

## Spiritual Alchemy

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish  
Mitchellville, MD, November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018

“Whereas you have been forsaken and hated . . . I will make you an eternal excellence, a joy of many generations... Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver, instead of wood, bronze, and instead of stones, iron. I will also make your officers peace and your magistrates justice. Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, neither wasting nor destruction within your borders; but you shall call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise” (Isa. 60:15, 17-18).

The idea that bronze or copper can be changed into gold is one that fascinated mankind for centuries and was central to the development of the practise known as alchemy. In fact, medieval chemistry – or what was known as chemistry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – seems to have been pre-occupied not only with the possibility of changing baser metals into silver and gold but in fact, the possibility of changing any matter into something different by a process known as transmutation. Using this process, with or without some hypothetical elixir, many thought they would find cures for various diseases and maybe even prolong life or restore youth to the elderly.

Of course this is not what’s going on in the prophecy of Isaiah, which is not about natural things except as metaphors and symbols of spiritual life. But it’s intriguing to see how a spiritual idea well understood in ancient times might have been perverted to suggest some worldly benefit.

In general, the whole chapter is about God’s fabulous promises to a downtrodden, captive people. Many of the verses are familiar to us as prophecies of the Advent, and others bring to mind the glowing words of Revelation where the great and holy city, New Jerusalem, is revealed, having “no need of the sun or the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it ...,” a magnificent city of pure gold and precious stones, with gates of pearl, and so on (Rev. 21:23-24).

Just as the “light” referred to is not natural but spiritual light, so the glory of the city is enlightened thought or understanding, and the infrastructure the spiritual intelligence of that enlightened mind. The walls are distinguishing truths or ideas, the gates introductory knowledge, the streets connecting ways of understanding, and all the gold and crystal the refined, translucent, heavenly qualities of love and wisdom from the Lord. So in the prophecy of Isaiah the gold and silver that would replace bronze and iron are not natural but spiritual, treasures in heaven that can replace the selfish loves and ideas that tarnish and fade so easily in the world, treasures in heaven that neither moth nor rust can corrupt.

When we think about gold and especially when we compare it to the bronze (or possibly copper) mentioned in Isaiah we can easily see why it is used by the Lord as a symbol for heavenly love. Gold recovered from treasure ships sunken hundreds, even thousands of years ago in the sea is as beautiful and as precious today as it was when it went down, representing the incorruptible beauty of true love. Yet it is soft and workable, representing the gentle, accommodating nature of love, and it has marvellous chemical and electronic properties that can benefit people in countless practical ways even as love brings untold benefits in all areas of life.

Bronze or copper, by comparison, is very good, but won’t do half of what gold will do. For example, we use copper in electric wires, but technical people say that gold is a much better

conductor, it's just too rare and too expensive for this application. Besides, copper has greater inherent strength than gold, and that's important considering the way we use electric wire. So brass or copper also represents love, but a baser, less precious, very strong, practical kind of love. We could call it the love of the world for its own sake. It is the joie de vivre! It is something we can either learn or simply experience as a hereditary inclination, like a love of music, a love of knowledge, or a love of mathematics. Even the desire to do well in one's job or to live in peace with one's neighbors may be a merely natural thing, in other words, it may have nothing to do with any spiritual motivation, it may be simply the most comfortable way for a person to behave – to just “get along.” In the same way, the love of children can be quite natural, in that it doesn't necessarily involve any spiritual thought or affection, just a feeling about the family as the nearest “neighbor” or even an extension of oneself.

But this last is a good example of bronze that can be replaced by gold, for even though our love for our children may have worldly and egotistical beginnings, the Lord teaches that through education and self-discipline *from the teachings of His Word* eventually, gradually, in time, we can receive and enjoy a more precious, lasting love that will replace it. The natural loves at first help us establish good habits of provision for the children: good care, protection, attentiveness to all sorts of needs, and so on. Then, as we become more deeply impressed with the power and significance of spiritual values, we can be filled with a truer, better sense of what children are all about, and what sort of care and instruction we must provide for them.

In our lesson from Isaiah the Lord promised Israel gold instead of bronze. He also promised silver instead of iron, bronze instead of wood, and iron instead of stones. In a worldly, literal sense, this would be an alchemist's dream come true. Just imagine... if you could change – transmute – wood or stones into metal, and then common metals into precious ones! The mind reels. Indeed, it is just because the natural mind reacts with such anticipation and glee to the thought of the enormous wealth this process could generate that the true meaning of the text has been lost to the ages.

We are taught in the New Church that all true spiritual principles are misunderstood and misapplied when they are seen from a worldly perspective, that is, when the external appearance is separated from the internal reality. The origin of idolatry is an example. In the beginning within the most ancient church on earth, people saw the usefulness of portraying some of the Lord's Divine qualities in representative images: His omnipresence by a man with wings, His power by the strength and features of a lion, His omniscience by a creature full of eyes, and so on. But in the course of time more and more emphasis was placed on the representative images, with the result that now all over the world we find evidence of people worshiping statues, idols and mythological creatures that have no more real substance than Disney cartoons.

This, of course, was the situation in the land of Canaan with its baal worship when the children of Israel conquered it. We also have fine archaeological records of idolatry in ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece and other places. But it's not all ancient history. If you look around at contemporary religions, like Hinduism with its Krishna, Vishnu and other demi-gods, you will find much the same. If only people would acknowledge that it is not the image itself that matters, or some strange being represented by the image, but the Divine qualities portrayed *in* the image, there would be true worship (and, lest we be too quick to judge, for many Hindus we know that this actually is the case).

A similar thing applies to sacrifices. In most ancient times people recognized that animals represented human affections, some of which were good in the sight of the Lord and others not so good. The offering up of good affections to the Lord, then, became ritualized in sacrifice of animals, which in time so completely took the place of the affections themselves that nobody knew or cared anything about the spiritual states involved in worship, only the details of how to kill and burn animals. This is not so common today, but, as with idolatry, despite the crudeness and brutality of it we can still find value in the record of ancient sacrifices, particularly those of the Old Testament, *if we look to the representative symbolism that was involved.*

Returning, though, to Isaiah, we find that three distinct levels of life are mentioned, the sensual, the natural and the spiritual, and on each level both affections and thoughts (that is, both love and wisdom, will and understanding) are represented. Wood and stones are the sensual, bronze and iron the natural, gold and silver the spiritual. And just as one fundamental element cannot be changed into another, so one level of affection or thought cannot be changed into another. This is the error of alchemy. ***But one level may give way to another,*** and this is the lesson of Isaiah.

The Lord never said that wood could be turned into bronze, or bronze into gold! But in the symbolism of Isaiah He taught that there are feelings like wood that can give way to affections like bronze, and there are affections like bronze that will give way to loves that are as good as gold. Likewise stones cannot be turned into iron, or iron into silver, but there are truths like building blocks of stone that will give way to thought and reason that is as hard and strong as the iron from which swords and machinery are made (think of the expressions, “iron will” or “steely determination”), and these in turn will give way to spiritual wisdom as precious as refined silver ***if we acknowledge the Lord’s Word and use it to form and discipline our lives.***

Think about it, and reflect for a moment on how the Lord works this transformation within us. To be clear, we do not become spiritual by doing especially well in natural life, any more than we become truly insightful or wise by living an especially good sensual life. One may be built upon the other but there is no automatic progression from one to the other. To illustrate, keen vision, or even a microscope does not in itself provide any understanding of what is seen, even on the material level. Neither does understanding on the material level in itself reveal anything of eternal value. But when the physical eye is guided by principles drawn from understanding, and when the understanding is guided by principles drawn from the Word, then each level serves the one above it and takes its quality, perceptiveness and joy from the one above. In effect, then, the delight of sensual life is enhanced by the happiness of a disciplined natural life, for example when we eat well (but not too much) and when we include healthy exercise and useful service to others in our routine (rather than just sitting around); and that in turn is enriched, distinguished and ennobled by the pure joy of heavenly blessing when we raise our hearts and minds to the Lord, doing what we do ***for Him,*** in humble recognition of His love.

After all, it’s not as if all the wood or stone in the kingdom disappears. As long as we are in the world we will continue to experience the life of our physical senses. And it’s not as if all the bronze and iron vanish, in fact the natural thoughts and pleasures represented in these metals remain even after the death of the body, taking the place of the purely physical senses which are no longer needed there. But when we look to the Lord above all and take our inspiration and guidance from Him, then our lives are enriched as with pure gold and silver, precious loves and wisdom not at all of our own making but from the infinite storehouse of the heavens.

In such a state we will have no need of outward forces to compel us to a good life. So the name of our officers will be “Peace,” and the name of our magistrates “Justice.” Worldly ideas of self-preservation will give way to confidence in the walls of His salvation, and the gates of our entrance into spiritual life truly will be “Praise.”

It’s exciting to consider the beauty and usefulness of the natural resources of our world, the building materials of wood and stone and the various base or precious metals. It’s inspiring to know what can be done with these things and how individuals and whole nations can be made strong and prosperous with them. But now it’s even more wonderful and inspiring to reflect on how the Lord promotes our spiritual and eternal welfare through the love and wisdom that correspond to these things. And it’s exciting to learn the spiritual sense of His Word so that we can examine and refine what we think and do, adding the precious elixir of heavenly life and trust in Providence to the routines of natural, even sensual life, making all of our experience the medium of transformation from what is worldly to what lasts forever in the kingdom of God.

So the treasures of this world will give way to the treasures of heaven that we can truly, deeply enjoy in the form of new insights and perceptions, tender mercies and profound, eternal blessings from the Lord. And so we will be privileged to enjoy that *new* heaven and earth described by John in the book of Revelation, in which “God will wipe away every tear from (our) eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for (then) the former things (will) pass away,” and then He *will* “make all things new.”

Amen.

Lessons:

*Isaiah* 60:1-5, 10-22

Children’s talk on Thankfulness for Natural & Spiritual Blessings

*Revelation* 21:1-12, 22-27

*Arcana Caelestia* #1551:1-2