

Love of the World

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

Who doesn't love this world? How can you NOT love it – unless maybe you've had some terrible or tragic natural experience? And even then, isn't the real problem that you wish you could enjoy it more than you do?

The sun, the moon, the incredible order of the universe; the intense colors and sounds of creation, the spectacular views and the intricate details in the composition of every flower and seed; the “magic” of math and chemistry and physics; the awesome *power* of natural events; the miracle of human, animal or even plant genetics and growth: all of this is so amazing and provides such richness of experience that it's really hard not to love the pleasures it can give us.

One reason we go for holidays out in the country or at the beach is that we get our batteries recharged in the sphere of the wonders of nature. From the mountains and lakes and trees and wildflowers to the myriads of fascinating creatures that inhabit the planet, we can lose ourselves in the sublime order of what the Lord in His providence creates and maintains for us, and in the quiet contemplation of it all we can gain a tranquil perspective on our own lives.

But that's not all. Building on the opportunities presented, people through the ages have become more and more adept at controlling the environment to refine the pleasures it affords – through music, art, science, engineering, manufacturing and more. The telescope, the microscope, and all sorts of other scopes allow us to explore elements of nature and the human body itself that open up new vistas every day for enhancing the quality of life in this world. Our ability to harness horse power, water power, steam, gas, electricity, and now nuclear power enables us to benefit from outrageous luxury and leisure that would have been unthinkable for the average man just a century or two ago.

Truly, the world is a wonderful place and we are fortunate to be able to enjoy its blessings. How can we not love the pleasures of our natural senses?

And yet... we face a huge challenge. Because we know that there is more to life than just this natural world, indeed because we know that we will live forever in the spiritual world, we all face the challenge of making life in the *spiritual world* our highest priority and subordinating our love of this world to *that*. ***And it's not easy***. This world is *so alluring*, and the other *so obscure* to us most of the time that it is hard to stay focused, hard to keep a proper perspective. In fact, it's *so hard*, we are *so attached* to this world that God Himself had to “bow the heavens and come down,” breaking through the fog of human confusion to assume a physical, natural, corporeal Human form through which He could inspire and convince us to persevere.

Notably, the very first prophecy of this Divinely natural presence occurs as early in the Word as the third chapter of Genesis where we read the story of the snake in the garden: -

“Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And it said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said that you shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

“Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (Genesis 3:1-5).

In the dialog that follows, of course, the serpent is condemned, but not without the ominous warning that God would put “enmity” between it and the woman, and between its seed and her seed, saying HE would bruise its head, but it would bruise HIS heel (v. 15). The seed of the woman here is the Lord, who in assuming a natural body would make Himself vulnerable to the influence of the world and suffer on its account.

So we read in the *Arcana* that the most ancient people “called sensory faculties serpents, for just as serpents are next to the ground so are the sensory faculties next to the body. Consequently reasonings based on sensory evidence concerning the mysteries of faith they called serpent-poisons, and those who reasoned in that way they called serpents. And it is their basing reasonings so much on sensory evidence – that is, on visual, as is the evidence of earthly, bodily, worldly, and natural objects – that is the reason for the statement ‘the serpent was more subtle (cunning), than any wild animal of the field’” (AC 195).

Further, “In ancient times people who relied on sensory evidence rather than matters of revelation were called serpents. *Nowadays the position is even worse*, for not only are there people who believe nothing unless they can see it with their eyes and apprehend it with their senses, there are also those who confirm themselves in that attitude by means of knowledges unknown to the most ancient people, and who in so doing blind themselves very much more” (AC 196).

Now as you know, this serpent theme recurs many times in the stories of the Word, famously in the story of the Exodus when Moses, trying to persuade the Pharaoh of Egypt to let the people go, threw down his staff and it became a serpent. Then, later, as you recall, Aaron did the same thing with his rod, but the magicians of Egypt countered by turning their rods also into serpents, (what a mess!), only to have the rod of Aaron swallow up their rods, restoring order (Exodus 4:1-5 & 7:8-12). What this is all about in the spiritual sense is the importance of our sensory perception being connected to and controlled by the spiritual principles represented by Moses and Aaron. As such it is a rod, a symbol of authority and power. But if it is separated from those spiritual principles it becomes a deadly viper.

Then there is the story of the Children of Israel on their journey in the wilderness when they became discouraged and “spoke against God and against Moses,” complaining in particular about the manna they had been given to eat. “So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died.” Of course we know that this was not some sort of Divine retribution, but simply the natural consequence of their own attitudes. The solution? – a “fiery” polished brass serpent set up on a pole so that if anyone who had been bitten merely looked at it he would be healed (Numbers 21:4-9).

What this story represents in broad terms is that our own sensory perception can poison our faith in the Lord and put an end to our spiritual lives. But the brass serpent represents the sensory life, specifically *the natural good of the Lord's own life in the world* which, if we observe and honor it, leads us right back to Him and to our salvation. (AC 197:e; 425:e).

But wait, as they say, there's more! A serious study of the etymology of the words reveals that these same serpents of the books of Moses are given wings and *become dragons* in the Prophets and in the book of Revelation, especially Revelation, chapter 12 in the story about the woman clothed with the sun. But here the symbolism shifts – a little – to the concept of salvation by faith alone, that is, the belief that it doesn't matter what we DO in life, it only matters that we believe Christ died for our sins, and then we are saved – by HIS work and merit alone. This insidious idea releases people from any sense of responsibility for anything other than an ideological concept, and a dysfunction one at that, freeing them to indulge in every pleasure of the senses – not, perhaps, without some sense of guilt, but certainly without fear of eternal consequences. They will most likely understand that if their faith is genuine it will lead them to good works of charity, but they will deny that those good works have anything to do with their salvation.

So how does a serpent become a dragon, or how does reliance on the external, natural, sensory perception of things become a doctrinal concept that relieves people of personal accountability? Well, two possibilities come to mind: one is that a person's understanding almost always follows and supports his will. So if you *want* to be free of accountability this concept can provide the justification for it. It is a short step from this desire to the literal and figurative interpretation of Scriptures (not to mention Paul's Epistles) that finds evidence of sacrificial atonement everywhere, from the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac to that of the scapegoat in Leviticus, from the passion of Psalm 53 to the statement in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish..." But it is most pronounced in the sermons of Paul to the Christians in Rome and Galatia.

The problem with all this, of course, is that it ignores countless teachings throughout the Scriptures in which the Lord stresses the vital importance of our co-operation with Him in order to be saved. The tie-in to reliance on sensory experience, or the love of the world, therefore seems to be that we believe what we want to believe, and if we want to enjoy our love of the world without the burden of responsibility or fear of consequences we can argue even from the outward appearance of the literal teachings of the Word that these things don't matter. In other words, like the person who is caught up in the appeal of the physical senses, we can get caught up in the appeal of the literal sense of *certain portions* of the Word, and do what we want.

Now because we have this (at times) overwhelming tendency to get stuck in the love of the world apart from the disciplines of spiritual life, the heavenly doctrines warn us that the love of the world CAN BE one of the two sources of all the evil and falsity that plague mankind. The first source is the unbridled love of self that you heard about last week, a love that directly opposes love to the Lord, and the second is this... this serpent, the undisciplined love of the world, which directly opposes true faith in the Lord by trusting in the appearances and the pleasures of the world rather than the Word in its entirety as our primary source of information.

The inevitable result of this mistake is that we become easy prey for the worldly spirits who inspire us with greed, avarice, jealousy, covetousness, contempt of others, and all sorts of other evils that pit us against our neighbors in a competition for the world's wealth. Many of the

world's wars and other atrocities can be directly attributed to this competition. And many of the physical ailments we suffer personally are direct results of our indulgence in the pleasures of the senses: - lung cancer, obesity, various addictions, HIV, AIDS, hepatitis, "accidents," even diabetes.... Of course these are not always caused by the love of the world's pleasures, and even if so it is not always our own fault, but sometimes they are, and sometimes it is!

Much of the conflict we experience at work or even in recreational pursuits comes about because we are trying to claim some perceived worldly entitlement. And much of the grief we suffer is because we don't think we're getting what we deserve.

But it doesn't have to be this way! Like the angels in the book of Revelation, with the Lord's help we can fight against and overcome the dragon, "that serpent of old," in our lives. And how can we do this? – *Not necessarily by forsaking the pleasures of the world*, but by bringing them under control, *subordinating them* to the guiding principles of heavenly life.

The Lord Himself said at the end of the Gospel of Mark that "these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; ***they will take up serpents***; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them" (Mark 16:17-18). Note, "they will take up serpents." What this really means is that when we honor the Lord first and foremost we will be able to handle our sensory life with judgment and moderation. *We will be able to enjoy the pleasures of every natural sense*, including wealth, recreation, fine food and clothing, sports, alcohol, the intimacies of marriage, and more, all in accordance with their uses. More importantly, when we enjoy them in conjunction with a love for the Lord and for usefulness to our neighbors we will have *an even greater sense of pleasure* than could ever be possible otherwise, indeed, a sense of pleasure that is unimaginable to those who are consumed by their worldly cravings or ambitions for their own sake (CL 1-26).

Remember the third lesson from *Heaven & Hell* about the rich and the poor in heaven. And if you haven't read Paul's Epistle to Timothy you really should have a look, especially at the last two chapters where he makes essentially the same points as in that lesson. Do you know, for example, that this epistle is the origin of the saying, "The love of money is the root of all evil"? Note: it is not *money*, but *the love of money* as opposed to the *uses* money can buy.

So, you see, the love of the world is NOT BAD *in itself*, any more than the love of self is bad *in itself*. It's just at the low end of a hierarchy of loves that need to be kept in line with the higher principles of spiritual life! And just as it is incumbent on us to provide as best we can for ourselves so that we don't have to depend too much on others, so it is incumbent on us to look after this wonderful world the Lord has given us, preserving and protecting it for future generations. And the Lord's promise is that when we do this properly our love of the world can be refined and purified to a point of such intense heavenly pleasure that it's impossible to describe.

Amen.

Lessons: *Psalm 1*
Children's talk about how to feel really good

Revelation 12:1-12
Heaven & Hell #357-360: selections