

## **Doing Greater Works**

A Sermon by Rev. Douglas M. Taylor

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do because I go to My Father" (John 14:12).

The Lord is here telling the disciples that those who believe in Him will not only do the works that He does but will do even greater works. This is a surprising statement indeed. How could a disciple do greater works than the Lord? How can a servant be above his master? Yet the statement must be both true and good, since it comes from the mouth of the Lord Himself, prefaced by the words, "Most assuredly, I say to you," which can also be translated, "Truly, truly, I say to you." So we cannot doubt the truth of the Lord's statement. Our task is to understand just how it is true and good.

It is not difficult to see that the disciples could have power from the Lord enabling them to do the works of healing that He did. After all, the Gospels tell us that they had already gone forth as apostles and had cast out demons (see Luke 10:17). What is more, the Acts of the Apostles recounts many miraculous healings performed by the disciples after the Lord had ascended. For example, it is recorded that they healed a lame man (Acts 3:6,7), cast out demons, escaped from prison by supernatural means (5:19), healed a paralytic (9:34), also a crippled man (14:10), and even raised a woman from the dead (9:40,41). These miracles were similar to those of the Lord. But the apostles could do them only because they had been given Divine power from the Lord.

This power could be given only because they "believed in Him" and because He had gone "to the Father" (text). What is the meaning of these two requirements: believing in the Lord and the Lord's going to the Father?

The new revelation has much to say in answer to these two matters. To believe in the Lord includes much more than to believe that He existed on earth as an historical character or seeing Him as a wonderful man, even the most wonderful man whoever lived on earth. Such ideas of the Lord completely ignore or deny His Divinity. Even

the scriptural statement that He was the "Son of God" is usually understood to mean only that He was in some sense Divine, but that He still has a human part inherited from Mary. This makes Him still the Son of Mary. True, this is better than the complete denial of His Divinity, but it nonetheless falls short of acknowledging His full Divinity or that He is the only God. Yet the new revelation and the Scriptures themselves say that this is precisely what is meant by "believing in the Lord." For instance, we read in the *Apocalypse Explained* that "'to believe in the Lord' is to believe in 'the Father,' [as] the Lord Himself teaches ... in John: 'He who believes in Me does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me; and he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me' (John 12:44,45). This means that he who believes in the Lord believes in Him not separate from the Father but in the Father; and it is therefore added, 'He who sees Me sees Him who sent Me.' So elsewhere in John: 'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world; and I go to the Father' (16:28). 'To come forth from the Father' signifies to be conceived of Him, and 'to go to the Father' signifies 'to be fully united to Him'" (*Apocalypse Explained* 815:15).

In other words, His human part was now Divine. It was no longer the Son of Mary, but the Son of God, the Offspring of God, the Divine Human. He had glorified His human, that is, He had made it Divine, even down to the very bones of His body. Not only did God become man, but man had become God. This is what is meant by the Lord's going "to the Father." No one can dispute the proposition that if Jesus is Divine, then He must be the only God, for there can be only one God. No miraculous works could be done without believing in the Lord in this way. For confirmation of this we have only to turn to the incident read as our first lesson. The Lord had gone to what was called "His own country," that is, to Nazareth, where He had grown up. When He spoke in the synagogue there, the people were astonished and offended, for the reason that they did not believe in Him. They still thought of Him as one of themselves, as being merely human. They were too close to His Humanity to believe in His Divinity. Consequently, "He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58). This explains why the Lord, before doing a healing, always asked: "Do you believe?"

We would note in passing that "to believe in the Lord" could not possibly mean to believe that He suffered for us on the cross. This had not yet happened. The Lord could hardly ask them to believe in something that had not yet happened. It could mean only a belief in His Divinity. So we can see how the disciples could do the works that the Lord had done; they believed in the Lord, in His Divinity, His Almighty power to heal. They believed that He had gone to the Father. But "greater works" than those of the Lord? What could He have meant by that promise and prophecy? It is remarkable that, while the Heavenly Doctrines have much to say about the part of the text we have considered so far, there is nothing said about "greater works." However, there are similar passages that are explained, and these shed light on the "greater works."

Take, for example, these words to the disciples: "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). The "righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" was nothing but an outward show, eye-catching piety, all for the sake of self and the world. There was absolutely nothing spiritual in it at all. It was merely natural and physical. In saying that the disciples were to exceed the scribes and Pharisees in righteousness, the Lord obviously did not mean that they were to outdo them in outward-seeming good and do a greater number of pharisaic works on the natural plane. As is clear from the verses that follow, He meant that the motives of the disciples were to be spiritual in quality, that their works were to go beyond mere outward show, and were to have a soul, a spirit, a spirit of charity within them. In this way their good works, being spiritual in origin, were to exceed merely natural, good-looking (but empty) works, and so be greater works. It was the spiritual content that was to make them greater. It is the same with the works spoken of in our text. While the Lord did many marvelous works of physical healing, the disciples were not only to do the same but also to do even greater things--healings on the spiritual plane, healing the mind or spirit, not just the body.

The Lord's miracles on the physical plane did indeed represent miracles of spiritual healing. His restoration of sight to the physically blind represented healing the spiritual blindness of ignorance as well as of prejudice or other evil feelings. After all, when He accused the

Pharisees of being "blind leaders of the blind" (Matthew 15:14, Luke 6:39), He was not referring to ailments such as cataracts or glaucoma. He meant their spiritual blindness. Healing the deaf represented healing disobedience or a lack of heeding the Divine commandments. Healing the paralyzed represented healing the state of mind in which our intentions are good but when it comes time to act we are paralyzed. Feeding the hungry and the thirsty represented feeding those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Raising the dead represented raising the spiritually dead to a life lived from spiritual motives, such as love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor. It is the same with all the Lord's physical miracles. They all represent miraculous changes in the mind or spirit. That is the level on which they are to be understood. Now, while the Lord's miracles represented spiritual things, the disciples were to do those very spiritual healings themselves. They were to do greater things. The general meaning of our text, then, is that if we really believe in the Lord as the Divine Human, we, as disciples of the Lord, can be given the power to do good works of a spiritual kind for ourselves and for others. We will be enabled to heal the spiritual blindness, spiritual deafness and paralysis, spiritual famine and thirst experienced by ourselves and others. We will be doing greater works than physical healings, for the spiritual is greater than the natural.

Understanding our text in this way does indeed increase and confirm our faith, and that is not a matter to be dismissed lightly. If the hells can induce us to doubt the Lord's Word, they will have taken the first step toward destroying our faith and our commitment to following the Lord in our life. We have doubts whenever we do not understand what the Lord is telling us in His Word. That is why He said, when explaining the parable of the Sower, that the seed falling by the wayside corresponds to "one who hears the Word of the kingdom and does not understand it" (Matthew 13:19). Let us recall also that the cunning serpent in the Garden of Eden began his insidious attack on innocence by insinuating a doubt, saying: "Has God said, 'You shall not eat from every tree of the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1) and "You will not surely die" (verse 4). But, besides telling us what we should believe because it is true, the Lord also tells us what we should do because it is good and leads to real and lasting happiness. In regard to our life and how we should live it, the Lord is here reminding us that spiritual things are greater than natural things. In order to come

into the greatest happiness possible-- the happiness He wishes for each one of us human beings--we must learn to value natural and physical things only as means to spiritual ends or purposes, not as ends in themselves. This needs to be done in particular situations in order to become a general or ruling love.

The Lord is constantly reminding us of this. In the Old Testament He says: "If riches increase, do not set your heart on them" (Psalm 62:10). "Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him" (Psalm 49:16,17). In the New Testament He says: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). "For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26) "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:27). How do we apply this principle to our daily life? How do we in a practical way put our spiritual life before our natural life, both in general and in particular situations?

The first step is to recognize and accept the principle and resolve to follow it. Reading and reflecting on what the Lord has revealed is the best means of being given reminders and renewing our resolve, because it raises our understanding into the light of heaven, connecting us with heaven and the Lord, so that our spiritual blindness is healed. The next step is to examine our life and loves thoroughly to see when and where and with whom we tend to put self and the world first before the Lord and charity toward the neighbor. The process would include identifying times when we seem to forget the Lord and His will entirely, when self-gratification takes possession of us, when the body and its appetites control us instead of being controlled by us. Bodily pleasures are, of course, not evil in themselves. They are necessary. But they become evil when indulged in for their own sake, when they become the greater goal of life rather than a means to living a useful life. But our words and works are only extensions of our thoughts and desires. So what goes on in our mind needs to be examined candidly if our outward life is to

be ruled by good affections and true thoughts. Such evil feelings as contempt of others in comparison of oneself, or the hidden lust of adultery, or feelings of hostility or hatred or revenge against those who do not favor or flatter us, need to be shunned as sins against the Lord if we are to do the greater works of love and genuine charity.

We also forget the spiritual life when carried away by love of the world, when we dream of being famous, or even infamous, when the undeniable delights that the things of this world bestow upon us completely captivate us, and we think there is nothing greater, when we dream and act from personal advantage in all its forms rather than from principle.

As we all know, it is a basic teaching of the New Church that "all religion belongs to life." So we strive to apply the teachings to life. But which life? Our natural, worldly life or our spiritual life, our life to eternity? Which is more important to us? Which is greater?

For example, psychological therapy does indeed help us function better in this natural life, and it works even for an atheist. But spiritual therapy, that is, shunning evils as SINS AGAINST THE LORD, is even greater, because it invites the presence of the Lord and connects us with Him. As a result, it helps not only our natural life but also our spiritual life at the same time. That is why the Lord said: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." In order to make this the rule of our whole life, we need to ask ourselves: "In this situation, am I putting my spiritual life first or some worldly advantage? Am I doing this for the sake of the Lord's kingdom or purely for my own sake? Do I really think, in actual life, that spiritual works done from the Lord are greater than natural works done from the love of self and the world? Am I worshipping God or Mammon?" Searching our souls in this way can lead to doing what is good consistently from the Lord, that is, to doing the greater works that He promised.

Amen.

*Lessons: Matthew 13:53-58; John 14:1-12; Arcana Coelestia 8364:6, 9031:3,5*