that way – that the Lord must not be killed and rise the third day. We might be with Peter in this, but the Lord called him “*Satan*” because the resistance to devoting ourselves to uses prevents us from finding happiness.

This description does not tell the whole story when it comes to our regeneration, much less does it completely explain the reason for the Lord's death and resurrection. But it does explain a vital aspect of our path to a good life. This is the joy that the Lord was talking about when He said:

“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.” John 15:11, 13 AMEN

Readings from the Word

Matthew 16

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

²² Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"

²³ But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵ For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake

will find it. ²⁶ For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

Or what will a man give in exchange for his

soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then

He will reward each according to his

works. ²⁸ Assuredly, I say to you, there are some

standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

True Christianity 423

Goodwill (or charity) is doing good to our neighbor daily and constantly - not only to our neighbor as an individual but also to our neighbor collectively. The only way to do

this is through practicing goodness and justice in our position and work and with the people

with whom we have any interaction, because these are things we do every day. When we are

not doing them, they still stay in our minds all the time; we think about them and intend to do them.

People who practice goodwill (or charity) in this way become better and better forms of it. Justice and faithfulness shape their minds and the practice of (charity) shapes their bodies. Over time, because of their form, they get to the point where everything they want and think about relates to goodwill. In the long run, they become like the people mentioned in the Word who have the law written on their hearts [Jeremiah 31:33]. Such people also take no credit for what they are doing since they are not thinking about receiving credit for it; they are thinking about their duty. In their view, acting this way is the right thing for citizens to do.

Nevertheless, we are completely incapable of acting on the basis of spiritual justice and faithfulness on our own.

We all inherit from our parents the trait of doing what is good and just for our own sake or for worldly reasons.

None of us hereditarily does these things for the sake of goodness and justice. Therefore only when people worship the Lord, and function from the Lord while they seem to be functioning on their own, do they attain spiritual goodwill (or charity) and become saturated with it as the result of constant practice.

Arcana Coelestia 454

Unless one is active there is no happiness in life. Angelic life consists in use, and in good deeds of charity. For angels never feel happier than when they are informing and teaching spirits that stream in

from the world, or when they are ministering to people and are preventing the evil spirits with them

overstepping the mark, and inspiring people with what is good; also when they are arousing the dead into the life of eternity, and after that introducing such souls into heaven if they are capable of it. The happiness they find in all this is more than can possibly be described. Angels in this way are images of the Lord; they love their neighbor more than themselves; and this is what makes heaven heaven. Consequently, angelic happiness consists in use, stems from use, and is proportionate to use, that is, to the good deeds of love and charity.

