

“Contentment Over Materialism”

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[Belshazzar, the king, and his one thousand guests] drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone. In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace. Daniel 5:4-5)

The literal story of Belshazzar and the judgment on him reflects the condemnation that comes to people who set their hearts on things of this world and the pleasures they can provide. The parable of the rich fool in Luke has a similar theme.

Jesus spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

Belshazzar was using the resources he inherited to entertain himself and his friends. For this he was judged and found wanting. Like the rich fool his life ended far sooner than he expected.

A misunderstanding of Gospel teachings is that riches in themselves corrupt a person and that being poor helps a person get to heaven. Many have wondered about the Gospel of Matthew statement “It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24). The teachings for the New Church are quite clear that this passage should be understood in a different light.

By the rich man [who would have a hard time entering heaven] the rich in both the natural sense and the spiritual sense are meant. In the natural sense the rich are those that have an abundance of riches and set their heart upon them; but in the spiritual sense they are those that have an abundance of knowledges and learning, which are spiritual riches, and who desire by means of these to introduce themselves into the things of heaven and the church from their own intelligence. And because this is contrary to Divine order it is said to be "easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye." (*Heaven and Hell* 365:3)

The teachings for the New Church give us tremendous latitude on how we can live our lives.

[I]t is all right to acquire wealth and accumulate any amount of assets, as long as it is not done by fraud or evil devices. It is all right to eat and drink with elegance, as long as we do not invest our lives in such things. It is all right to be housed as graciously as befits one's station, to chat with others like ourselves, to go to games, to consult about worldly affairs . . . We can be happy and cheerful . . . This is no obstacle to our acceptance into heaven as long

as we keep God appropriately in mind and act honestly and fairly toward our neighbors. Our quality is actually that of our affection and thought, or our love and faith. . . .So when it says in the Word that we are judged according to our deeds and rewarded according to our works, it means that we are judged and rewarded according to the thought and affection that give rise to our deeds or that are within our deeds. (*Heaven and Hell* 358)

We are told that rich people can use the resources they have available to benefit their country and their neighbor “in far more ways than a poor person can” (*Heaven and Hell* 361).

Belshazzar was condemned not due to his wealth or because he held a stupendous banquet but rather because his fundamental values and goals in life were corrupt. A person can be extremely poor and likewise have corrupt values and goals as conveyed in the following teaching:

There are many people among the poor who are not content with their lot, who covet much more, and who believe that wealth is a blessing; so when they do not get what they want, they are enraged and harbor evil thoughts about divine providence. They envy other people their assets, and given the chance would just as soon cheat them and live in their own foul pleasures. (*Heaven and Hell* 364)

There is a promise that if we pray and try to live by a confidence in the Lord’s care that contentedness with what we have achieved and what we own will not be hard.

Those who trust in the Lord . . . though concerned about the future, yet are unconcerned, in that they are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to that future. They remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss; they are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infatuated with wealth; if they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either; if lowly in status they do not feel downcast. They know that for those who trust in the Lord all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8478:3)

While it is not hard to see the story of Belshazzar as being one of love of the world and materialism, the specific teachings of the New Church about this story present a different story. Nearly all of us have battles against love of the world and materialism. It hurts us and the people around us. But there is an even more sinister quality to this story in the internal sense. Belshazzar and his misuse of the cups and goblets of gold and silver from the Temple of Jerusalem are specifically said to represent a misuse of ideas that the Lord has revealed. The Lord has warned us against a particularly dangerous form of evil called profanation. It involves use of ideas that have some true and goodness behind them but are being employed for self-centered and evil purposes.

Sadly enough we have many times over heard about clergy in the broader Christian world who have used the respect people have for their positions and their authority to sexually abuse children and young people. This is a horrendous evil. Our church organization has been its own examples of this evil. Many decades ago teens tried to tell parents what terrible evils were occurring and were disciplined for suggesting that their pastor might do such a thing. This is an example of how the

respect and honor that could be attributed to someone honestly serving the Lord has been given to someone using that cloak to take advantage of others. Specifically we are taught:

“The vessels of gold and silver from the temple of Jerusalem” [that Belshazzar brought to his banquet] represented the forms of good and the truths which belonged to the Church and to the Lord's kingdom; “drinking wine from them” meant desecrating them by means of evil loves and false ideas, which are 'the gods of gold and silver'. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8932)

Another passage states:

“Dividing” means separating and removing from forms of good and truths. . . It is evident that 'dividing' has this meaning from the words written on the wall when Belshazzar king of Babel, together with his nobles, wives, and concubines, drank wine out of the vessels of gold and of silver that had belonged to the Temple in Jerusalem, Dan. 5:2-4, 25, 28. What was written said, 'Numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided,' 'divided' here meaning separated from the kingdom. Those verses describe the profanation of goodness and truth, which is meant by 'Babel'. Profanation is meant by 'Babel' . . . Forms of the good of love, also the truths of faith, received from the Lord, are meant by 'the vessels of gold and silver'. . . Profanation is meant by drinking out of them, and by praising then the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone are a string of evils and falsities. . . Belshazzar's kingdom when it had been divided was a sign of the dispersion of goodness and truth, and his being killed that very night a sign of deprivation of the life of truth and good, which is damnation. (*Arcana Caelestia* 9093:2, 4)

Less horrible forms of this evil, but still terribly dangerous, occur when people use their knowledge of what is true and good to control or mislead a spouse, a child or some other acquaintance. A husband could cow his wife with the expectation that she should honor his wisdom when in reality he just wants to get his own way in a disagreement. A mother could brow-beat her children with the idea that they are to give honor to her, when what she really seeks is control of key parts of their lives. A person could use a superficial knowledge of the teachings for the New Church to intimidate acquaintances into siding with that person perspective in some issue. In each case things that are true and good in themselves have been twisted, misused, or misapplied to accomplish a goal that opposes what the Lord would wish for us all. Any time a person knows something of what is true and good and uses it for self-centered and worldly goals a terrible corruption occurs. This can even be true of people who hid their hatred of others by apparent acts of friendship. These acts carry the potential of eternal hellish consequences for the individual unless that person turns back to the Lord and repents.

We each have our spiritual battles against love of the world and all the pleasures it provides. It is not easy to know whether our use of the amazing natural resources so many of us have looks more to what is useful or more to self and its own gratifications. We also can face the more sinister evil of misusing the truth we have for evil purposes. But like Daniel came and interpreted to Belshazzar what had occurred the Lord can help us to see the reality of what is happening in our spiritual lives if we truly seek His help and wisdom. The Lord want us to recognize the spiritual dangers we face and turn from them. AMEN.

Lessons: Daniel 5 portions, *True Christian Religion* 400:11

Daniel 5

¹ Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand. ² While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which *had been* in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which *had been* in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them.

⁴ They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone. ⁵ In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. ⁶ Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other. . . . [*He called all his wise men but none could interpret the writing until the Queen reminded Him of Daniel*]

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in . . . and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another; yet I will read the writing to the king, and make known to him the interpretation. [*Daniel reminded Belshazzar what had happened to his Nebuchadnezzar*]" ²² But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. ²³ And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who *holds* your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified. ²⁴ Then the fingers of the hand were sent from Him, and this writing was written. ²⁵ "And this is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. ²⁶ This *is* the interpretation of *each* word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; ²⁷ TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; ²⁸ PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." ²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a chain of gold around his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. ³⁰ That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, *being* about sixty-two years old.

True Christian Religion/True Christianity 400:11

Love for the world is wanting to redirect other people's wealth to ourselves with whatever skill we have. It is putting our heart in riches and letting the world distract us and steer us away from spiritual love (love for our neighbor) and heaven. We have a love for the world if we long to redirect other people's possessions to ourselves by various methods, especially if we use trickery and deception, and have no concern for how our neighbor is doing. If we have this type of love, we have a strong and growing craving for good things other people have. Provided we do not fear the law or losing our reputation, we take people's things away, and in fact rob people blind. Yet love for the world is not as opposite to heavenly love as love for ourselves is - the evils hidden in it are not as enormous. Love for the world takes many forms. It can be a love we have for wealth in order to be promoted to higher positions. It can be a love for honor and high position for the sake of increasing our wealth. It can be a love for wealth for the sake of various benefits that gratify us in the world. It can be a love for wealth for the sake of wealth itself: this kind is miserly. And so on. Our purpose in gaining the wealth is the use we hope to get out of it. This purpose or use determines the quality of the love. The nature of any love is the nature of the purpose it has; everything else about it serves as a means.