

A Gift to Give to Future Generations
A Sermon by Rev. Eric H. Carswell
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Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them. (Mark 10:14)

We know quite well that the Lord has warned us about the unhappiness that comes from being too self-centered in our daily concerns and priorities. He has also warned us about the unhappiness that comes from being too focused on natural concerns and material things. All of us can imagine the thoughts that were perhaps going through the minds of the disciples as they saw parents bringing their little children to Jesus. Perhaps they were thinking that He is much too important a person to have time for these children. Perhaps they were feeling overloaded with the noisy chatter of children as many adults waited to see this man who had done such wonderful miracles. Whatever was going on in their minds, they had decided that they should shoo away the parents and their little children. The gospel of Mark describes them as rebuking the parents for coming to Jesus with children.

But their priorities were not the Lord's priorities. He was greatly displeased with what they were doing. What do you think Jesus looked like when He was "greatly displeased"? He was unhappy with the disciples because they did not realize how important children are. He told His disciples, "Let the little children come to Me..."

The Lord would say the same to each of us. He is not happy when self-centered and worldly priorities stand in the way of a person doing what is truly best for the children and young people who are growing up in this world.

One of the values of community, in its broad sense, is the strength and consistency that it can bring to raising children and young people. Certainly, parents have the primary responsibility for the rearing of their children and teens, but they certainly do not have sole responsibility. Each of us, through our interactions with the children and young people we come in contact with, can help them along the path of life. Each of us can help them develop a sense of responsibility, an enjoyment in a job well done, and an awareness of how much our choices affect others.

Given the fact that many children tend to sense that their own parents have an extraordinarily narrow view of reality, there are times when another adult apparently has even more power to be an influence for good in a child's life than his parents do. We as a group of adults can help all the children and young people we teach through church and school to lead happier and more productive lives. In a very real sense, we can help the children and the young people to come to the Lord. We can help them to recognize the Lord's presence in daily life and the importance of living according to what He has taught us. We can help them come to see what is represented by the pearl of great price and help foster a desire in them to obtain it for themselves.

The Lord began His parable with the words, "The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls." When the Lord spoke of the kingdom of heaven, He did not refer just to a future state we may experience some day in heaven. The Lord's kingdom includes both the life of heaven and that of the Lord's church on earth (*Arcana Caelestia* 5886:4). With each of us

heaven with us and the quality of our lives in this world are the same thing. The state which will be heaven for us should also be the state of life on earth which we look towards. Those who cannot feel something of heavenly happiness and peace while in the world will not be able to miraculously receive that happiness and peace after death.

In our culture that tends to be so external, focusing more on the material possessions that a person has acquired than anything deeper, it is so important to remind the children and young people that the true source of happiness does not come from the outside. It comes from within a person. It depends on the fundamental spiritual quality of their life. It depends on what people are willing to dedicate themselves to, what they are willing to sacrifice for. Each of our lives can be a living testimony to far deeper and more lasting values than a materialistic culture might foster.

The single individual spoken of in the Parable of Great Price was a businessman who bought and sold pearls for his living. He represents anyone who learns and uses what the Lord teaches us in His Word. The knowledge from the Word that a person needs to guide his life is like the gold and silver which a merchant would gain from his trade. We as adults are responsible for our own learning. We can read and with effort grow in understanding. We are responsible for whether we choose to attend classes or church on Sunday. But this is not true for children and young people. Unless they are encouraged to develop a habit of reading for themselves, they will never begin. Few children or young people would choose to attend church given any kind of choice. Beyond these personal and family matters, there is the far broader opportunity to learn what this and other New Church congregations have provided for the young through formal New Church education. This education seeks to offer not just religious truths, but also a broad view of natural truth as well, that is organized and presented by the teacher to best reveal the Lord's presence and activity within the world around us. This broad base of knowledge supporting the idea of the Lord is a fabulously valuable heritage that we can help pass on to the coming generations of developing minds.

The merchant in the parable devoted himself to seeking beautiful pearls. These pearls represent the sight of truth that can emerge in a person's mind when he thinks carefully about what the Lord has revealed in His Word. Just as a pearl is composed of many layers surrounding a central particle, so also will the ideas in our minds be ordered, as it were, into layers. The fundamental truths of religion will be at the center of each of our thoughts. Surrounding each fundamental idea there will be related truths that are progressively less universal in their application. Gathered and given order by the Lord these different levels of truth will be organized into a single spiritual form in our minds, like that of a beautiful pearl (see *Arcana Caelestia* 3057:2, *Doctrine of Faith* 35). While any individual is capable of coming to something of this order by himself, everyone benefits tremendously from the help of those who have already seen this order for themselves and can help guide the growing mind to see it more rapidly and clearly. The Arcana lesson I read earlier observes that starting with the 20th year, or after high school, an important change takes place. "At this time belief begins; for belief is not a person's own until he has confirmed what he believes with ideas that are the product of his own thinking." If we think all the essential developments are done through high school, we are in error. Both personal belief and the inner spiritual battles that define us in adult life begin after the natural rational plan of our minds is

open and functioning. For many of us this took place in the setting of college, one that may or may not support the foundations of the New Church built earlier.

We can help young people to be like merchants seeking beautiful pearls by teaching them what is true, helping to train them to think and make responsible decisions for themselves. As children and young people engage in this never-ending process, they will learn many things, and if they seek to guide the choices of their daily life by what they have learned, they will gain an ever-increasing understanding of what the life of religion is all about. Gradually they will come to recognize the most important concept of all true Christianity. They will see the pearl of great price. This pearl represents a living and personal knowledge of our Lord and God (*Apocalypse Revealed* 727). Note that the Lord's parable doesn't say that the merchant was single-mindedly seeking this once-in-a-lifetime pearl. Perhaps there is a sense in which it found the merchant rather than the reverse. The merchant was just doing his job. We and the young people under our care likewise spend much of our lives working with daily challenges that seem only remotely related to our concept of the Lord.

How important is our concept of the Lord? Its importance can hardly be overstressed. Without an idea of the Lord as He really is, there is nothing of genuine religion, and without at least something of genuine religion in its rudimentary form, it is impossible to have a productive and happy life. The doctrine of the Lord is always the central doctrine of the church. Our understanding of its various aspects colors our sight of every other doctrine. For example: Often we make decisions that express our trust in the Lord's care for us. Certainly, we know of the Lord, but how do we express our acknowledgment of His all-pervading influence in our lives? How does our acknowledgment of Him affect what we do each day of our lives? Responsible decision making is not an easy thing to learn, and probably more is learned by example than by lecture. How do our lives reflect a trust in the Lord and a sense of His importance to the young people who watch us so closely?

Obviously, anyone can memorize facts from the Word about the Lord. But such memorization by itself affects little. Mere intellectual sight of truth enriches us spiritually just about as much as window shopping in jewelry stores enriches us naturally. In the Lord's parable the merchant was not content to have merely found the pearl of great price. He went and sold all that he had and bought that pearl. Knowledge concerning the Lord is nothing without the acknowledgment of Him in a good life. Certainly, we and the young people under our care need to know about the Lord before we can acknowledge Him, but there is no power for us in mere knowledge until it becomes acknowledgment and finally genuine faith (*Arcana Caelestia* 10083:2). Though a part of our mind rebels against the idea, nothing that we do is genuinely or fully good and nothing that we know will be genuinely or fully true without an acknowledgment of the Lord. This acknowledgment is said to be the first of all things of spiritual life and the most essential thing of heaven and the church (*Arcana Caelestia* 10083:6). As the Lord said, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47).

Genuine acknowledgment of the Lord is not easy. To buy the pearl of great price the merchant had to sell all that he had. The act of selling all his previous possessions presents an image of how we must reject all the worldly and selfish loves that stand in the way of a full acknowledgment of the Lord (*Arcana Caelestia* 1044:3). Heavenly life cannot be received unless

we can remove from our minds all the thoughts and desires that would lead us away from the Lord and heaven. Unfortunately, this includes many things that we presently enjoy and that have a significant place in our day-to-day lives. the Lord spoke of this appearance when He said, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt 10:29). Sometimes it seems that so much of what we like to do must be rejected if we are to fulfill the Lord’s commands. The reality, of course, is that rejecting many of the thoughts and attitudes that we presently accept as our own is the only means to us to receive eternal life, a life so much happier and more peaceful than merely natural life that it is inconceivable. To reject the life that comes naturally to us we must be led by the Lord in His Word to recognize and shun the hells as they seek to influence our thoughts and acts. Their ideas must be recognized and not given power by our acceptance of them. Needless to say, there is much that we can do to help children and young people to recognize their bad habits and also realizing they are capable of changing these habits.

The need for the knowledge and acknowledgment of the Lord is the spiritual truth illustrated by the Lord’s parable of the pearl of great price. In what way do we seek this pearl in our lives? The Lord’s parable was addressed to all people as the way to receive the blessing of heaven. Each of us certainly has responsibility for our own spiritual development, but we can also recognize the important job we have helping the children and young people in our care to come know the Lord, follow Him, and trust in His care. If we help in this work, we are helping the children and young people to find that pearl of great price for themselves. We are helping them to come to the Lord just as He wanted the children to come to Him when He was in the world that He might take them up in His arms and bless them. May we do what we can so that the Lord may also bless the generations that follow us. Amen

Lessons: Deuteronomy 31:7-13, Mark 10:13-16, *Arcana Caelestia* 10225:1-5, portions

Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. And the LORD, He is the one who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed.”

So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying: “At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess.” Deuteronomy 31:7-13

Then [parents] brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will

by no means enter it.” And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them. Mark 10:13-16

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:45-46

The meaning of the word “twenty”, when it refers to a person’s age, is the state in which the understanding of truth and good exists. The reason why “twenty” means the state in which the understanding of truth and good exists is that when a person attains twenty years he starts to think for himself. For from earliest childhood to extreme old age a person passes inwardly through a number of states, which are those of understanding (or intelligence) and wisdom. The first state lasts from birth to the person’s fifth year. It is a state of ignorance and of innocence within ignorance; and it is called early childhood. The second state lasts from the fifth to the twentieth year. This is a state in which instruction is received and knowledge is acquired; and it is called later childhood [and adolescence]. The third state lasts from the twentieth to the sixtieth year, which is a state in which understanding exists; and it is called adulthood, maturity, or full adulthood. The fourth or last state lasts from the sixtieth year onwards, which is a state of wisdom and of innocence within wisdom.

The fact that the first state is a state of ignorance and also of innocence within ignorance is self-evident. While this state exists the inner levels of the mind are being put into shape for the use they will serve, and consequently are not yet opened up. Only the most external levels, those of the senses, are open; and when these alone are open ignorance exists. For a person’s understanding and perception of anything at all springs from those inner levels. From this it also becomes clear that the innocence which exists at this time and is called the innocence of young childhood is of a most external nature.

The fact that the second state is one in which instruction is received and knowledge is acquired is also self-evident. This is not yet a state in which understanding exists because the young person does not arrive at any conclusion by himself; neither by himself does he draw any distinction between one truth and another, nor even between truth and falsity, only with the help of others. His thought and speech consist purely of matters contained in his memory, thus solely of acquired knowledge; nor does he see or perceive whether something is true unless he takes it on trust from his teacher, consequently because another says it is.

The third state however is called a state in which understanding exists because the person now thinks for himself, drawing distinctions and arriving at conclusions; and the conclusions are his, not another’s. At this time belief begins; for belief is not a person’s own until he has confirmed what he believes with ideas that are the product of his own thinking. Till then the belief is not his but another’s within him; for till then he trusts in the person, not in the matter of belief. From this it becomes clear that the state in which understanding exists begins with a person when not his teacher’s but his own ideas constitute what he thinks, which does not happen until inner levels of the mind are opened towards heaven. It should be remembered that the outer levels of the human mind exist in the world and the inner ones in heaven, and that the amount of light flowing from heaven into ideas derived from the world determines how much understanding and wisdom a person has. This comes about according to how far and in what kind of way the inner levels have been opened; and how far they are open depends on how far the person leads a life looking to heaven and not to the world. (*Arcana Caelestia* 10225:1-5 portions)