



THEOLOGY CORNER

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*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of
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“What Happens When You Die?”

This is a question that is so often ignored by the general population, but it is a serious one. There are many ways I can approach this question depending on the audience, but instead of aiming this at the Atheist or Agnostic, I will be addressing the question to a Christian audience. In discussing this topic, the Church labels it as a discussion about the *Four Last Things* — Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. When Christians ignore these final realities, it leads to a failure in considering moral choices with proper seriousness. The root of this lack of seriousness in the moral life of the Christian is either **despair** or **presumption**.

Those Christians who are in despair with regard to their salvation continue to live in sin because they feel as if they have committed either too many sins or too grave of sins in their life for God to forgive them. These people need to know that God’s goodness and mercy is infinite and extends to as many sins and as serious of sins as they come. God desires your salvation. He created you for union with him and wants nothing more than to share his life with you. He established the Sacrament of Reconciliation for this very reason — to welcome the repentant sinner back into the family with open arms. He forgives us not because we deserve it, but because of his infinite goodness and mercy.

The sin of presumption lies on the opposite side of the spectrum. Presumptuous Christians continue to live in sin because they think that God will forgive their sins despite the fact that they will continue committing them. These types of Christians will live in sin while saying things like, “As the scripture says, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, so we should just have faith that God loves us and will continue to forgive us.” This is easy to accept given that Romans 3:23 does, in fact, say this. But one cannot take scripture out of context and apply it as a blanket statement over the moral life as if it provides license to sin! While we are all indeed sinners, Christ tells us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48). We are imperfect due to sin, but it is Christ’s healing grace that can lead us to perfection. This healing grace does not simply overlook our sinful life. Rather, it acts upon our nature, perfecting it unto a harmony that was present in the beginning. This harmony includes living a virtuous life in imitation of Christ!

It is a known fact that we will all die. Human death, in itself, is a consequence of the first sin (Rom 5:12). But thanks be to God that he took an evil and brought about a greater good by taking death and making it the means by which we may enter into eternal happiness with him in heaven. This is a great gift, but one that requires action. It requires action not because we can earn our salvation, but because it is essential that we cooperate with God and continuously consent to the transforming grace that he unceasingly offers to his children. The things we do in this life really mean something. If someone does not die in friendship with God, then their salvation is in serious jeopardy. As Christ said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matt 7:13-14). Is this because God made the road narrow? No. The road is narrow because of sin. Human beings become so attached to sin that living in sin requires very little to no effort, whereas it is truly a struggle to choose God and remain in friendship with him. It is for this reason that it is said, “...he who endures to the end will be saved.” (Matt 24:13).

After our death, each of us individually will immediately be judged by Christ based on our conduct in this life, and this is called the **Particular Judgment**. This is when one will either go to heaven, hell, or the intermediate state of purgatory. Take note that purgatory is an *intermediate* state and this is why it is not considered one of the “last” things since it is temporary. It is also important to understand that, for the Christian, judgment is not akin to the Egyptian weighing of souls or to Lady Justice as if God decides whether one goes to heaven or hell based upon the *quantity* of good or bad actions you have done. Moreover, he does not send a soul to purgatory to see whether a person will make it to heaven or hell.

Instead, Christian judgment determines the *quality* of the soul and its degree of perfection. In speaking about heaven, Revelation tells us that "...nothing unclean shall enter it." (Rev 21:27). This means that the soul must be perfected before it enters into perfect union with God. This perfection entails that all one's desires be perfectly ordered to God. In many cases, even when someone dies in a friendship with God, there are still disordered desires in the soul that need to be resolved — this is the purpose of purgatory; as a state of purgation whereby the soul undergoes a purification of the intellect, will, and passions. The second judgment or better known as **General or Final Judgment** is the judgment that we refer to when we recite the Nicene Creed (e.g., "he will come again to judge the living and the dead"). This judgment is made upon the whole world and this is when God's plan for the world will be revealed to all.

Heaven and hell are both eternal states, which means that once a soul is in heaven or hell, that is its final destination. Heaven is the eternal state of perfect happiness resulting from the face to face vision of God (i.e., beatific vision), which is the reward for those who lived and died in friendship with God. This is the state of being to which our humanity is ordered. In heaven, our minds and hearts (i.e, intellects and wills) are perfected as we are given the light of glory and united with Truth itself and Goodness itself, and therefore will no longer desire any further knowledge or crave any other thing. Hell is the eternal state of torment and despair which is the punishment for those who have freely rejected friendship with God and the happiness that he desires for us. This is a state of being that is entirely contrary to that for which we were created. Our intellects and wills are eternally unsatisfied, and we exist forever knowing that we are deprived from our ultimate destination.

These are realities and we must treat them as such. We should live each moment of our lives as though it were our last, because we do not know when our time will come. Let us always be prepared for this day by clinging to Christ and allowing his grace to perfect us through frequent reception of the sacraments, frequent prayer, and purification of minds, hearts, passions, and bodies.

If you want to be guided in an understanding of this journey to holiness from spiritual childhood to spiritual maturity, be sure and register for this year's "**Growth in Grace and Prayer**" Spiritual Mission led by Fr. Brian Mullady, O.P., on October 4th through the 6th at 6pm in the auditorium. As always, if you have any general questions, or question about the upcoming Mission, or even if you would like to request a topic for a future Theology Corner, you are most welcome to contact me anytime.