

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part fourteenSunday, January 13th, 2012, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #1618

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HOW THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY EMPTIES THE CROSS OF CHRIST OF ITS SAVING POWER

The problem many have with the traditional doctrine of hell is that it seems so rigid and hopeless. We all know just how wicked this old world is. We see how bad people can be. We don't rub shoulders with too many perfect people. And who is the world qualified for heaven?

Then the Bible seems to hold up such relentless standards of holiness:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 - "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

In short, the problem with the traditional doctrine of hell is that *so many people seem to be going there*. Romans Catholic priest and author **Zachary Hayes** sums it up like this:

"As long as there is only heaven or hell, it is not surprising that hell will be heavily populated. But when the possibility of a purification [pay attention to that very important word] after death enters the scene, with it comes the tendency to depopulate hell by placing many people in a sort of outer court of heaven until they are more fully prepared [another very important phrase to note] for entrance into the presence of God"

Hayes continues:

"The problem with confining people to either heaven or hell is a simple one - not everyone seems 'bad enough' [important phrase] to be consigned to hell. And most do not seem 'good enough' [another important phrase] to be candidates for heaven. Therefore, [notice this is Hayes' final logic and conclusion] something has to happen in between."

Those are incredibly revealing words. Notice the logic of that last sentence. *"Therefore...."* - like something has been **proved**. *"Something has to happen...."* Why? Simply because of the way things *"seem"* to Hayes - *"Not everyone seems bad enough for hell. And most don't seem good enough to be candidates for heaven.... "Therefore....""*

The *"works"* theology shines through in these words. *"Bad"* people go to hell. *"Good"* people go to heaven. It's like passing an exam at school or having your resume approved for a job. Some people make it and some don't. And above all else, please note the way Jesus Christ is almost left out of the picture entirely.

1) **LET ME BRIEFLY OUTLINE THE ROMAN CATHOLIC POSITION ON PURGATORY** - While there is not perfect uniformity of opinion right across the board, the main points traditionally go like this:

- a) Those who have dutifully attained spiritual perfection through baptism, penance, absolution, and satisfaction in this world will go to heaven when they die. Those who die with the more serious sins - **mortal sins** - on their record will lose the regeneration they received as baptized infants and go to hell. That's why these sins are called *"mortal sins."* They kill the spiritual life received by the infant in baptism.

But there are many people who aren't in either one of those classes. Many people (at least in Roman Catholic theology) have been trying to live a decent life. They've faithfully partaken of the sacraments. They've been brought into the church through baptism (**which removes the stain of original sin**). They confess their sins to a Romans Catholic priest (and it **must** be to a Romans Catholic priest). *In short, they love God, but die spiritually imperfect and incomplete.* They aren't ready, imperfect as they are, to enter the holy presence of God. They will go to **purgatory**.

- b) Purgatory is a place where these people are cleansed from the remnants of the sin they died with. It will last for varying amounts of time, depending on how much work there is to be done. It will also depend on how many people are praying for them back in the Roman Catholic church.

Catholic priest Joseph Pohle describes purgatory as follows:

"It is a state of temporary punishment for those who, departing this life in the grace of God, are not entirely free from venial sins or have not yet fully paid the satisfaction [take note of that important phrase] due for their transgressions."

Those in purgatory are, however, children of God and will sooner or later be admitted to the abode of the blessed. Their eventual arrival in heaven is sure. But their time of deliverance from their cleansing in purgatory is uncertain.

- c) There are different ways in which the souls in purgatory can be freed from the indwelling sin. These are foundational to the Roman Catholic doctrine of redemption and the work of the church.

- i) For their own part, the souls in purgatory can receive further forgiveness by their *suffering*, their *penitential works* and *contrition*.
- ii) But they can also be helped along in the process of cleansing by the work of the saints here on earth. This would be by participation in the mass, by prayers for the dead, and by works performed on behalf of the dead.

2) TEXTS USED TO SUPPORT THEIR DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY

Most catholic scholars don't even profess that the source of this doctrine is in the exegeting of Scripture. Its source is found in the *Councils of Florence and Trent* and expanded in the writings of the *fathers of the Roman Catholic church*.

Yet some texts are still cited for support:

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 - "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— [13] each one's work will become manifest, *for the Day will disclose it*, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what *sort of work* each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

Catholic scholars see these words describing a *purification of the soul after death*. The individual's life is spared, but only after the sin has been burned up. He "*will be saved, but only as one through the fire*" (15).

When you look at the whole chapter, you will see that the Catholic interpretation actually makes the passage say the *opposite of what Paul intends*. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth. The whole third chapter has been written with one goal in mind - *to stop the people from splitting up the congregation around different leaders*.

That's what verse 9 is all about - "*For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*"

All the workers and leaders are on the same team. They are fellow workers together and God will bless the church as long as the *foundation of the church is remembered and kept in place*. Paul covers this in verses 10 and 11 - "*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*"

Verse 11 is key to understanding the whole picture of the building of the Body of Christ. The foundation of the whole thing is the *finished* work of Jesus Christ. There is nothing else upon which our salvation can successfully stand. Yet Paul says there is a horrible tendency to *replace the true foundation of the church with other human inventions* (organizational skill, contemporary management skills, popular appeal, etc.).

If leaders (those are the ones to whom those words are addressed) build on anything else than the finished work of Christ, *it will be revealed on judgement day*. And that concept of a specific *day* of judgment is a very important concept in this text. This judging work isn't one that takes place over an extended period of time. It comes in completeness on that specific *day* of judgment.

The fruits of their labor will be tested by fire on that *day*. And then Paul describes the real tragedy of this faulty ministry foundation. He says that *many who were influenced by these leaders' ministry will be lost* - 1 Corinthians 3:15 - "*If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*"

Do you begin now to see why it is that there is ultimately nothing loving in tolerating false doctrine and false teaching in the church? How easy it is to forget that there are *precious souls at stake!* It will also be a terrible time of loss for those ministers who were more interested in pleasing crowds than defending the truth. They will have to stand there and watch the results of their ministry disappear before their eyes!

But there is something everyone must note in this passage. It is key to understanding its message properly. There is no mention anywhere of anyone being *purged from their sin* by that fire. The fire burns up the *fruits* of ministers who neglect the centrality of the foundation of Jesus Christ. The fire judges the *works*. It does nothing to cleanse the *soul*.

Gordon Fee of **Regent Seminary** in Vancouver reminds us of the powerful message this passage has for today's church:

"This text has singular relevance to the contemporary church. It is neither a challenge to the individual believer to build his or her life well, nor is it grist for theological debate. Rather, it is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament that warn - and

encourage- those responsible for "building" the church of Christ. In the final analysis, of course, this includes all believers, but it is particularly addressed to those with teaching/leadership responsibilities. Paul's point is unquestionably warning. It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, pop psychology, managerial techniques, relational good feelings, or what have you."

"But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or His glorious gospel in it. And the good news of the passage is that one does not need to build badly. That which has the character of the foundation - Jesus Christ crucified and risen - will not only survive any present hour of testing, but will enter the final judgment as a glorious church; and those responsible for such building will receive their due reward."

Another passage frequently referred to is Matthew 12:31-32: "Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. [32] And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

The argument used goes like this: Why would Jesus say that this particular sin wouldn't be forgiven in this life *or* the life to come unless *some* sins were forgivable in the life to come? And isn't that what purgatory is all about?

It's an argument that can appear convincing, but it's not at all the point of those verses. Let me explain:

In my own life, sins are dealt with in two ways:

- a) Sometimes I am made aware of sins I have committed. I feel guilty. I am bothered as the Holy Spirit deals with my heart. So I turn to God for cleansing. I *ask* for forgiveness. I forsake those sins and turn from them and receive immediate forgiveness.
- b) But there's also a much less conscious level of sin in my life. There are sins I commit in *ignorance*. Then there's the sinful nature that I'm born with - "*In sin did my mother conceive me.*" And there is nothing in the Bible to teach that my sinful nature is removed at baptism, or in any other church sacrament. Also, there are *sins of omission* - things that I should have done but didn't. How many sins of omission will you commit today? Can we fully know this? Could we enjoy one single day of life if we *did* know all of these?

All of these types of sin would pose a major threat to me at the judgment were it not for the fact that the Gospel has marvelous provision for all of those things. There is a verse dealing with forgiveness, frequently quoted, but which offers much more than is usually perceived:

1 John 1:9 - "If we *confess our sins*, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to *cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

As I am faithful in following Jesus - as I deal with the sins that I *know* God is talking to me about, *my whole life gets washed inside and out*. As I faithfully confess the sins God brings to my attention, God cleanses my life from *all* unrighteousness. As I walk honestly and openly in the light, I receive far more than I ever know to ask for.

All of those things that are warped and fallen inside my heart will be cared for on judgement day because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. I receive the forgiveness I ask for *now*. And I receive the cleansing I will need when my life faces *final judgment* - cleansing from sins I never fully understood in this present life-time.

But our Matthew text deals with another problem. Jesus says that this sin of *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* is different. It's a willful repudiation of the Spirit's cleansing work. It's renouncing all claim to Christ. It's nullifying the marvelous power of the atonement. *It leaves your life barren both now and at the judgement!* Far from offering hope, it *shuts down all chances of hope after this life is over*.

This is the danger John describes in these verses. These are not texts implying a future work of cleansing in Purgatory.

3) THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY IS A DENIAL OF THE POWER OF THE CROSS - IT ADDS TO THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST

Let me quickly post three texts and three affirmations:

- a) Revelation 22:11 - "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

Affirmation #1 - The punishment for sin after this life is eternally ongoing because the corruption of sin will be increasing and eternally ongoing. There will be no further purifying. There will be no making up for the wrongs done in this life. The state of both the just and unjust is fixed. Nothing could be clearer from these prophetic words.
- b) Philippians 3:9 - "...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is

through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

Affirmation #2 - The only righteousness that merits heaven and eternal life is the imputed righteousness purchased through Christ's atoning death on the cross.

In other words, the doctrine of purgatory misses the central point of the whole Christian faith when it places its emphasis on the **acquired status** of our own merit - either **before** or **after** we die. Righteousness in Christ **never is** the result of acts of penance, suffering or remorse.

Let it be shouted from the roof-tops. No one is good enough to go to heaven, and can be. That's never been the way God's system of salvation works. If you say **we don't deserve that righteousness** you are absolutely right. That's why it's said to be good news. That's what grace is - something undeserved.

Take away the foundation of redeeming grace and imputed righteousness and you have radically altered the New Testament message of salvation.

c) **Romans 8:1** - "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Affirmation #3 - My eternal and secure confidence before God is enjoyed now, and can't be taken away, even by death itself.

Underline that wonderful little word, "**now**." The confidence can be enjoyed already. That's not because I'm so worthy and wonderful. **It's because I enjoy a solidarity with Christ.** He intercedes on my behalf **right now** (not after I die) before the Father. I can rest in that.

See also **Colossians 1:13-14** - "He **has delivered us** from the domain of darkness and **transferred us** to the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14] in whom **we have redemption**, the forgiveness of sins."

This verse contains the same precious message. The rescue mission is **over**. It is a completed fact. There are no acts of human effort or church sacrament that can add to it. Paul is crystal clear on this matter. He says we "**have**" redemption - it is an accomplished fact in Christ Jesus.

4) **HEAR THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER**

The doctrine of purgatory, in undermining the cross of Jesus Christ does two very disastrous things:

- a) **It robs believers of their certain standing before the throne of God.** If the doctrine of purgatory is true, then the blood of Jesus Christ is nice, perhaps even helpful, but **not quite able to cleanse us from all sins.**
- b) **It opens the door for a false hope for those who weren't really serious about Jesus in this life.** It tries to **evacuate** much of the **population** from suffering after death whereas the gospel offers to **prevent** it all together. Purgatory gives another foundation to the church for the hope of redemption. Paul says those hopes will be **tragically burned up one day before the throne of God.**

What can wash away my sin? It's a very good question. And there's still only one answer - "**Nothing but the blood of Jesus!**"