

What Did Jesus Mean - Part 5.
Only the poor can enter heaven.

In my talk, I am taking up the words of Jesus which first suggested to me the usefulness of a series of broadcasts on problem passages in the Gospels, where He spoke of the handicap riches can be when it comes to entering heaven. The words I refer to are to be found in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 19, and follow immediately after the Lord's encounter with the rich young man whom He told to go and sell what he had and give to the poor. "Then said Jesus unto His disciples" we read "Truly I say unto you, That a rich man shall with difficulty enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." (v. 23 & 24).

As people have done ever since that time the disciples took the Lord's words literally and they could not see otherwise than that he was making entrance into heaven extremely difficult. "When the disciples heard it," it is said, "they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?" As they understood Him, Jesus was calling upon people to abandon wealth and material possessions. Hence the sequence to it all, Peter saying unto the Lord, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed you; what shall we have therefore?" And part of the answer he received reads "And every one that has forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." (v. 27 and 29).

That the Lord cannot, however, have been speaking about material wealth and earthly possessions becomes obvious when we stop and reflect upon the matter. Poverty is not a virtue and it cannot be taken to be in any real way an indication of a person's character within. What makes us fit for heaven is not the outward circumstances of our lives, but rather our attitude to those circumstances. We can be rich or poor and, in the eyes of the world, important or unimportant. What matters is how we respond to our situation. In the midst of wealth and splendour a person can be humble and close to the Lord. Conversely, in the midst of poor circumstances a person might be full of complaint and discontentment, envious of others and, in fact, far removed from Him. The point needs stressing that the outward circumstances of our lives are simply not the determining factor with regard to heaven which some have made them.

"Those who know anything of the spiritual sense of the Word" wrote Swedenborg, "know that heaven is for all who live a life of faith and love, whether rich or poor. It may indeed be known that the rich enter heaven just as easily as the poor, and that a man is not shut out of heaven on account of his wealth, nor received into heaven on account of his poverty. Both the rich and the poor are in heaven, and many of the rich in greater glory and happiness than the poor." (*Heaven and Hell* 357).

If then the Lord did not mean material wealth and earthly possessions when He spoke of the difficulty rich people have in entering heaven, what did He mean?

It would be well for us, I suggest, to go back to the commencement of the incident, to when the young man first came to the Lord, for the very phrasing of his question itself points to the problem he had. "And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" He wanted to know of some good deed which would earn him a place in heaven. His question tells us that he had the idea that outwardly good things would merit people eternal life. There is every indication that he had done many good things in the past. Now he wanted to know what else he could do. He seems in fact to have done all the right things. He had, it is said, kept the Commandments. He was a good man in his own eyes.

People who value themselves in terms of the goodness they do, are in terms of the truth which they know; these are those who are pictured here by the rich young man. And it is these riches; this sense of our own worth; this estimation of our own importance; which are the riches that are condemned by the Lord. "Then said Jesus unto His disciples, Truly I say unto you, That a rich man shall with difficulty enter into the kingdom of heaven." And knowing now what is meant, do we wonder why? It is not material riches which are meant here, but the wealth of knowledge and goodness we are tempted to think we possess. (See *Arcana Caelestia* 8906) And it is this we must abandon.

The Lord wills poverty upon us! It is a strange thought at first, but the poverty He wills upon us in the realisation of our own unworthiness; the acknowledgement that without Him we can do nothing that is good or think anything that is true. He wills us to come to see that if we are to do good it must be from Him through us.

He is ever seeking to lead us to the point where we would claim no merit whatsoever for good that has been done; rather that we should be genuinely grateful to Him that it was able to be done. He would have us come to confess, not just with our lips; not just as a fleeting thought now and again; our entire dependence upon Him. And this is the paradox, that those who so come to see and acknowledge this are the only true rich; rich in spiritual characteristics and qualities. "Jesus said unto him, If you will be perfect, go and sell that you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." And, as He elsewhere said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven".

"No angel or man" we read "can of himself produce anything good or true, which in itself is good and true. Hence it is evident that both angels and men are kept in good and truth by the Lord, and this continually."

(Apocalypse Revealed 854).

Our acknowledgement of this truth must enter into all things of our spiritual life. If we are saved from evil and feel in ourselves the strength to resist it it is because the Lord is present with us. If we are able to keep the Commandments, no glory reflects on us personally, for it is from the Lord alone that we are able to do so. If we have the slightest notion of having helped another, by word or influence, or whatever, it is and has been the Lord's doing through us. It is said of the angels in heaven that they are constantly aware that it is the Lord alone who holds them back from their evils. They know that the only strength to resist which they have is the Lord's.

The Lord is at all times trying to come to us with His truth and goodness, with these priceless treasures beyond our reckoning. But our lives are so crammed with our own treasures and values; with truths and goodness which we think we possess. These are what we are to sell and get rid of. This is what hinders our entrance into eternal life. We are to humble ourselves before the Lord; counting on nothing about ourselves, on either the truth we know or the good we have done, as deserving of merit or reward or as, these things in themselves, qualifying us for life in heaven.

"The Lord" wrote Swedenborg "cannot be conjoined with man unless man is in humble worship; and there is no humble worship unless man acknowledges and believes that he is dust and ashes, that is (of himself) nothing but evil, and that Jehovah or the Lord is the Most Great and Most Holy, and that, of himself, he dare not approach Him. When a person is in such humble worship, the Lord can flow in with the life of His love, and give heaven and eternal happiness."

(Arcana Caelestia 7550).

Only when a person is humble, let us note the point; when he has set aside self-satisfaction in himself as a good and worthy person; when he has come to realise that all is in the Lord's hands; when he has come to see that rich in the knowledge of truth he may be, yet by itself it achieves nothing, can he hope to enter heaven.

In the first talk in this series we had before us the Lord's words in Luke's Gospel Chapter 14, where He calls upon those who would aspire to be His disciples to hate and forsake "father and mother, wife and children, brethren and sisters."

"Whosoever of you that forsakes not all that he has" He goes on to say "he cannot be my disciple." And we saw that what is meant here is the unregenerate thoughts and inclinations which live in the household of our minds which we are to turn away from. So also a similar thing is meant where in His answer to Peter, which was mentioned at the beginning, the Lord said, "And every one that has forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." I stress the point: it is not people who are meant, but our unregenerate feelings and selfish tendencies.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 35.

<http://www.swedenborg.com.au>