

The Secret Of Life

Rev. Brian W. Keith

Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone wants to feel the satisfaction that comes from the sense of success and usefulness. And some people seem to achieve it! Some people, in spite of a few difficulties here and there, seem to have found happiness. So how is it done? How have some people discovered how to be happy? Is there some secret that has not been revealed to the masses yet?

The Lord told a story that points to such a secret. He spoke of a person who after journeying for a time arrived at midnight. But the place where he was lacked food. The owner of that house then went to a friend whom he knew to have plenty of bread. Not surprisingly, at this point in the night he was already in bed with his family. and he showed tremendous reluctance to disturb them, as it probably would involve his crawling over them to unbolt the door and find the bread to give to the person. Yet, although he was reluctant, he eventually did give him as much bread as he needed. Why? Because of the man's persistence! Because he kept asking, kept pounding on the door, kept making such a nuisance of himself that it was easier to give him the bread than to ignore him.

So that's the secret--the squeaky wheel gets the oil! Or, if you make yourself irritating enough to someone, you'll usually get what you want!

No, that is not the secret, although it is related to it. The secret is persistence--keeping at it, working for what is good and true even though there may not be many rewards at first.

Not a very attractive secret, is it? Not particularly glamorous, flashy, or inspiring. The fact of the matter is that, except for a few individuals who seem to have things going their way, at least for a length of time, all success, happiness, and good is achieved through persistent effort.

On the surface, the parable teaches this, but it is even more evident in looking at the deeper spiritual level of the story. For the man going on a journey is symbolic of the journeys that we make in our lives. Our minds are constantly thinking, exploring--they are traveling on a journey of understanding of the world around us, of people, and of the Lord's truth.

But there are points during our journey when we arrive at midnight and find no food to nourish us. Midnight -- a very dark and, in the plateaus of Palestine where the Lord was speaking, a very chilly time. So it described a kind of obscurity and absence of warmth in our life. This is reinforced by the absence of bread. The spiritual food we require is the satisfaction of being useful, the warmth of being in the sphere of love. When it is missing, all the understanding in the world will not comfort or inspire us.

What is being described is an occasion when we recognize how little good we actually have. Perhaps we've read the latest "positive self-image" books or gained an insight into the progression in regeneration, but our jobs have become tasteless to us and we feel in a rut. Or perhaps we know the value of marriage and family, but we are so caught up in the maintenance of the house and care of the children that our sense of joy in the family is far less than we know it should be.

What can we do when we sense this kind of emptiness? We turn to a friend who we know has spiritual food -- the Lord, of course. As this man went to a friend's house, so we turn to the Lord and ask Him for a greater sense of happiness, energy, and peace in our lives.

And what happens? His door is shut! He will only call out from within! And He shows no desire to give aid!

Does the Lord really keep us away? Of course not! The Lord's apparent indifference in this and in several other instances in the New Testament is not because He doesn't care or because He is unwilling to help. It comes from His inability to give what is not truly desired.

How can this be? It is seen in the request for three loaves of bread -- not just one or two, which should be sufficient to satisfy any traveler. but three. This number is symbolic of fullness, and so indicates the desire we have to possess all good -- natural, moral, and spiritual -- immediately! When we find a void in our lives, all too often we think it must be filled at once. When we recognize we are not the ideal person we would like to be, we then imagine how we should be and how we want to be, and then demand to be that way, now! So we want tranquility in our natural lives, people being extremely friendly to us and everything going smoothly -- a kind of natural good. We also want to have easy moral choices, and then have others recognize our wisdom

and applaud our decisions. And we want spiritual good, an inner sense of the Lord's presence and surety that He is guiding all of our steps.

These are good things to have, which the Lord wants for us. But none of us is ready to receive them all immediately. So it seems that the Lord ignores our requests or is too busy to help -- He is in His house and will not give us any bread. The truth of the matter is that those and many more goods do not become real in our life until we persist in our efforts to obtain them.

The Lord said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). He did not say, "Blessed are they who are bloated." For it is only when we sense the absence of good in our lives and sincerely yearn for it that the Lord can provide.

It is our persistent efforts through which the Lord can achieve much, for it is a Divine quality. It describes the Lord's continual endeavor to reach out to us. As the Heavenly Doctrines note, "The Lord draws all people to Himself; but as angels and people are finite, they can follow the current of the attraction only according to their measure, although the force of attraction persists to infinity" (TCR 350, emphasis added). Persistence is built into the very nature of the Lord because His love cannot be anything but that. The Lord stands at the door and knocks, constantly, incessantly. There is never a time when the Lord stops His efforts to reach us to lead us, for His love desires to make us happy in all things. The only issue is to what extent we receive that love. It is when we mirror Him by being persistent, by sticking to His ways even when it is not terribly easy or delightful, the doors are opened and we receive as much good as we want.

Nowhere is this more important or obvious than in our spiritual struggles, our temptations. We all face spiritual difficulties in our life, be they minor confusions or strong pulls toward what we know to be hellish. From doubts to lusts and apparently overwhelmingly powerful selfish feelings, we all at times struggle. What's the secret to survive when we are in these states of anguish or listlessness? Well, there are certainly some things which are more productive to do than others. After all, if we are tempted to steal and we go ahead and do it, we have ended the temptation in the worst possible way! But the only real key, the secret, is our persistence in hanging on to what is good (see AC 2343:2).

There are not some people who are stronger than others, so better suited to overcome their personal hells in temptation. While in it, it may be hard for us to believe in the midst of our spiritual struggles, the Lord insures that we have sufficient strength to overcome whatever we face. The issue is not of innate ability or a skillful method that will work in all situations. Rather it is the continual endeavor to keep going even when it seems as if we have no strength left to do so. That's how the Lord overcomes evils in our lives -- we keep working at it. It may not happen as quickly as we would like, for in each temptation we are tested to the limit of our endurance. Nor may it be as easy as we would like, for our strength is always limited. But if we keep going, slugging through the mud and muck of life, we do eventually make it through, with the Lord lifting us up throughout.

In marriage we see much the same dynamic. Marriages begin from incredible heights of affection and passion. The closeness felt during the stage of betrothal and in the early phases of marriage is impossible to describe. But what most married couples find is that as the years go by, that passion or excitement seems to fade away as they are caught in all the typical concerns of life. Be it business, recreational, or family responsibilities, what takes up the most time in their life often ranks third or fourth in importance, while the love between them seems to be set on the back burner. So some of the luster comes off the marriage, and frequently there is a sense of a lack of good within the marriage. As the man taking the journey found no food where he was, sometimes marriages will have dry spells where it seems the early promises of happiness are unfulfilled.

So the love is gone? Actually, no. Those early peaks of passion were only indicative of what a heavenly marriage can be. When we lapse back into our more pre-regenerate states, as most do regularly, it is no wonder happiness in marriage is hidden!

What does it take then to rekindle those fires, to make the marriage exciting and happy again? While there are many good suggestions, from weekends away to giving small gifts to one's spouse, none of them will work unless there is the desire, the drive, to love that other person. This means not approaching the spouse with demands, such as, "I could love you better if you lost some weight/didn't work as hard/or remembered our anniversary more accurately." It is a willingness to love the good of the other person and set aside foibles and faults. It is as the Writings say, "... if, from his soul or inmost being, the lover constantly

persisted in his love for that one, he would attain those eternal blessings which he promised himself before the consent, and promises himself when consent has been given" (CL 333:2).

So how does one's partner become more attractive and the marriage happier? By the lover's constantly persisting in his love. However, there is a challenge here because our selfishness wants to convince us that the problem is never with us but always with the other person. Yet such selfish and destructive tendencies can be overcome if we keep working at it -- if we persist in our love for the other person.

So this the great secret of life: be persistent in good. Though we experience a lack of good in our lives from time to time, it does not mean all is hopeless. Though we may desperately want everything to run smoothly in our lives, want the happiness that we see promised in the Lord's Word, the three loaves of bread, it will not suddenly be handed to us. But if we persist, if we continue to do what we know we should, if we continue to walk along the Lord's way, then eventually the door is opened and we are given as much good as we want. It is as the Lord said to Joshua when commanding him to lead the people, "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). Amen

Lessons: Psalm 37:1-26; Luke 11:1-13; CL 333