

The Pearl of Great Price
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A Sermon by Stephen D. Cole

“Again, the kingdom of the heavens is like unto a man, a merchant, seeking goodly pearls; who finding one exceedingly precious pearl, went, sold all that he had, and bought it.”(Matthew 13:45-46)

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew recounts a series of the parables by which the Lord taught about the kingdom of the heavens. And in the midst of these, we find the parable of our text, using the image of a pearl merchant, buying and selling pearls. Many of those who heard these parables of the Lord went away puzzling over His words. But we are invited to enter with understanding into the true meaning.

The symbolism of buying and selling unlocks the meaning of this parable. And this symbolism appears often in the Word; for throughout the Old and New Testaments there is mention of merchants, their wares and their trading. Take this example from Genesis, for instance: “Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to Egypt.” The meaning here, as the *Arcana Coelestia* explains, is this:

“To buy” means appropriation therefrom. This is evident from the meaning of “buying,” as being to procure for oneself, thus to appropriate. Procuring and appropriating spiritually are accomplished by means of good and truth. To this corresponds the procuring and appropriating that in the world are accomplished by means of silver and gold; for in the spiritual sense “silver” is truth, and “gold” is good. Hence “buying” means appropriation. (AC 5374:1)

Mental or spiritual “buying” and “selling” are appropriation and disappropriation, respectively. Another of the many places that this imagery appears is in the Lord’s advice to the rich young man. Let us recall how the story goes.

As it is told in Matthew, a rich young man approaches Jesus and asks sincerely, it appears, what he must do to attain eternal life. First, Jesus tells him that he must keep the commandments. But when he replies that he has kept these from his youth, Jesus tells him to sell his belongings, and that then he will have treasure in heaven. In the version in the Gospel of Luke, it is put even more strongly: “All, as much as thou hast, sell” – an echo of the merchant in our parable, of whom the very same words are used, that he sold “all, as much as he had.” But in the case of the young man, he went away sorrowful.

This was not one of those occasions on which the Lord was rebuking a disingenuous inquirer or putting him in his place. Mark adds this poignant detail: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, One thing thou lackest: go, as much as thou hast, sell.” Jesus adds this last charge out of love and compassion for him. He was a young man, and perhaps a little too proud of his pious life, and we can hope that, even as he sorrowed, he took the Lord’s words to heart.

The *Apocalypse Explained* (893:4) tells us that the command that he should “sell all that he had and give to the poor” meant in the spiritual sense “that he should alienate and cast away from himself the proprium.” This word “proprium” is used in the Latin of the Heavenly Doctrine and, in some translations carried over into the English, but it is not much used in the rest of the English speaking world. So translators have tried various expressions to render it into English. A reviewer in *New Church Life*, more than a hundred years ago, complained that a new version of *Heaven and Hell* translated “proprium” variously “self,” “a self,” “selfhood,” “own selfhood,” “the selfhood of man,” “what is man’s own,” and “what is of themselves.” And equating the “proprium” with “the self” is somewhat misleading. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing Swedenborgian sources, makes this same mistake, saying that “proprium” means self-hood, one’s “essential nature.”

To get a correct understanding of the proprium, let's go back to the imagery of "buying" and "selling." "To buy" is to appropriate. And "appropriate" actually derives from the Latin word "proprius." And both are cognate with the word "property." We buy and sell property. And, psychologically speaking, we "buy into" certain ideas or ways of looking at the world. When we disagree with something or disbelieve some assertion, we might say "I don't buy that." It behooves us to recognize that our propriums are "our own" in the way that we "own" a piece of real estate or an article of clothing, not in the sense of being some essential part of our identity. Falling into that latter confusion is part of the problem with equating "proprium" with "self." "Proprium" is not our identity, it is the self-image that the evil spirits want us to "buy into."

The hells, of course, will ever be ready to convince us that our inherited shack in the swamp is who we really are and not a piece of property that we can sell. The rich young man apparently had nicer material possessions. But that just makes it all the harder to trade up, to sell all that one has with only just a hope of treasure in the life to come.

Many passages in the Word seem to offer only sacrifice and self-denial as the route to heaven. Psalm 51, for instance, makes dramatic reference to what we must give up. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God thou wilt not despise." (Psalm 51:17).

Are not we apt, as was the young man, to go away sorrowing because we have "great possessions"? But the sacrifice must be made and sometimes it is put in terms of all the things of this world that we hold dear. For the Lord teaches:

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 10:37-39).

Although these teachings do contain the promise of eternal life they are not very encouraging about ease of attaining it. Apparently what is loved and familiar must be given up for the promise of the distant and uncertain. We may go away from these teachings sorrowing for two reasons: that it seems that so much must be given up, and that it will be painful to do so. There may be some truth to that, but our text puts it in different light.

The merchant in the story did indeed sell all that he had, but in doing this what did he lose? His former possessions may have included some things he valued, he probably already had pearls of good quality and other fine possessions. But all these would have faded to nothing as he discovered the pearl of great price. The parable invites us to imagine him gladly and joyfully selling all else to acquire this new-found treasure. What he gave up, then, would have been, in his eyes, little or nothing. Any sorrow that he felt in giving it up would have been passing and would have been quickly replaced by his joy in contemplating his new purchase. Such a story provides a more encouraging picture of what it is to strive for eternal life. So let us continue to examine the story more closely, let us learn more of the spiritual message that it contains.

Pearls, generally in the Word, and not just when mentioned as wares, indicate knowledges, knowledges of good and truth. The one pearl that is sought and to be purchased at the expense of all others, the pearl of great price, is the knowledge and consequent acknowledgement of the Lord. We must properly pay for this knowledge by setting aside all our proprial knowledge, all those knowledges acquired from our own loves. If we have not set our own lives in order in this fashion we cannot truly receive the knowledge of the Lord. If we do not do our part, if we do not give up what we have, we are not freely choosing the Lord. Looking to the pearl of great price in this way is what insures our freedom.

To those who turn away from the Lord, those who will not sell all that they have, nothing can be given. Indeed, the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that anything good forced on such would be like a pearl tied to the snout of a swine. (CL 525, TCR 62) This is, of course, reminiscent of the Lord's words in Matthew: "Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast your pearls before the swine, lest they trample on them with their feet, and turn and tear you." (7:6) The knowledges of goods and truths cannot be offered to those that have not made themselves ready. This is especially true of the knowledge of the Lord.

A word should perhaps be said about the appropriateness of the pearl as a symbol for the knowledge of the Lord. The pearl differs from other precious stones, both in the mode of its formation and its character after it is formed. It is not formed by simple laws of the mineral kingdom, but is rather built up layer upon layer by a lowly member of the animal kingdom. The result is a stone that cannot be improved or made more beautiful by cutting and polishing, but instead would be destroyed by such action. It is for this reason that the Heavenly Doctrine tells us: "The Divine Trinity is like the pearl of great price: but when it is divided into Persons, it is like a pearl divided into three parts, which is thereby completely and irretrievably ruined" (TCR 184e). The pearl of great price is one, a unity, it cannot be improved upon or added to, nor can it be divided.

The merchant and his tradings, as we have seen, relate to dealings in knowledges. That the merchant "sold all that he had," however, shows that the case goes beyond simply the setting aside of knowledges. For "all that he had" or all that was his own clearly refers to the proprium, and all the proprium is more than knowledge, it means the rejection of proprial loves as well. The contribution of this parable, as was said earlier, is that it offers the encouragement that giving up the proprium, even all the proprium, need not be an entirely unhappy matter. In those states when we see what is gained in exchange for the proprium we are gladly willing to sell all. The one who loses his life for the Lord's sake really loses nothing, for the very life that one thinks one is losing is also restored. How can this be so? The Heavenly Doctrine offers some explanation of this.

In the chapter in *Divine Providence* dealing with the Lord's end in creation, a heaven from the human race, the nature of conjunction with the Lord is explained. There we are told: "The more nearly one is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly does one appear to himself to be master of himself, and yet the more evidently does he recognize that he is the Lord's" (DP 42). The passage goes on to say that at first appearance it might seem that to be conjoined to the Lord is in fact bondage and that the evil conclude that the good are not free because the good will not do evil. But it is the reverse that is actually the case. For, as the Lord said in John, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin....If the Son shall make you free ye shall be free indeed" (8:36)

It is only to the degree that we are in wickedness and falsity that we think that we will lose our lives by submission to the Lord. It is from this that the appearance arises. All of us have something of these in us. From these we will all have states of regret in setting aside the things of our propiums and knowing and acknowledging the Lord. But we all have our states of clearer sight as well. At these times we see the pearl of great price and then would willingly sell all our proprium and be led by the Lord's Providence. These two kinds of states were contrasted in one of our lessons from the Heavenly Doctrine:

People who are led by the Lord's Divine Providence are raised above their proprium, and they see then that all goodness and truth originate from the Lord.... Anyone who believes otherwise is like someone who has his master's goods placed in his care and claims them for himself or appropriates them as his own. Such a one is not a steward but a thief. And because a person's proprium is nothing but evil, therefore he also immerses those goods in his evil, by which they are consumed, like pearls cast into dung or vinegar. (DP 316:e).

To claim oneself what is the Lord's might seem appear to create a stronger sense of self-life, but ultimately it is, in fact, spiritual death. To lack the one pearl of great price is to have nothing at all. It is only from the Lord that everything else is genuinely brought to life.

And purchasing the pearl of great price is more than simply an adjustment of our thinking – it is also an adjustment of how we conduct our lives. The *Apocalypse Explained* equates this with the behavior of the virgins who follow the lamb, mentioned in the Book of Revelation:

For they are virgins, means that they are in the affection of truth for the sake of truth. This is evident from the meaning of "virgins," as being affections of truth, . . . spiritual affections of truth are meant, which are such as have for their end eternal life and the uses of that life. . . . Therefore of such it is said "these are they that follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." Moreover, such are meant by the Lord in these words in Matthew: "The treasure hidden in a field" and "the pearls" signify the truths of heaven and the church; and the "one precious pearl" signifies the acknowledgment of the Lord. The affection of truths because they are truths is meant by "the man went in his joy and sold all that he had, and bought the field" in which the treasure was hidden, also by "the merchant's going and selling all that he had, and buying the precious pearl." [2] Those who are in the spiritual affection of truth are called "virgins" from the marriage of good and truth from which is conjugal love. (AE 863:1-2)

The last bit of this passage brings in one more way of thinking about that precious pearl: married life and conjugal love are a key way that we practice "following the lamb" and renouncing the old proprium. And, by the equation that the doctrines offer us, insofar as one pursues the marriage of good and truth in one's life, insofar as one renounces the old proprium in one's life, so far one also allows the Lord to advance the states of conjugal love in oneself, even if one is not married, or has a partner in the other world.

The *Apocalypse Revealed* tells us "those who follow the lamb" are, in the spiritual world, those coming into the New Christian Heaven. This makes sense, because the first essential of the New Church is the acknowledgement that the Lord is the God of heaven and earth and His Human is Divine and this acknowledgement can only be made from a genuine knowledge of the Lord. The pearl of great price has a special place in the New Church. This is also the reason that each of the twelve gates of the Holy City New Jerusalem was seen as a pearl. The *Apocalypse Revealed* tells us of these gates:

The reason why each one of the gates was of one pearl is because all the knowledges of truth and good that are signified by the gates and the pearls relate to the one knowledge which is holding them together, and this one knowledge is the knowledge of the Lord. It is said one knowledge, although there are many knowledges making up that one knowledge; for the knowledge of the Lord is the universal of all the things of the doctrine and consequently of all things of the Church. (AR 916).

The knowledge of the Lord, the pearl of great price is the introduction to the New Church. To acquire this pearl we must not simply wait for it to come to us. We must seek goodly pearls in the Word and as we find the pearl of great price we will gladly sell all that we have and buy that precious pearl.

Amen.