

Sermon on the Parable of the Talents **by Fr. Paul Check**

“Treasure in Heaven” is a phrase that Our Lord uses more than once because it is something that He wants us to enjoy. That will not surprise anyone. But what some may not know is that not everyone who goes to Heaven will enjoy the same amount of treasure. Some will have more than others. In other words, among the blessed, the name the Church gives to those souls in Heaven, among the blessed there is a hierarchy. Some rank above others. The higher the rank, the more heavenly treasure or glory, as theologians say. How do we know that?

Well, Our Lord Himself said as much. “For the Son of man is to come with His angels in the glory of his Father,” Jesus said, “and then He will repay every man for what he has done.” (Mt 16:27) So, it is an aspect of divine justice that God rewards us according to how we have lived. Even our human sense of justice confirms this idea. While we pray for the deathbed conversion of some poor soul, we would probably not consider that the person in question deserves the same reward as someone who has devoted his or her entire life to the service of Christ and His Church; someone like Mother Teresa, for instance.

Elsewhere in the gospel, during the Sermon on the Mount for example, Our Lord spoke of those who are “greater” or “lesser” in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Mt 5:19, 18:4; Lk 7:28). And Jesus told two parables that instruct us that there are degrees of glory in Heaven: the Parable of the Pounds in St. Luke’s gospel (19:11-27) and the Parable of the Five Talents in St. Matthew’s gospel (25:14-30), which we have just heard.

It is worth noting that this parable is the last parable recorded in St. Matthew’s gospel. After this, what remains is the account of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. Now, ranking the parables in order of importance would be impossible. But we can attach some significance to the fact that the Parable of the Five Talents contains some of the final spiritual wisdom Our Lord chose to impart to His disciples.

The story is not hard to follow. A nobleman entrusts three servants with various portions of his wealth with instructions to invest it profitably. Two of the servants acquit themselves well and are recognized accordingly, but the third does not. The third servant offers an excuse, but the excuse is not accepted. Notice that he does not ask for forgiveness or make any reference to his master’s generosity. Instead, he tries to justify his failure to do what he was told by accusing his master of being too demanding. How easy it is for fallen human nature to adopt such an ungracious attitude. And so the servant is justly deprived of what he was given to include its potential for more and he is justly punished for his ill will and idleness. Notice, too, that it is not only his misuse of his gifts that earns his punishment, but also his non-use of them, his failure to do anything.

The Parable of the Five Talents teaches us something about the Last Judgment. It serves both as an encouragement and as a warning that we are to profitably use the gifts God has given us. Our eternal reward depends both in kind and in degree on how fully and generously we have cooperated with God’s grace and accepted and carried out His will. You and I are the recipients and custodians of many treasures, chief among them the treasures of divine truth and grace. And Our Lord intends that we preserve and multiply our treasure for the good of our souls and the souls of others.

In his commentary on this parable, Msgr. Ronald Knox wrote, “It would seem that Our Lord does not recognize the possibility of standing still in the Christian life: the servant who restores his talent whole but without any interest is written down as worthless; the seed either produces no harvest at all

or produces a harvest in excess of what was sown. The careless Christian would do well to reflect on this," Msgr. Knox continues, "if he is in the habit of supposing that he is likely to attain heaven by fulfilling the bare minimum of his obligations and doing no more. It is theologically possible, but Our Lord does not seem to think it likely."

Storing up treasure in Heaven: this is our purpose in life. The Parable of the Five Talents contrasts the brief labors God asks from us now with the lasting reward He promises in eternity. Did you notice that the gospel says that the man who owns the property undertakes "a long absence"? That man is a figure of Christ who "leaves us as it were to ourselves, [and] does not interfere to arrest our foolish or sinful actions. Why? In order that he may test us; we are in a state of probation." (Knox) In other words, the faithful servants are left by their master to make the most of their time by adding treasure, grace, to that already given to them. Within a Catholic theology of grace, the Church uses the term "merit" to refer to the opportunity Our Lord gives us to collaborate with Him in the work of our salvation.

The Catechism says it like this: "The merit of man before God arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of His grace." (CCC 2008) Now we must be clear about a certain point. The initiative with regard to our salvation is God's - we cannot save ourselves. The life and death of Christ is the source of all human merit. But the ability to merit heavenly treasure becomes, as the Catechism says, "a right of love" because we are God's adopted children in Christ and Christ's co-heirs. As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir." (4:7) As a result, the Catechism continues, "Moved by the Holy Spirit and charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for the attainment of eternal life." (2010)

Now there are some conditions necessary for us to gain merit, i.e. to store up treasure in heaven. First of all, we have to be doing a good work. There is no merit for sin or disobedience to the teachings of Christ and His Church. Next, we must do the work freely, not from force or fear. Then, the work must be motivated by a supernatural intention: the glory of God, the salvation or good of a soul, or atonement for sin. And finally - and this is of the utmost importance - we can only gain merit for those things done while we are in a state of grace, meaning without mortal sin. Someone may indeed be a "good person", but if he is not in a state of grace as he is doing some good action, then he cannot benefit in eternity from that good action. That is why the confessional is so important and why it is so gravely contrary to our own self-interest to say, "I know that the Church teaches that thus and so is a mortal sin, but I don't believe that it is."

Perhaps now you can see why there is a hierarchy in Heaven, why some souls store up more treasure than others: because they freely choose to do so. It is part of God's justice and love that He allows us, in some way, to consider the gift of eternal life "our own" since we have helped - through merit - to determine what it will be. In fact, this is what causes life for the devoted follower of Christ to be such an adventure. No action, no moment, no joy or sacrifice is too small or too insignificant to have its own proper echo in eternity, if only we will permit it to do so.

Mother Teresa saw this as evidence of not only God's justice and love, but also of His humility. Remember when Jesus told His disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches"? (Jn 15:5) Mother recalls our attention to something so obvious that we might miss its meaning. Where does fruit appear, on the vine or on the branches? On the branches. In the parable, did you notice that the master did not claim for himself either the money he originally gave to his servants, nor did he claim the profit that they had merited? He left all of that treasure in the possession of those who had followed his instructions faithfully.

And Our Lord wishes to do the same for us.