

Becoming Catholic #32: Purgatory in the Bible, Part 1—Purgatory in a Parable of Jesus

Making Wisdom Popular

The “Becoming Catholic” blog series is a multi-part, multi-year, bite-size, fact-focused attempt at describing the journey of a lifelong protestant to the Catholic Church. You can read all the individual articles [here](#).

What is Purgatory, and is it taught in the Bible?

Let’s talk about it, and yes.

This introductory article will provide a very quick overview of Purgatory, with details left for future installments in this mini-series, “Purgatory in the Bible.”

The goal of this first post is to present a quick example of Jesus’ teaching on Purgatory that, in our experience, most protestants miss, despite how clear it is. Our hope is that non-Catholic Christians, especially protestants, will be willing to consider the many more Scriptural details that support the Catholic Church’s teaching about Purgatory after they see how clearly Jesus teaches it. Growing up protestant, I thought Purgatory was *obviously* unbiblical. But when I began reading the Church Fathers, and saw how they unpacked Scripture in such a way that Purgatory not only became plausible, but *obvious*, I realized there was a much stronger biblical basis for this Catholic doctrine than I realized.

First, a brief definition of Purgatory. The [Catechism of the Catholic Church \(par. 1030\)](#) describes it this way:

All who die *in God’s grace and friendship*, but still *imperfectly purified*, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; *but after death they undergo purification*, so as to achieve the holiness necessary *to enter the joy of heaven*.

The doctrine of Purgatory is quite basic, but has many details. For this introductory post, we will stick with the basics.

The Catholic Church teaches that everyone will ultimately end up in either Heaven or Hell for all eternity. Only these two states are *eternal*.

However, She also teaches that some of those *on the way to Heaven* who have impurities in their soul will first be *purged* of those impurities prior to entering Heaven. Hence the word, “Purgatory.”

Where do these impurities come from? From deliberate sins, and the just penalties due for those sins. Since Purgatory is *temporary*, the penalties we are describing are *temporal* penalties, as opposed to *eternal* penalties. The eternal penalty of sin is Hell, and can only be paid for by Christ. So the Church does not teach that Catholics can “earn” their way out of this. No one can. But temporal penalties, when done by a Christian who is otherwise in a state of friendship with Christ, can and will in fact be “paid” for by Christians, either in this life, or the next, through an appropriate

punishment. These penalties are disciplinary measures imposed by our loving Father on His sons and daughters for the purpose of making them holy.

We see this pattern throughout Scripture. A good example would be [Proverbs 3:11-12](#), which is quoted in [Hebrews 12:5-6](#):

¹¹ My son, do not despise *the Lord's discipline* or be weary of *his reproof*, ¹² for *the Lord reproves him whom he loves*, as a father the son *in whom he delights*.

First, Scripture speaks of those who are God's "sons," those "whom he loves...in whom he delights." These are those the *Catechism* refers to as "in God's grace and friendship." Therefore, we are not speaking of someone on their way to Hell. Second, Scripture speaks of God inflicting "discipline" and "reproof" on these sons "whom he loves." Scripture explains the purpose of this ([Heb. 12:7-11](#)):

⁷ It is *for discipline that you have to endure*. God is *treating you as sons*; for *what son is there whom his father does not discipline?* ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, *then you are illegitimate children and not sons*. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but *he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness*. ¹¹ For the moment *all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant*; later *it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*.

Thus, God reserves a *painful* form of discipline exclusively for his *legitimate children*. However, this discipline—unlike the eternal punishment of Hell—is meant to *make them holy*, and its ultimate fruit is *righteousness*.

The Catholic Church teaches that God, in love, applies this form of discipline to every Christian who commits sin after receiving baptism (which cleanses their souls, and makes them a new creature, in a state of grace and friendship with God). The purpose is to purify their souls of the sins they have committed after baptism, and lead them to eternal life in Heaven. However, if they die before their discipline has been completed, their soul is not yet completely purified. The place where their soul receives this final purification before Heaven is Purgatory.

Here is an example to illustrate the concept.

A Quick Example: Punching a Hole in the Wall

Let's say a Christian purposely punches a hole in someone's wall. This is a serious sin. Unless they repent, they are on their way to Hell, because they deliberately chose hatred of their neighbor, which breaks Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

However, let's say they repent. Now, they are no longer threatened with Hell. *Eternal* punishment is off the table because they have turned back to God. However, their neighbor's wall still has a

hole in it. Therefore, in justice, they are *obligated to repair the wall that they broke by their sin*. This is part of the *temporal penalty* they owe because of their sin.

Imagine the Christian in this case was a minor. The person whose wall they broke could forgive them, and their earthly father could forgive them. But as punishment, any earthly father worth their salt will require their child to repair the damage they have done. The hole in the wall must be fixed. They can do so in many different ways: they can ground them, deduct money from their allowance, require them to buy the supplies and fix it themselves, etc. Does their father do this because he hates them, or because his forgiveness is not sufficient? No, of course not. He does it because he loves them, and wants them to grow in virtuous maturity—exactly as Scripture describes God’s desire for His children.

At this point, there are two possible outcomes: the repentant sinner repairs the temporal damage from punching a hole in their neighbor’s wall *in this life*; or, if they die before doing so, they will pay for that temporal damage *in the next life, prior to entering Heaven*.

The place where this final painful, disciplinary, and purgatorial cleansing takes place is Purgatory.

Jesus Teaches the Doctrine of Purgatory in a Parable

In St. Luke’s Gospel, we find Jesus explicitly describing such a state of punishment in one of His parables, where we read as follows ([Luke 12:41-48](#)):

⁴¹ Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?” ⁴² And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? ⁴³ ***Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing.*** ⁴⁴ ***Truly, I tell you, he will set him over all his possessions.*** ⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and ***will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful.*** ⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master’s will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, ***shall receive a severe beating.*** ⁴⁸ But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, ***shall receive a light beating.*** Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.

In His parables, Jesus frequently uses the metaphor of a master leaving his possessions to servants, and then returning to judge them according to how they managed them. We see this, for example, in the Parable of the Talents in [Matthew 25](#). The master is Christ, the servants are Christians, and they each receive a different reward or punishment based on what they did, corresponding with them going to Heaven or Hell.

Christ utilizes the same metaphor in this parable. However, He doesn’t specify just two destinations—namely Heaven and Hell. Rather, He describes four (really, three, as will be shown). They are as follows:

1. Eternal reward—Heaven

“Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing” (v. 43)

2. Eternal punishment—Hell

“[The master] will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful” (v. 46)

3. Temporary punishment—Purgatory

A. Severe punishment

“[The servant] shall receive a severe beating” (v. 47)

B. Light punishment

“[The servant] shall receive a light beating” (v. 48)

Thus, Jesus clearly describes *four outcomes* for the master’s servants. Each of these describes what the servants receive *upon the master’s return* (i.e. Christ’s return), and are thus clearly eschatological. There is no more work to be done. All that remains is reward and punishment.

However, two of these outcomes are of the same type, namely temporary punishment.

Therefore, we can say Our Lord describes *three outcomes* for those who follow Him: eternal reward (#1), eternal punishment (#2), or temporary punishment that is either severe, or light (#3A-B). These correspond quite clearly to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. And since temporary punishment excludes the possibility of Hell, it follows that after death, some of those who follow Christ will in fact attain eternal life in Heaven, but only after receiving some sort of temporary punishment first.

In other words, they will go through exactly what the Church describes as Purgatory.

So there it is: Purgatory straight from the mouth of Christ.