

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: Learning to Accept It

The working out of this our salvation must be pain, and the handling of it down to them that are below must ever be by pain; but the eternal form of the will of God in and for us, is intensity of bliss.

George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Third Series, *The Creation in Christ*

The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) was a difficult parable for me to accept at one time. I understood the implications of the parable quite well: a person who lived a life of self-denial for the greater glory of God was getting the same reward as another who led a life of selfish depredation and performed heinous acts, as long as the other had an erstwhile change of heart while on his deathbed. For most of my formative years, this understanding did not bother me. I believed in Purgatory, and I was able to accept this teaching and even desired it. Even at my earliest memories of Christianity, the idea of a single person suffering in Hell was the most repugnant concept I could think of. I desperately wanted all souls to go to Heaven, although I still wanted them to pay for the hurtful things they did. And Purgatory fit that bill for a long time.

Then at some point in the later half of my primary education, a concept was presented in my Religion Education class that shook my confidence in the Church's teachings. It was proposed that suffering in Purgatory was so quick as to be virtually instantaneous, so one hardly suffers at all. I believe this had its origins in Vatican II, and I believe it was intended to calm the concerns that we children might have had concerning loved ones who had passed away. Now, I don't want to undermine Father Ratzinger (later known as Pope Benedict XVI) or any of the others who poured so much of their life and love into Vatican II, but I've also heard it said somewhere that "There were three Vatican IIs: the one that was planned, the one that happened and the one that the public was told about," and I've seen little evidence suggesting otherwise. I never heard this particular teaching about Purgatory again, which makes me think it was either a misrepresentation of Vatican II, or that it was but never gained widespread consent. Either way, the damage was done.

I believe in a God of truth, justice and mercy. Purgatory, a core premise in my preteen theology, was suddenly degraded by the Church to the point of being virtually meaningless. This caused me to doubt the truthfulness of other Church teachings. I felt justice was denied to the faithful, which fired a sense of moral outrage against this teaching as well. At first glance, mercy seemed to remain, but if there is no truth in being faithful and no justice in doing selfless acts, then what is left for mercy to do? Did this mean the Calvinists were right after all, and salvation is only a matter of moral luck? While this was not the only factor that led me to abandon the Church in favor of pantheism, it was one of the stronger ones.

Through God's mercy, He showed me the way back to Catholicism by greatly humbling me (and proving to me He has a particular and ironic sense of humor as He did so). While the Purgatory issue has never been brought up in that context again in my presence, it has never been forgotten. In my continuing efforts to learn about all things God, I've read and heard many ideas related to this matter, and spent much time in contemplation. While I personally believe Purgatory must be a meaningful (and therefore painful) experience for the hopeful soul, who am I to say how much is too much or too little? In the end, Purgatory is where the healing hands of Jesus make the final purification of the soul so it can enter Heaven. I have come to accept that whatever He decides is good enough is

certainly good enough for me.

And if that was all there was to this story, then it likely would never have been written. But God has placed a pantheist in my life who is very strong in both Christian and Eastern teachings, and, being non-Catholic and therefore not believing in Purgatory, he had the same observations and concerns over this parable that I did when Purgatory was removed from the equation. Clearly I was not alone in having difficulty in accepting this teaching. And while most Catholics, like me, can reconcile the teaching through Purgatory, our call to be missionaries means we need to be prepared to talk about the parable without using Purgatory as a crutch. About 1/3 of all Christians belong to denominations and churches that do not believe in Purgatory, non-Christians may not fully grasp how strong the mercy of God is, and those who left the church (like me at one time) often have questions that need to be answered.

A) God of Justice: The difficulty in accepting the parable comes from the apparent conflict with one's sense of justice. This matter is strongly affected by our understanding of what a God of justice must be like. This parable forces us to accept at least three separate but related concepts before we can hope to understand what is really going on here. The first concept we have to accept is our own sinfulness.

1) Human Sinfulness: I don't really think most people have a hard time accepting that they are not perfect; it's just that they think their own sins are minor. It's others that do the really bad stuff. A woman may love to indulge in soap operas yet finds the idea of cheating on her husband repulsive. A parent might fear that a predator might kidnap and molest their child, yet still makes the same child participate in beauty pageants or dance class and posts pictures of them doing it all over social media. A man might balk at the idea of killing someone in cold blood, but has no problem spreading damaging gossip about a co-worker.

Now, one might be tempted to say, "How can you possibly compare a dance recital to kiddie porn?" And one will have a point worth discussing. There are times when such comparisons are flawed because the point being made misses the fundamental differences between the two. If one were to say to me, "You don't need a church to be saved. It's just another building," then I would respond with, "You don't need a hospital to be healed. It's just another building." What one finds in a church or hospital is radically different than some random building. It's not that one can get *better* help at a church or hospital than another building; it is that these buildings are uniquely prepared, staffed and qualified to provide services that simply don't exist otherwise.

But when we are talking about sin, the only difference we find is in degree. A woman watching adulterous acts on TV is performing adultery through the proxy of fantasy. An eight-year-old girl wearing next to nothing and mimicking sexual moves while "dancing" is being sexualized even if no actual sex takes place. A man attempting to destroy another's reputation and career with words is destroying important parts of someone's life. It's not that we are seeing fundamental differences between the two extremes, only that the lesser sin is restrained to some degree while the greater sin is relatively unhindered.

And it is this hindrance that we need to be aware of. In all three cases, the hindrance comes primarily from cultural norms that, for the Western world, is grounded in Christian morality. How many women who are faithful are only faithful because they are afraid of some social consequence of having an affair? If what eight-year-olds are allowed to wear and do were more lax, can we not expect that the dance studios would get even closer to true pornography? And if a man thought he could get away with murder, how much more often would it take place? I don't know the answers, but I have no

doubt that in all three cases things would get worse instead of better.

There are indeed people who will be "good" no matter what happens to them, and there are those who will be "bad" no matter what as well. But for the overwhelming majority of people, they will do whatever they can get away with. Imagine walking into a restaurant and there are about 20 adults there. Many will smile at you if you make eye contact, or even say, "Hi." You could probably ask any of them for the time and get a polite answer. Some might even make small talk with you as you wait for your order. No doubt some of them came as couples with kids present. Judging by the way the kids behave, most of the parents are doing at least a decent job in raising them. Out of those 20 normal, everyday people you meet there, 12 to 16 of them would kill you in a painful way if there were an authority figure telling them that it is for your own good. This was proven in the Milgram Experiment, a test that has been validated worldwide many times.

The Milgram Experiment first took place at Yale University under Professor Stanley Milgram. In the experiment, volunteers were split into two groups. One was fastened to a chair and had electrodes put on him while the other was placed in front of a series of buttons that allowed increasing amounts of voltage to hurt the one in the chair, including a potentially fatal dose. The one in the chair was asked a series of questions, while the other was to administer an increasingly powerful shock for each wrong answer. The doctor running the test claimed the experiment was to see how negative reinforcement affected one's ability to learn. But the *real* test was to see how much pain normal people would administer to a helpless victim in the name of "science." The one in the chair was really an actor. The original test showed about 60% of the people would go all the way to the fatal shock. Of those who didn't administer the fatal shock, all but one went as far as the last button before it. Thinking this must be an aberration, the test has been performed many more times worldwide. As it turned out, the initial test had a remarkable number of merciful people, as no other major test resulted in such a low percentage of killers. The normal is between 70 to 75%, and numbers higher than 80% have been reached. People are willing to kill, in a painful way, someone they do not know under the pretense of helping the victim become a better learner.

In short, the only thing that separated the monsters who committed the holocaust in World War II and the firemen who rushed into the burning towers during 911 was opportunity. There are exceptions to this to be sure. But for the majority of the people, this is true. The killers of Jews killed because they had the opportunity to do so, while the firemen who gave their lives to save others did so because they had the opportunity to do so. Jesus knew this when he spoke of the parable of Workers in the Vineyard. Those who worked all day did so because they had the opportunity to do so, while those who only worked two hours did so because that was the only opportunity they had. Is it just to reward or punish one based on opportunity alone? What merit is there in working 8 hours when others could not work that long, what sin is committed in working 2 hours when that was all that one was allowed to do? To understand why abominable "deathbed converts" can go to Heaven, the first thing we need to understand is that the major difference between them and "cradle Christians" is opportunity. We should be less upset that some "sinner" got to go to Heaven "the easy way," and spend more time being thankful that we were not put in the position they were.

2) Just How Many Hours Did We Put in the Vineyard?:

To imagine a man worse than yourself you've only got to stop doing something, while to imagine one better you've got to do something.

-C.S. Lewis, letter to Sister Penelope, C.S.M.V, 9 July 1939

In continuing the theme of looking at our blessings before condemning those who are "latecomers" to salvation, we should also take honest stock of how much work we really did in the vineyard. If we find fault with those who are only working two hours, then we are implying that we are working the whole day. Perhaps a few of us are. But if we try to be honest with ourselves, then almost all of us will see we are not really working the whole day either. Even if we are in the vineyard the whole time, how much work was actually done? If we want to deny those who only worked two hours a full day's wage, then by our own argument, we won't get a full day's wage either. Now, we may very well think that we will be happy with only 3/4 of a day's wage, but then the question arises as to whether we put in even that much work. If we only look to the worst performers for our standard, then it is easy to overestimate just how much work we put in ourselves. But regardless of how much work we do or don't do, we are fortunate in the fact that God must give us a full day's wage regardless.

When the God of Moses identified Himself by name, He called Himself "I AM." (Genesis 3:14-15) This phrase was not followed by a predicate nominative. God simply "is." We cannot receive 3/4 or 1/2 or 1/4 of "is." Either we have all of "is," or we do not have any. If we get to Heaven, then we will experience God in His entirety. If we do not get to Heaven, then we will experience none of God's glory at all.

This brings me to an interesting question that, as far as I'm aware, no philosopher has really talked about (although I think C.S. Lewis was thinking of this as he wrote *The Great Divorce*). God clearly exists beyond time and space, but Heaven itself is often described as having time and space just like Earth. A failure to appreciate these two facts has, in my opinion, led a lot of otherwise very good apologetics to have a weak spot when it comes to talking about why all in Heaven will no longer sin.

While no theory of this was developed in *The Great Divorce*, the concept that Heaven will be some blending of time and space with non-time and non-space was quite clear. "There is no other day. All days are present now," and "This moment contains all moments," from chapter 11 are quite memorable and profound. In this scenario, our eternal lives would be like a never-ending book, but we could jump freely to any page within it, and linger on any word or sentence as long as we wished. While this is incredible to believe, it does answer a lot of questions.

We now know why the angels who denied God cannot be redeemed, as to say "no" to God at any point of their existence means to say "no" at all points of existence. In a similar manner, the angels who said "yes" to God once say "yes" to God at all times. We can now understand why, in the *Book of Revelation* according to Saint John, we see the passage where "four living creatures" give glory to God "day and night *they did not stop.*" (Revelation 4:8, italics mine) Yet shortly after, they "fell down before the Lamb" (Revelations 5:8). And note that this is not just limited to the "four living creatures," but to all those in Heaven. Heaven has been described by Jesus as a place where the work is pleasant (Matthew 11:28-30), a wedding feast with singing and dancing (Matthew 22:2), a banquet with fine eating (Isaiah 25:6) and a place to give eternal glory to God (the aforementioned Revelations 4:8). If we are free of time and space, we can do all of this at the same time without contradiction. And we also see why the traditional first judgment takes place at the moment of death. It is our decision (or judgment) at this moment that determines all moments that follow because the present and future moments are the same.

It also shows how just and benevolent God really is when He allows pain and suffering on this world. For those of this universe, which is trapped within a reality separate from (yet accessible to) God, we can say "yes" or "no" at one point in time and then reverse our response to God any number of times later. We don't have to make a single decision and risk a single bad mistake. We have innumerable opportunities in our lives, no matter how short they are, to admit our sinfulness and seek

to be a better person afterwards. In this regard, pain and suffering are crisis tools, as they drive us one way or the other. One cannot remain undecided once sufficient pain or suffering is given. Eventually, one will either break from the strain and reach out to God, or one will break from the strain and refuse God. Unlike the angels, who only had one chance, we are given many chances. While death is the "official" opportunity for choosing or rejecting God, the truth is that most of us decided long before then.

This last sentence leads us to my final point, where I will discuss why someone would make a last minute decision to truly believe in God after a life of depravity. Would not his life get into a rut that he could not get out of?

3) Life Choices: I talked about how no man is truly good. Any condemnation one places on others, no matter how heinous the other is, is actually a condemnation of oneself. I talked about how an assignment to Heaven or Hell is irrevocable because time will not exist there in the way that it exists here on Earth. At some point, all of us will give either a final "yes" or a final "no" and our eternal destinies will be set on that. So, what does this final question look like and how can we prepare for it? The Bible gives us quite a few clues. Actually, it gives too many clues for most people to handle.

Overwhelmed by all the clues, many people form theories that do not take all of them into account. Calvinists, for example, believe in double predestination because there is mention of scrolls (or books) with the names of the saved already written. For them, living a good life will not get one to Heaven, but it is an *indication* that one *might* be saved. This, however, is in direct conflict with any scripture that talks about forgiveness.

My favorite examples are when those who asked Jesus what they needed to do to go to Heaven. Jesus never said, "Don't worry about it, you're in." Nor did He ever say, "Sorry, you didn't make the team, so you best live it up now while you can." He told those He forgave to "not sin any more," (John 8:11) or words to that effect.

On the other extreme, we have many who believe in *sola fide* (faith alone is what it takes). "Just say, 'Jesus is my lord and savior,' and then do what you want because Satan can't get you anymore." This comes mainly from misunderstanding the Epistles of Saint Paul. It is not only in clear opposition to most of what Jesus taught and to the letters of James and John, but is actually not what Saint Paul himself was writing about. He was quite clear that faith must lead to good deeds, and he spent quite a bit of effort challenging the "faithful" to question why they did not act like they had faith. There are many variations between these two extremes of double predestination and *sola fide*, but only the apostolic churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) really seem to address all of them, and they all use the concept of Purgatory.

We see in Revelations that nothing impure will be in Heaven (Revelation 21:27). Many Protestants claim that this refers to the body, which will be left behind. Yet it is not the body that makes decisions, it is our consciousness. Based on the descriptions Jesus gave us of Heaven, we can be sure that we will have consciousness there. And if it is our consciousness that causes us to sin, then it obviously cannot go into Heaven as is. It needs to be made pure.

There are those who claim that our souls (our consciousness) are made pure at Baptism. To this, I agree. But the first thing we do is tarnish it again. It is better to say that God no longer looks at our sins when baptized and (for apostolic churches) after we have gone through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. While most Protestants deny the need to confess sins as a sacrament, they still

recognize that, even after baptism, we still need to ask God for forgiveness. But my point is not *how* we keep our souls clean, but rather the fact that nearly all Christians acknowledge that souls will get tarnished with sin as time goes on no matter how hard one tries. It is not the fact that we have sinned that will send us to Hell, it is the inability to *stop* sinning that will keep us from going to Heaven. Some select few, through intense faith, exemplary lives and constant self-reflection, will go directly to Heaven because they have lorded over their bodies to the point where they will not sin again. Others, through martyrdom, made the final choice of "yes" when they chose to die for Christ. But for the overwhelming majority of us, our ability to control sin is still beyond our grasp. And here is where Purgatory comes in. There are those who have not fully committed to "yes" in their own in life or in martyrdom, yet God deems worthy enough to enter Heaven (and hopefully it is a lot of us). In Purgatory, we have a "place" for Jesus the healer to fix our souls so we can give the eternal "yes." And here is where all the different clues of salvation come together.

For us to allow Jesus to fix us, we will be giving up something of ourselves (our sinful nature). Some will have to give up more than others. But Jesus doesn't care about that. However, Jesus won't help us if we don't let Him, just as a doctor won't help a patient if the patient refuses to see him. It requires faith in Him that He will make us better by taking that part away. If we don't have faith in Him, then He will respect our wishes and let us be. And the desire to not change is strong, so we must examine our lives and be truthful with just how wretched we really are. If we are fairly pleased with ourselves, then we won't have much reason to want to change. And if we grow too attached to worldly things, then we will be reluctant to leave them behind. If we are used to having our way all the time, then it will be hard for us to give up control. It is the recognition of our own sins, the acts of sacrifice and mortification, and the practice of good deeds that grow our faith in Jesus so we can trust Him to take away all that our sinful nature desires. In this understanding, the final Judgment is a choice *we* make to stay as we are, or to let Jesus make us something greater. I could go on, but I think I covered the most important teachings of Judgment, and this should help us to see the other indicators in the proper light. So now, finally, we come to the question that started this all: why would God allow someone who performed heinous atrocities his entire life get a free pass to Heaven on his deathbed?

B) The Free Pass:

"Oh God," we think, "How terrible if it were !!" Just so terrible is it that it should be Judas. And have I not done things with the same germ in them, a germ which, brought to its evil perfection, would have shown itself the cankerworm, treachery? Except I love my neighbor as myself, I may one day betray him! Let us therefore be compassionate and humble, and hope for every man.

-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Third Series, *The Final Unmasking*

If we look over what the Judgment is, I think this answers itself. If I simply offer one a million dollars, almost everyone will accept it. If I start adding conditions, however, the number of people accepting the money will drop off. For example, most parents wouldn't kill their child for a million dollars. There are plenty of other things that most (but not all) people will refuse to accept for wealth. God offers everyone, no matter how evil, Heaven. But it requires one's soul to be purified. Those who go to Hell, for whatever reason, are refusing to be made pure. So we realize that the question as to why God would allow certain people into Heaven is really backwards. The question should really be worded as: "Why would someone who denied God their whole lives suddenly say 'yes'?" They can't say "yes" in an effort to simply "get away with it," because that would still leave the soul impure. They can only

say "yes" and succeed if they understand just how wretched they really are and are willing to give that wretchedness up. Rather than be upset that some of them will indeed go to Heaven after overcoming this obstacle, we should be delighted that they overcame such a massive barrier to salvation, and be grateful that we did not have such barriers ourselves.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 8 December 2022