

The Rewards of Heaven and the Punishments of Hell

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then ***He will reward each according to his works.***” - Matthew 16:26-27

What could be more common in the world of religion than the concept of eternal consequences – rewards and punishments – for our actions in this world? And yet, what concept in religious thought could be more seriously misunderstood!

Did you know, for example, that the word, punishment, only occurs in the entire New Testament four times? – and three of those are in the Epistles. Furthermore, the ONE time the Lord Himself uses the word, in the original Greek it has nothing to do with *retribution* or *retaliation*, it simply means *torment* or *restraint*: He’s talking about the separation of the sheep from the goats, and He says that the goats – those who have no charity toward the neighbor – “will go into everlasting *torment*, but the just into everlasting life” (Matt. 25:46). And why? – because they aren’t willing to live in peace and contentment with the laws of heavenly order.

In fact, we read, “the Lord casts no one into hell” (HH #545), least of all in retaliation for all the sins they may have committed in the world. Rather He *allows* people to *choose* a hellish life, which of course means that they are choosing a life in hell. (More about this in a few minutes.)

It is similar with the rewards of heaven: these are not given to compensate or *pay* for all the good deeds we do on earth, even though the Greek word for reward does carry that connotation. Rather they are the good, happy, generous, peaceful states that we enjoy when we have learned to set our own reputation, honor and gain aside in favor of a real love for serving the Lord and our neighbors. These rewards are not given, then, as some sort of deferred remuneration for struggles on earth; if so they would still be catering to our self-love! Rather, they are *inherent* in the good deeds themselves when these deeds are done with unselfish love. So in our angelic states we actually think of this way of living as an honor and a privilege, not a chore.

The whole idea of justice by retaliation is based on two worldly principles, a cruel, selfish need to exact revenge, and the use of fear as a deterrent to bad behavior. Neither of these is a particularly commendable virtue, but for self-centered, worldly-minded people the threat of retaliation often gets results. Even the promise of reward for good deeds isn’t much better since, as we just noted, it also appeals to self-love and love of the world. However, given that our hereditary disposition is that way, religions through the ages have used these tools to uphold their teachings, just as civil governments through the ages have used them to enforce their laws. Even so, as we know, “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” A selfish person may cooperate to avoid punishment, but if so, inwardly he is still selfish.

Sadly, this *by their own testimony* was pretty much the state of the Biblical Jews. Their whole religious culture from the time of Abraham was based on threats and promises appealing to their self-interests. This is why the words and even the concepts of reward and punishment occur mostly in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets. It is there, for example, in Exodus 21,

Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19 that we read, “Whoever kills any man shall surely be put to death,” and that any injury would require “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot,” and it is specifically said, “*without pity*”! Of course the Lord addressed this directly, saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but *I* tell you *not* to resist the wicked. But whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matthew 5:38), and much more along the same lines, basically refuting the whole concept of tit-for-tat retaliation.

Why? – Because the Lord’s over-arching purpose in His advent was to restore the connection between heaven and earth by teaching the principles of spiritual cause and effect, revealing the *spiritual implications* of what we do. “Therefore,” He said, “when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” (Matthew 6:2-4). He said the same thing about prayer, fasting, and pretty much everything in this natural life. We are not to be concerned for ourselves at all, but to “seek first the kingdom of God” which is the truly heavenly love and wisdom “within us” (Luke 17:21).

Still, the Lord did frequently speak of rewards, and He certainly did appeal to the disciples’ self-interest, but He spoke in terms of what we call delayed gratification, or better things later that would make the struggles of this life bearable. And He didn’t mince words: “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad (when you are persecuted), for great is your reward in heaven...” (Matthew 5:12). “Take up your cross (Matthew 16:24).” “Lay down your life... Do whatever I command you” (John 15:13-14). Why? – Greater, better things will come to you in heaven.

All this raises an important point about how we grow spiritually. There is no magic switch – not baptism, not confession, not even a true understanding of the Word – that can suddenly make us selfless angels. Nor can we be saved or enter heaven *in spite of our selfishness*, since it is part of our nature and if we don’t overcome it in this life it will prevent us from enjoying the heavenly life – both now and later. So we are taught that the Lord – like any wise parent, only infinitely better – never breaks, but bends us, gradually, little by little, through intermediate steps to that new life so that we can take ownership of it and feel part of the process. He removes our evils one by one as we co-operate with Him, not all at once lest we lose our sense of identity, freewill and rationality. In fact He *nourishes* our sense of self by promising rewards, at first for good behavior and then for good intentions, because He knows that unless we see something in it for ourselves we’ll never commit to following Him. But He also knows that when we do it and experience the blessings that follow, the time will come when we enjoy doing it for its own sake. So He lets the tares grow with the wheat until harvest, and only THEN puts in the sickle to reap.

In the New Church we call this process regeneration and we call these steps and stages “mediate goods,” that is, good ideas, feelings and intentions on a lower *level* that can pave the way for those on a *higher* level once the foundation is laid.

So, did the Lord “bribe” the disciples to honor Him? Do we bribe our children by promising them rewards for good behavior? No, not really. The rewards are real, both literally and spiritually, *and they are built in to the work we do*; they follow as cause and effect; but since we can’t really appreciate their spiritual quality until we engage in that work the Lord uses our selfish mo-

tives to get us started. In fact He used this technique to inspire the disciples (all simple, worldly men) to spread the Gospel around the world and to establish His Church so that now in His Second Coming He can further enlighten us.

So now let's consider what the Lord has taught through the ages about the torments of hell. In the Old Testament this was described as a physical place called Sheol. In ancient Jewish cosmology it was an underworld somehow existing below the surface of the earth, just as the heavens were considered to be a sort of physical dome over the top of the earth, in short, the sky. Sheol was, in the words of one reference book, "a world of gloom, weariness, darkness, decay and forgetfulness, where one is remote from God." But it's never really described in detail, and we know from the New Testament and the teachings of the New Church that many of the Jews didn't really believe in a life after death at all. It was in the New Testament that the concept of hell, or Hades, took on vivid characteristics including the presence of eternal fire, filth, rotteness, worms, dragons and various demons inspiring wailing and the gnashing of teeth. In the churches it was definitely seen as a place of eternal punishment for a sinful life in this world.

But, as we see in the doctrines of the New Church, these descriptions of hell are all written in correspondences so that when we are mature enough to understand them we can see their spiritual meaning in our spiritual lives.

For example, the fires of hell are really the burning passions of our own selfish loves. The wailing is the grief and mourning caused by evils – in ourselves and others. And the gnashing of teeth is the clashing or conflict of thought caused by falsities – again, in ourselves and others. In reality the torments of hell are all inflicted by evil spirits on themselves and on each other as they do what they love to do, that is, to exercise their greed and selfishness. The minute somebody begins to get ahead, he or she is cut down by someone else who is jealous, and the minute somebody begins to enjoy *anything* someone else butts in and tries to get that pleasure for himself. People in hell don't feel the joy of others as joy in themselves (DLW #47); they only want others to support what **THEY** enjoy.

So these torments are not inflicted by some jealous God, despite the appearance to the Jews of the Old Testament, rather they are permitted by the pure **MERCY** of God who allows us to be that way if we insist. And they are permitted **ONLY** as means to restrain their otherwise uncontrollable cravings and maintain some degree of order.

Viewed from another perspective a life in hell surely is one of never-ending bitterness and frustration: we can never get everything we want and what we do get is limited by the competition of others, who want the same thing (and, by the way, resent **US** having it).

In contrast, the rewards of heaven are the complete opposite of all this. "Heavenly love," we read, "is such that it wills what is its own to be another's. Consequently, no one in heaven perceives his own good in himself to be good unless it is also in another; and this is the source of the happiness of heaven" (HH #268; see also #399). In other words, angels don't want to impose their will on others, they would rather give it all up for their sake. In fact, we read,

"To save a soul from hell the angels think nothing of giving their own lives; indeed if it were possible they would suffer hell themselves in place of that soul. Consequently their inmost joy is to transport into heaven someone rising from the

dead. They confess however that that love does not originate one little bit in themselves but that every single aspect of it does so in the Lord alone. Indeed they are incensed if anyone thinks anything different.” (AC 2077:2).

This quotation illustrates two things: first, that angels in heaven have no fears or concerns for themselves, only for others; and second, that they don't feel any need or desire to get credit for what they do, it's all about the Lord, which means that they have no need or desire for reward in the traditional or literal sense of the word. It's just totally irrelevant to them. On that basis no one in heaven will ever be frustrated or deprived since everyone is looking out for everyone else, and the minute there is a genuine need there is someone with the exact skill and passion to provide for it.

“Therefore,” the Lord said, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... But seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:25, 33).

They will be added because it is the great joy of everyone in heaven to do so, and they simply channel the love and wisdom of the Lord to make it happen.

So we return at last to the verses referenced in the beginning:

“What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then **He will reward each according to his works.**” - Matthew 16:26-27

The Son of Man is the Lord in His Word, especially the literal sense – teaching, training, directing, telling us what to do. The glory of His Father is the spiritual sense of that same Word enlightening and inspiring us with deeper insights revealing the Divine love as it affects our inner lives. And the angels are not only the Lord's messengers, but the messages themselves of truth that make it possible to discern right from wrong. So, finally, the “reward for each according to his works” is the manifestation of the real states of our spiritual lives with all that these states imply: peace and blessing for those in heavenly love, bitterness and strife for those in self-love. And the thing is, our inmost and predominant states *will* be revealed after death, but they will *not* be changed. So if we think heaven is the place to be, we need to practice for it now.

Next week, all being well, we will review the teaching that there are no angels in heaven created as such, that this world is the seminary of the heavens, and that the church in particular is, or should be, our heaven on earth. Obviously we have our work cut out for us.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 5:1-11 & 7:12
Children's talk on the Beatitudes and the Golden Rule

Matthew 5:38-48 & 16:24-28
Arcana Caelestia 6391-6393: selections