

The Lord's Parables (2) : The Parable Of The Talents

Not long before His arrest and crucifixion, and knowing that they were very near, the Lord spoke at length about His Second Coming and of the judgement that would take place at that time. By way of illustrating the points He was making, and in order to impress them upon those who were listening to Him, the Lord made use of a number of parables, one of which is the parable of the talents: a parable which, firstly, clearly referred to the Lord's then impending departure from the world but which, at the same time, holds within it, teaching and implications which vitally concern us all.

In this regard, our approach to the parables is based on an understanding of them as being not just interesting, even brilliant, illustrations and similitudes, but as teaching of the Lord within which lies an internal meaning, every detail in them being significant. Where a simple illustration is concerned the details, of course, are not important. What we're saying, and as Swedenborg several times stressed, is that the parables are not simple illustrations and the details given and the things said, even such things as the numbers mentioned, are significant. They are spiritually significant and, when understood correctly, enable us to understand the teaching which the parable has for us.

"For the kingdom of heaven" the Lord said, "is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey".

Then we are told about what the servants did with the talents they had received. "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money." Eventually, and "after a long time", the master returned and there was a reckoning. Commending the first two, those who had received five and two talents respectively, and had doubled them, he turned to the third servant who, in his defence claimed that out of fear for his master, whom he knew to be a 'hard' man, he had thought it wiser to hide the one talent so that he could at least return that which he had been given.

Condemned for his inaction, it was commanded that the talent be taken from him and given to the man who now had ten. "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." (Matthew chapter 25, verses 14-30 (parts)).

The general meaning of the parable, so far as you and I today are concerned, is not difficult to see. Clearly, the master in the parable is the Lord, and the treasures or talents which He delivers into our keeping are the truths and teachings of the Word. To trade with these, as the Lord wants us to do, means to put them to use, to apply them to life, and quoting, "to procure spiritual life and intelligence by them" (*Apocalypse Explained* 193).

We who know the Lord, are all stewards or custodians of the spiritual treasures which the Bible contains. And they are given to us for a purpose, not to be hidden away or to be buried, but to be used in the hurly burly, and amidst the challenges and opportunities, of every day life. "They who know what sin is" wrote Swedenborg, "and still more they who know many things from the Word, and teach them, and who do not examine themselves, and consequently see no sin in themselves, may be compared to those who scrape up wealth and lay it in chests and coffers, making no further use of it than to look at it and count it. Such are like the trader who hid his talent in the earth." (*True Christian Religion* 527).

Straightforward as the teaching of the parable at first seems to be, it is not, however, without its difficulties: difficulties to which I would now like to turn. Have you ever wondered, or do you wonder, why one man should have received five talents and another only one? And since by the master in the parable is meant the Lord, what is involved in His "travelling into a far country"? When the man who had received only one talent was called forward to give an account of his stewardship he spoke of his master as a 'hard' man. Can that ever be said of the Lord that He is a 'hard' man? And finally, why was the talent taken from the unprofitable servant and given to him who had ten? What is this teaching us?

With regard to the first point, the number of talents distributed, more to one and less to another, it should be understood that it is not the Lord who determines how much or how little a person receives of the truths and teaching of the Word.

People themselves determine this. Indeed, it is the state of mind and life, or the attitudes of people, which are depicted here. Some receive the Lord's truth in its fullness and completeness. These are those who are meant by the servant receiving five talents. The number five signifies such fullness and completeness.

Some receive the Lord's truth with the resolve and intention to apply it to life; and these are meant by that man who received two talents. The number two signifies the marriage of truth and goodness; of which is known with the way one lives.

Some again receive the Lord's truth with no real intention at all of obeying it. They may listen to sermons and read the Bible even, and self-righteously feel they have a claim on salvation. These are meant by the man who received one talent. The number one signifies and points to their trust in knowledge, or faith, alone. (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5291).

I repeat the point: it is the different reception of the Lord's truth, which people themselves determine, which is spoken of and depicted here. We noted a moment ago how the master in the parable, whom we know represents the Lord; is spoken of as travelling into a far country. What does this teach us, in fact, concerning the Lord?

It teaches us that for all that He gives us from the Word, what is necessary for us to become spiritually minded people, the Lord, of necessity, stays out of sight. Often, indeed, it seems as if He is far away from us and we feel ourselves very alone.

And this is the way it has to be. We live our lives in this world as if the Lord were absent. We have to meet challenges and difficulties and, to all appearances, we do so by ourselves. The Lord doesn't show His hand. And He knows it is better for us that He doesn't. Individual initiative and 'as-of-self' response would be suffocated if He did.

It is, therefore, vitally important that we should seem to be left to ourselves. And whilst it is only an appearance that we are so left to ourselves, yet the appearance serves a very real purpose. As parents we can't shield our children from decision making and character building experiences and we have to take our place somewhat in the background. So with the Lord.

What is also an appearance is that the Lord is a 'hard' man. When people turn to the Ten

Commandments, for example, their reaction sometimes is, that the Lord is a 'hard' man; that He demands too much; that His standards are too high. But He is not a hard man at all. Truth always seems hard to those who are in evil or who are inclined to do its opposite. To a person inclined to adultery, for example, the Commandment which forbids it seems 'hard'. In fact that Commandment is an expression of the love and concern of the Lord who wants nothing more than our well being and everlasting happiness. That it seems hard is due to us, not to the Lord. And so it is with so many truths which run counter to what we desire.

And then there is the last point. The talent being taken from the unprofitable servant and given to another. Is it not true that any faculty or ability which we fail to use is ultimately lost to us? So it is also with regard to the Lord's truth and teaching. If we fail to make use of it, in the end it is lost to us.

In the spiritual world this is especially so. A person in this world can seem to know and understand many things. But if this knowledge and understanding has led to nothing, and has been in the memory only, in the spiritual world it simply drops away. It was never really part of the person anyway. There such a person loses even that which he seemed to have.

With those, though, who have acquired spiritual life by using and applying to life the truths they have known in the spiritual world they acquire more truths. They have deeper and deeper insights into the meaning of things and a clearer understanding of things only seen obscurely before. It is, just as it is said in the parable "For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away."

There are many places where the Lord stressed the importance of the way we live, insisting on the need to apply what we know and have learnt of His teaching to our daily life, our feelings and our attitudes. And here, in this parable, is one of them. Elsewhere He said, "Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21).

It is not enough to know, and to bury what we know away in our memories, at the back of our minds, lost behind the welter of activities, pursuits and interests which distract us, failing to use it in any way. We must use what we know that it might bring blessings to others and serve the great purpose for which the Lord gave it to us.

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