

With God All Things Are Possible

A Sermon by Rev. Douglas Taylor

“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

This statement and other similar ones have sometimes been taken to mean that the Lord can do anything at all that people can imagine, and that He does everything without means; as for example, that He created the universe out of nothing. But this is tantamount to a miraculous faith.

The Lord can indeed do everything that He wishes to do (see Psalm 135:6). Whatever the Lord from His Divine love intends to do, He can do, because He also has at His command infinite wisdom by which to accomplish the end in view. In this sense it is true that “with God all things are possible.”

But it is certainly not true that He has absolute power to do anything at all evil as well as good, like a capricious earthly tyrant. For the Lord is good and His mercy is forever. He is goodness itself. So we are explicitly taught that His almighty power operates “within the sphere of the extension of good” (TCR 56). It is therefore impossible for the Lord to depart from that good sphere and do anything evil. To do that would be to go outside of Himself. It is impossible for Him to do anything contrary to His own Divine order, simply because He does not wish to do it. It is contrary to His very essence.

Since the Lord is order itself, and does not wish to depart from that order, we find in the Heavenly Doctrine a number of references to things that are impossible for the Lord to do, things contrary to order. On the other hand, the teaching is that “everything is possible that is in conformity with order” (AC 8700), because the Lord, the Mighty One, is in it. What He wishes can be done. “With God all things are possible” (text).

But what does the Lord wish above all else?

He wishes that there might be a heaven made up of human beings drawn from the human race. He wishes that every one of His creatures should receive as much abiding happiness or blessedness as he or she is willing to receive. The everlasting happiness of the human race collectively and individually is what the Lord wishes and strives for above all else as His goal of goals.

So it can be said that everything that leads to that supreme end (which is another way of saying “everything that is in conformity with order”) is possible because the Lord wishes it and has the wisdom to accomplish it.

This, then, is a universal principle; but let us see first what it applies to in our text. Every text has a context. What is the context of the Lord’s statement that “with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible”?

This nineteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel begins with a discourse on the subject of marriage. In the internal, spiritual meaning the marriage meant is the heavenly marriage, the marriage of love and wisdom in a human mind, the marriage of the will and the understanding the essential marriage.

Then follows the incident of the little children being blessed by the Lord, who says that of such innocent ones is the kingdom of heaven. They represent innocence a free and spontaneous willingness to do what the Lord wishes. That is what innocence is, the very essence of every state of heavenly happiness.

The willingness of the angelic inhabitants of heaven to follow the Lord wherever He leads, their desire to carry out His wishes at all times out of regard for Him, is beautiful to contemplate. But we are not born with that celestial and spiritual willingness to be led by the Lord that the higher angels have attained. We have to be re-born into it.

We begin our reformation with something very different. We begin with a sense of duty with regard to the Lord's commandments, with the conviction that these commandments are Divine and for that reason must be obeyed. We have to begin by compelling ourselves against the inclinations of our human nature. We follow the Lord, yes; we strive to do His will as it is done in heaven. But we do this without any great delight, but rather with a heavy heart, with a sense of obedience to command. It is a matter of using deliberate will-power as if of ourselves, choosing many times between the Lord's will and our own. And it is a matter of enduring to the end.

So we learn to do no murder (in any of its forms), to shun contemplating and committing adultery, and to flee away from stealing and fraud and from lying and deceit. We force ourselves to turn our backs on such evils of life because they are sins against the Lord, even though our baser self continually lusts after them and calls them delightful. We also learn laboriously to honor our father and mother, and even to some extent to love our neighbor as ourselves. These things we learn to do by self-compulsion, because we have heard the Lord say: "If you want to enter into [eternal] life, keep the commandments" (verse 17).

Then the Lord in His Divine providence, with His ever watchful eye upon our everlasting happiness, lets us experience a rather rude spiritual shock. We had thought that we were already in the Lord's kingdom. We smugly say, when contemplating the Ten Commandments, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" (verse 20)

In response the Lord makes us realize that keeping the commandments means more than avoiding certain evil actions and doing good acts. Our motive for doing the Lord's will is of paramount importance; in fact, it is our motivating love that imparts the quality to the act. To the extent that self and self-centeredness enter in, the act is not good. It may well have a good effect on others, but in itself it is not a good act, because it does not go forth from a good motive. As the Lord said on another occasion: "Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a rotten tree bears rotten fruit" (Matt. 7:16).

In order for our good actions and words to be genuinely good, even if done in obedience to the commandments, we have to receive the motivating love from the Lord. And in order to do that, we have to give up what is our own.

“Sell what you have and give to the poor” (verse 21). We have to give up all ideas of our own righteousness, all sense of merit of having earned heaven, and of having any rights in the matter any thought that we have the will-power to follow the Lord of and from ourselves, that we are the source of our own goodness and truth. We have to give up all such fantasies, and in poverty of spirit humbly admit the reality: that we have nothing that is good or true from ourselves, but that any such blessings that we may have we have received from the Lord, and from Him alone. “Without Me,” He said, “you can do nothing” (John 15:5, emphasis added). The more thoroughly we are convinced that “no one is good but One, that is, God” (verse 17), the more will our poverty of spirit be enriched, and the more heavenly delights will we be able to receive. Then we will understand what it is to come to the Lord and follow Him.

But this may seem to us a hard saying, one that we cannot bear to hear. For this state (when we experience a spiritual shock) is very much “a young man” an immature, early stage in the reformation and regeneration of our mind; and while we are in it, we may well be tempted to go away “sorrowful,” thinking longingly of the “many possessions” (the proprial delights) that we now realize we must give up. These are not so much our selfish pleasures and covetousness. They include those things; but the “many possessions” are specifically the feelings of ownership that we enjoy with regard to the Lord’s kingdom. We have to admit that we are not the proprietors of the blessings of heaven. Such good things do not in the least come from what is our own. They are the Lord’s, and only the Lord’s.

If we will but acknowledge that the kingdom is the Lord’s and not ours, that the power is the Lord’s and not ours, and that consequently, the glory belongs in fact to the Lord and not to us, then we can really be as little children in the presence of our Heavenly Father, and enter worthily and delightedly into His kingdom, for of such states of innocence is the kingdom of heaven.

But if we are loath to sell what we have and give to the nourishment of that poverty of spirit that is the first of the blessings of heaven, then we will surely depart from the Lord and be full of sorrow. For it will mean that we are trusting in ourselves alone; it will mean that we are worshipping ourselves, because whatever we look upon as the source of goodness and truth and power is for us our God, whatever it is.

If we are puffed up with the pride of our own understanding and intelligence, and the pride of possession; if we glory in what we know in comparison with others; if we gloat over ourselves, enlarging what is our own with the sanctimonious thought that we are not as bad as some others whom we could name and probably do name if that seems safe in the eyes of the world if, in short, we feel, consciously or subconsciously, that we own the kingdom, then we are the rich man who finds it so hard to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is just as difficult for mere knowledge without the humble acknowledgment of the Lord to usher us into genuine spiritual truth as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, a camel corresponding to things known, and a needle to spiritual truth, or truth springing from the goodness of charity.

The amazement of the disciples on hearing what seemed to them a condemnation of natural riches is our amazement and bewilderment on realizing what we must give up in order to receive the innocence and bliss of heaven. It suddenly seems impossible. “What shall we eat [spiritually]? What shall we drink [spiritually]? What shall we wear [spiritually]?” Surely this is asking too much! It will kill us to have to give up our pride of intelligence and possession, our sense of merit. It will take away all our delights, our very life! How can we be asked to sell what we have in this sense and give to the poor? Besides, if this is the way, how can anyone do it, because it is surely against all human nature to do so? Who among us is not to some extent like the rich young man?

But the Lord’s answer to our state of bewilderment is simply this: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (text).

We cannot save ourselves from our own self-love! “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23). It is utterly impossible.

It is quite impossible for us to become angelic except from the Lord, the only source of power. This is not the same as saying we need God’s help, because that usually means that we can do most of it but we will need some help from the Lord. How often we hear civil leaders proclaim, “With God’s help we shall prevail,” as if all that was needed was a little help from God in the difficult places! And how often God is forgotten after the victory!

No! The truth the reality is that from ourselves we cannot even believe that God exists. We would have no knowledge of Him unless He had revealed it by means of His Word. No one is born with an instinctive knowledge of theology. True, there is “a universal influx from God into the souls of men of the truth that there is a God, and that He is one” (TCR 8). But this influx has to be caught, so to speak, in those receiving vessels that we call knowledges (things known) about Him. These things known can come only from the pages of Divine revelation.

The influx from God (just mentioned) is what sheds light the light of truth upon the things known, which also have been Divinely provided. This light is what enables us to believe in the existence of God, not anything of our own. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” for, as we are also taught, “it is the Divine that bears witness concerning the Divine” (AE 635:2).

If we cannot believe in the Lord from ourselves, still less can we love Him from ourselves alone. To love the Lord is to put Him first all the time, in every situation and in any company, and act as He would have us act not for our own sake, but for His sake. That is to love the Lord. But this is impossible for human beings themselves. We need to receive the love that goes forth from Him the eternally outgoing love and return it to Him. From ourselves we love only ourselves, putting ourselves first every time.

From ourselves we cannot even love the neighbor. To love the neighbor from charity or goodwill is to wish well to the neighbor, whether an individual, a community, our country, the church, or the Lord’s kingdom. To wish well to those who are the neighbor is to put their good first, or, at the very least, on the same level as our own. It is to wish lasting happiness to them; to serve them with a view to their welfare, not our own; to serve them rather than have

them serve us; to be aware of the needs of others, to be considerate and thoughtful of others and remember them; to be neighbor-centered instead of self-centered; to be outgoing, to love and serve even those who are not connected to us by relationship or friendship; to be more concerned with giving rather than getting; to love to give without hoping for and expecting any tangible reward here or hereafter any other reward, that is, than the delight of use, which is inherent in the doing.

That is charity toward the neighbor. But “with men this is impossible.” Let us acknowledge that. It cannot be done. We cannot from ourselves do those things that are involved in loving the neighbor because, if left to ourselves, we are outside the proper order of life for human beings.

But let us never forget the remaining part of the text: “With God all things are possible.” The Lord can bear witness to Himself and His presence. The Lord can lift up our gaze above the seductive fallacies of our five senses and make Himself visible to the eyes of our understanding; the Lord can give us the will to obey Him unselfishly; the Lord can give us the will and determination to shun selfishness as a ruling love because it is a sin against Him (an obstacle to His presence); the Lord can fight for us in our temptations and He can win the battle for us; the Lord can give us that outgoing love that gives to others, the genuine charity that hungers not for rewards and thanks; the Lord can give us that poverty of spirit that ascribes the victory to Him alone.

Here then is the purpose of life. It is nothing else than to be conjoined with the Lord, with whom all things of order are possible, and with whom is the power to save from hell, here and hereafter. If we are conjoined with the Lord, our keeping the commandments will save us. To be conjoined with the Lord is to shun our evils because they are sins against Him and separate us from Him; it is to be in contact with Him, to receive from Him.

That is why the remainder of this chapter speaks about giving up the foes of our own household in order to receive from the Lord. “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven” (John 3:27). “Without Me” (or “Severed from Me”), says the Lord, “you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

When we really see that this is indeed so, then we can respond, from the heart, “Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever.”

Amen.