

The Narrow Path: The Wide Path

On one occasion, some of Christ's disciples were speaking to him of certain Jews who were killed when a large tower came toppling down upon them. His reply: *'Do you think these were worse sinners, because this happened to them? Not at all; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish! . . . unless you repent, you will all likewise perish!'* Do some of us suppose that the inhabitants of New Orleans, for example, were worse sinners than we, because of the disaster that befell them? We had better not. Worthy of note is then Cardinal Ratzinger's true observation that many *'believers'* have yielded to a worldly way of thought and action. Yet, they still consider themselves as believers, 'good Catholics'. All of us are in need of genuine acts of repentance, outward and inward, or we 'shall all likewise perish!' God is merciful indeed, to the *repentant* sinner; but rigorous in His dealings with the *obstinate* sinner. There is an unbridgeable chasm between the two categories. Where we each fall will be disclosed at the moment of our death.

Is this 'negative' press here, or is it reality? Which do we prefer: to have our ears tickled by those who are afraid to speak openly of the whole revelation of Christ, even in its more fearful elements; or to hear the whole unsettling truth which may really move us to do something for our salvation? Blessed John XXIII, whom some erroneously consider to have been an excessive optimist, reflected often on the certainty of death, the joys of heaven AND on the possibility of hell. Are we wiser than Blessed John? (to take but one example)

Pope Benedict, speaking years ago as 'Cardinal Ratzinger', recalled the fact that 'life is a serious business'. 'We must,' he also said, 'be on our guard lest we reject the promise of eternal life offered to all, eternal friendship with Christ. We must not yield to the mentality of so many believers nowadays who think it is enough to act more or less like the majority and every thing will automatically be all right.' On another occasion he underscored another relevant point: the 'Jesus' who only affirms me in whatever I do, is absolutely not the 'Jesus' of the New Testament.

Hopefully we aren't so ignorant of the Scriptures as to be unaware of the authentic tenor of our Lord's teachings. Just as in the Old Testament there are beautiful passages on the mercy of God along with wrathful statements, there are in the New Testament dreadful warnings together with words of love and comfort.

The possibility of eternal damnation for the individual Christian is unquestionably the most 'disturbing' element of the revelation given us by Christ our Lord. Many, usually the 'educated' or those influenced by them, have often called the New Testament the revelation of the God of Love, the Old Testament being the revelation of the God of Vengeance. Terribly false dichotomizing here. To all those who love to speak of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's Mercy (which, of course, He is!) it is well to recall that the New Testament contains more descriptions, vivid descriptions of eternal retribution for the wicked, than the Old Testament. Christ our Lord positively threatens humanity and each individual should we fail to repent and believe-IN HIM.



Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*

Let's move on and take up some teachings of St. Alphonsus Liguori, a "Doctor of the Church" with singular insights into the Christian moral life:

God is merciful. Who denies it? But He is also just; and therefore He is obliged ("obliged", that is, by His fidelity to His own Supreme, Divine Nature) to punish those who offend Him. He shows mercy; but to whom? An answer comes from Psalm 103: *As a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.* Our Blessed Mother gave a similar utterance which answers this question: His mercy is from age to age on those who fear Him. God's Mercy is superabundant to those who revere Him as Lord and Father. But He executes justice on those who despise Him and abuse His mercy to insult Him the more.

The mercy of God is infinite! But the individual acts of pardon which proceed from Him toward the particular person are not infinite. God is also just. The Lord said to St. Bridget, 'I am just and merciful, but sinners regard me only as merciful.' And the eastern Father and Doctor of the Church, St. Basil the Great, writes that sinners wish to consider God only as good and merciful. Beware when the devil, not God, promises you divine mercy, that he may induce you to sin gravely. 'Never attend to that dog who promises you the mercy of God', says St. John Chrysostom.

God bears with sinners, but not forever. Were God to bear forever, no one could be damned! It also appears that each person would have to be immortal for God to bear forever. But, it has been the constant teaching of Fathers of the Church, Doctors of the Church, Saints and Theologians from the beginning even until modern times, that the greater number of adults *are lost*. I have been able to count about 14 in all, spanning the centuries down to modern times. This is not just a group of pessimists; they are merely commenting on the words of Truth Himself: '*... broad is the path and wide is the gate that leads to destruction, and many there are who enter by it.*' They merely comment on the words of the Apostle Peter, first Pope: '*... the just man is saved only with difficulty ...*' (I Pt. 4:18a)

This is a disconcerting thought, to put it mildly. But the fact remains that Christ the Lord said what He said and St. Peter, His Chosen, echoed it. (so also Jewish literature before and around the time of Christ spoke of eternal perdition as the fate of most men) In any case, such a constant stream of brilliant and holy minds have taught this doctrine, that a Christian who is not a fool must allow it to sink in and ponder it seriously and live accordingly. And remember the words of

Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict) over 20 years ago: 'life is a serious business We must, be on our guard lest we reject the promise of eternal life offered to all, eternal friendship with Christ. We must not yield to the mentality of *so many believers nowadays* who think it is enough to act more or less *like the majority* and every thing will automatically be all right.' NO! It will, in reality, probably turn out all wrong-eternally so—if we choose the broad way of 'acceptable' society.

The mercy of God, to return to our thought, is infinite indeed; and let us have boundless confidence in this Ocean. But we must also remember that the mercies of God are not infinite. He has ordained for each man a certain number of sins which he shall pardon, and no more. For after that, the person will have to appear before His Judgement Seat. *'Do not say, "I have sinned, and what harm has befallen me? The Most High delays his repayment."*' (Sirach 5:4) God does endure, but not forever. When the number of mercies He has decreed to show to a certain sinner is exhausted, he then punishes all his sins together. 'The longer God has waited [for a sinner's repentance], the more severely does He punish.' This is the teaching of the Successor of Peter, Pope St. Gregory the Great. (7th century)

St. Augustine says that, if He were not God, we would have to call Him unjust because of the incredible patience He exercises to those whose live years and years in mortal sin, offending His majesty almost without ceasing! He says, 'We provoke Thee to anger, Thou invitest us to mercy.' Amazing! We appear to be engaged with God in a contest in which we labor in order to provoke Him to damn us because of our guilt; while He invites us to His mercy!

But do not despair: the Lord promises that, if sinners repent, He will even forget their sins, as if they had never offended Him. *If the wicked repents, . . . he shall live . . . I will not remember all his evildoing.* (Ezek. 18:21f) The Lord glories in showing mercy and granting pardon. How long does He wait to pardon a man? Not an instant! Hear the beautiful words of Isaiah: *At the sound of your cry, as soon as He hears, He will answer you. Then shall you call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry for help, and He will say: Here I am!* (30:19; 58:9) God does not treat us as we treat Him: we are deaf to the calls of God: but with Him, it is, *as soon as He hears, He will answer you.* The very instant a man repents, God answers and grants him pardon.

We must not ever abuse God's mercy, but regard it our greatest consolation and treasure. All praise and thanks to Him forever! ✠

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