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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z41  
Vine Sermon  
Wednesday 23 October 2019

2 Maccabees 12:38-

Matthew 5:21-6

## **Purgatorio**

*"Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17).*

What is purgatory? What can we learn from the idea of purgatory about our human condition?

The American philosopher William James (1842-1910) had various theories about the influence of an individual's temperament on his or her picture of the world. He took it for granted that human beings have many different perspectives on what is real. For him truth is a kind of amalgamation of our various viewpoints which come out of how we make use of ideas. In this sense, for James truth is a social reality.

In his essay "Herbert Spencer" James contrasts idealism with materialism. Idealism comes from a temperament which embraces a sense of intimacy with the universe and the feeling of connection to "the all." For people with a materialistic this view feels like a "close sick-room." They prefer to see the world as "uncertain, dangerous and wild," a universe that "has no respect for [the human] ego." James finds himself between these two temperaments. He feels the intimacy but also recognizes the wildness of our life.<sup>1</sup>

When you read what Christians have said about purgatory you cannot help but come to conclusions about the relation between this idea and the personalities of the writers. The debate about purgatory is a study of a certain kind of human mind seeking satisfaction for a persisting question. It involves a yearning for a kind of consistency, a reconciliation of ideas that at first seem to be in conflict.

The idea of purgatory is simple. Purgatory is a state or place of purification experienced after death. Upon death we are not yet ready to be in the presence of pure holiness. Purgatory is the place of preparation for an encounter with the absolute purity of God. Purgatory explains why it makes sense to pray for people who have died. It probably also has to do with justice. In this life people do not universally seem to suffer as a result of their wrong doing. Purgatory satisfies our deep yearning for fairness.

In its current form what we think of as purgatory really comes to us from the twelfth century. As Europeans were inventing the university, ideas about purgatory began to

take hold. However from before the birth of Jesus religious people have used metaphors of purification by fire.

There really is no clear reference to purgatory in the Bible. The Bible does not specify what exactly happens when we die. Jesus promises, "in my father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you (Jn. 14:2)?

The Book of Maccabees tells the story of Jewish uprisings against Rome in the century before Jesus' birth. Most Protestant churches do not accept The Book of Maccabees as part of the Bible. Roman Catholics however often refer to it as a source for understanding what purgatory means.<sup>2</sup> When Judas Maccabeus examined the bodies of his men who were killed in battle he discovers that they had all been carrying idolatrous amulets. Roman Catholic theologians reason that when Judas takes up a collection and prays for the dead it would have to mean that they had not yet entered fully into God.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:11-15) he uses a building metaphor to describe our spiritual life. The foundation of our works in Christ Jesus is built on gold, silver, precious stones, wood and hay stubble. Paul then writes that this will be tested by fire. For Roman Catholics this is a metaphorical description of purgatory. For them this testing by fire is what happens after we die.

In the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 12:32) Jesus says that whoever speaks against the Son will be forgiven but speaking against the Holy Spirit, "shall not be forgiven... neither in this world, nor in the world to come." Christians have debated endlessly about what this sin against the Holy Spirit could be. Some believe that this reference to the "world to come" refers to purgatory.

Among the earliest Christian writings (The Church Fathers and Mothers) we find mention of prayers for the dead and purification by fire. Origen writes that a person who has less consequential sins will experience fire that burns them away.<sup>3</sup>

One of the primary issues of contention during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century concerned the selling of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church. The idea that living people could help the dead by acts of piety or generosity led to abuses by the church. Reformers like Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) hated this and condemned the idea of purgatory as lacking a basis in the Bible.

John Calvin cared more than anything else about the sovereignty of God, that we are helpless, that only Christ's death and resurrection can save us. The idea that a dead

person's salvation might somehow depend on something that we ourselves do was deeply upsetting to him. Calvin writes, "Therefore, we must cry out with the shouting not only with our voices but of our throats and lungs that purgatory is a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

In the "Articles of Religion" found in the Historical Documents section of our prayerbook there is a similar statement. Article XXII "Of Purgatory" says, "The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."<sup>5</sup>

I began by talking about how our disposition can shape our philosophy or theology. What kind of person is attracted to this idea of a state or place for purification? First, I think this would be someone who cares about purity – God's and ours. Second, this teaching might be important for those who feel a deep and abiding passion for justice, who feel appalled by the way cruelty sometimes seems rewarded in this life. Finally, I also think that people want a way to understand the value of their prayers for beloved ones who have died.

You may be wondering where I stand on all this. Our life is so filled with mystery. Why are we so moved by the first soft light of the day on a jet plane flying a thousand feet above the city, or the sense of infinity that confronts us at Ocean Beach, or the people I meet as I ride my bike through the city? How can we ever understand what it means to really return home to God? The answer of course is through metaphors and stories.

Let me tell you two things about my personality. First, I am a skeptical person. If God is God, there is no way that we will completely understand. I think so often about our little dog Poppy. She notices and experiences things that I cannot hope to see. I talk to her but she would have no idea what it means for me to say that I am going to go vote, for instance. How could we possibly understand God when we can't even understand ourselves?

The second thing is that I deeply trust in God. We encounter God in our daily life, when we pray, in unexpected meetings with other people and here at Grace Cathedral. We know what God wants for us through Jesus the Son of God. His teachings and centuries of tradition help us to see what God means to us, and what our responsibilities to God are.

I pray for the dead because I love them and feel a sense of connection to them in God.<sup>6</sup> I trust that nothing I have done or thought or been will ever keep me from the love of

God. I don't know what it will be like but when my days in this world are over but as I pass through the gateway of death I expect to see the one who is my friend and who has accompanied me all this way.

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Russell, "William James", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/james/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, 268-9.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Hanna, "Purgatory." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 12. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). 23 Oct. 2019 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.5.6 (Battle, vol. 1, 676).

<sup>5</sup> Book of Common Prayer, 872.

<sup>6</sup> The Episcopal Catechism says, "Q: Why do we pray for the dead? A: We pray for them, because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is." Book of Common Prayer, 862.