

Doing Our Duty

"But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?"

"And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?"

"Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

"So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do."

- Luke 17 7-10

Genesis 16

Luke 17:1-19

Psalm 116

New Book of Worship, Psalm 116, pp.78-79

The lesson in this seemingly harsh parable is very clear even in the letter. Under the figure of master and servant our relation to the Lord is mirrored. As a servant, in doing his duty, does not place his master under special obligation, so men, the servants of the Lord, cannot claim any merit for their service. If we do all that we can, we cannot do more than our duty to the Lord. When we consider the gifts we continually receive from the Lord and the continual manifestation of His mercy and lovingkindness to all mankind, it is clearly evident that it is our duty to keep His commandments, and to do all the good that lies in our power. The balance will always be heavy on the Lord's side, and we have no claim to merit.

But the parable also has a meaning applying to the mind of the individual himself. Between the mind and the body this relationship of master and servant exists. The body is the servant of the mind. Its office is to do always the commands of the soul. It is forever a servant. For the body to command the mind would be to invert order, and would bring disaster.

And we have two minds, or rather two parts of the mind, the natural and the spiritual. And the relation of master and servant exists between our internal or spiritual mind and our external or natural mind. Here likewise the internal is master and the external servant. While we live in this world, all our knowledges come through the natural mind. It is the natural mind that learns truth and that does good. But the truth that it learns and the good that it does are from the power bestowed upon it and flowing into it from the internal mind, where abides the indwelling spirit. In other words, we choose what truth we wish to learn and the kind of good we wish to do. The natural mind is forever a bondservant to the spiritual mind.

In the parable the servant is said to be plowing or feeding cattle. The servant has his work to do. The master gives the commands but does not do the work of the servant. He may oversee, correct, and support the work of the servant, but the servant's work and the master's work are different; each works as of himself, but servant and master depend upon each other, and the happiness and welfare of each is bound up in the other.

The servant is plowing or feeding cattle. As the ground has to be prepared to receive seed and bring forth a crop, so does the mind have to be prepared to receive the truths of the Lord's Word, that there may be a harvest of good deeds in the daily life.

If we wish to acquire a knowledge of science, of law, or of economics, the understanding has to be prepared for it. Plowing refers to this preparation of the understanding for the reception of Divine truth from the Word. And the cattle, which represent the affections, refer to the will. The will must be fed. We do not master a science in a day. Persistent effort is necessary; and particularly sincerity, industry, and obedience must be nourished in the will. Often and repeatedly we have to compel ourselves to heed the Lord's teachings and to resist wrong feelings. This work is the task of the natural mind, which it does in its own way, in its own field, as servant of the spiritual mind.

For of itself the natural mind cannot see clearly, nor can it act wisely. It's light is dim, its vision narrow. It is a servant only. Yet without this servant the spiritual mind would be helpless. Without it no practical uses in the world could be performed. The servant and the master must depend upon each other.

"But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?"

"And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?"

This seems harsh. And it is added: "Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not."

The field from ^{which} the servant came in is the natural life, where truth is learned and good affections are developed. But our outward acts are the food and drink of the internal man. Said Jesus, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." Outwardly good acts may be done from selfish or worldly motives. When the preparatory work is done, when the natural mind has learned the precepts of the Word, when the commandments have been outwardly kept, preparation is made not for the supper of the natural mind but for the supper of the spiritual mind. "When thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room." The natural mind cannot exalt itself and be fed.

When the inward spirit is brought into conjunction with heaven and the Lord, when we do good not from the desire for praise but from love to the Lord and the neighbor, then the Divine influences can inflow through the spiritual mind into the natural mind and fill the natural mind also. If the higher nature of man is not fed, how can blessings flow down into the outward life?

Often people think, "When I get enough for myself, I will give to others, but my own needs must come first." If the natural mind attempts to satisfy itself first and in its own worldly way before serving the spiritual mind, it will not taste of heavenly truth and good, but will see and receive worldly and natural things only.

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Throughout all human history all departures from good have arisen from the attempt of the natural mind to serve itself first. No man can reach heaven from the senses without the direction of an enlightened spirit. No one can receive the good of any truth until he has interiorly acknowledged it to be from the Lord. The inner man must be brought into order. If the inner man is unregenerate, how can the natural mind become cleansed? It is for this reason that the Lord's Prayer reads: "Thy will be done, as in heaven, so upon the earth." The natural mind and life are filled with regenerate life through the spiritual mind, not the reverse.

The servant first must serve his master, that afterwards he may eat and drink.

What a man does in his outward life from a regenerate spiritual mind he does from heaven and from the Lord, but what he does from himself alone brings no spiritual reward.

"Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not."

It is the law of the heavenly order for the external to serve the internal, for the natural mind cannot attain happiness except through the internal. None of the faculties of the senses carry with them the instinct necessary to guide them. If we follow sensual pleasure as a guide, we shall soon ruin our bodies. From infancy we have to be taught to control our appetites and curb our inclinations. The spiritual planes of the mind are not under obligation to the lower planes - quite the opposite. So even in the physical body the skin serves the heart and lungs, and its own health is dependent upon this service.

"So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do."

The master demands the full service of his servant. He gives him no extra rewards. If we do our full duty, we do not produce any extra profit for the Lord. In serving the Lord we find our own life. Men have nothing of which they can boast. They can do no more than their duty. And they must depend upon the Lord to direct them, to give them light to see their duty and strength to do it.

All merit is in the Lord and not in any man. No one can do any real good except in the name of the Lord. The only way to happiness is in service of the Lord, in keeping His commandments. There is no merit in man's keeping the laws because it is to his best interest to keep them. It is the natural man in us that seeks merit. But "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

A little brook, rising from the mountains far inland, grows to a mighty river and pours a flood of waters into the sea. But does the river imagine that it^{is} doing a great favor to the sea? Whence came the waters of the river? From the sea, through the clouds, rain, and snow. Well might the ocean say to the river, "Without me ye can do nothing." And just so through the whole universe there is a circulation of life from the Lord, going out into all things, blessing all, and returning to the Lord through the thankful hearts and lives of those who are born again.

The parable teaches us a lesson of humility, and its truths are very unwelcome to him who lives for praise. All that we can do is only our duty. And where is the man who has done all that he should have done in everything? And if such a one could be found, he would be the very one who would not claim any merit for himself.

Does it seem as if this subordination of our outward acts to the service of the spiritual will result in an unhappy life? It is quite otherwise. Heavenly order and the truly human life are found only in the submission of the natural to the spiritual. If true happiness is to be ours, control cannot be given to the natural mind.

It takes time to gain the victory, and how tired we grow in the work of serving the Master first, and how often we long for a time when the natural mind can sit down to its own meat! But if we are faithful and patient, the time of rest and satisfaction will come.

"Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."

Amen