

'Roman Catholicism- Part 6- Purgatory, Prayers and Penance'

The title for tonight's message is '*Purgatory, prayers and penance*'; but let's turn firstly to God's Word...

Reading: **Matthew 6v1-13**

Prayer

*'When in the coffer the coin rings,
Out of purgatory the soul springs'*

That was the catchy sales pitch of Johann Tetzel when he came to sell indulgences in the early years of the 16th Century. It was the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church that really was the initial issue that ignited the fires of Reformation in Europe under the leadership of Martin Luther and the other Protestant Reformers. In his *95 Theses*, Martin Luther directly attacked indulgences and indirectly refuted the 'unbiblical fiction' that was **purgatory**. In Theses 27 and 28, Luther directly addressed Tetzel's indulgence slogan; Luther wrote, '*There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of the purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest*' and '*It is certainly possible that when the money clinks in the bottom of the chest avarice and greed increase; but when the church offers intercession, all depends in the will of God*'. Now some argue that Luther during the reformation did not come out against the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on purgatory; but what we must come to understand is that Luther was coming out of Rome's darkness and as time went on his grasp of Biblical doctrine developed and deepened as he abandoned the traditions of Rome and instead affirmed the teaching of God's Word as what he believed. And so we find- later on in his life- when giving lectures on the book of Genesis, Luther said the following about purgatory, '**Purgatory is the greatest falsehood because it is based on ungodliness and unbelief; for they deny that faith saves, and they maintain that satisfaction for sins is the cause of salvation. Therefore he who is in purgatory is in hell itself; for these are his thoughts: 'I am a sinner and must render satisfaction for my sins; therefore I shall make a will and shall bequeath a definite amount of money for building churches and for buying prayers and sacrifices for the dead by the monks and priests.'** Such people die in a faith in works and have no knowledge of Christ. Indeed, they hate Him. We die in faith in Christ, who died for our sins and rendered satisfaction for us. He is my Bosom, my Paradise, my Comfort, and my Hope'. The Reformer said on another occasion, '**Of purgatory there is no mention in Holy Scripture; it is a lie of the devil, in order that the papists may have some market days and snares for catching money...We deny the existence of a purgatory and of a limbo of the fathers in which they say that there is hope and a sure expectation of liberation. But these are figments of some stupid and bungling sophist**'.

Purgatory is supposed to be under the special jurisdiction of the pope and it is his prerogative- as the representative of Christ on earth- to grant indulgences (i.e., relief from suffering) as he sees fit. Purgatory is where Roman Catholics believe most people go after death to be finally purged of their sins and gain whatever merit they may be lacking to enter heaven. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines purgatory as a '**Purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven**', which is experienced by those '**who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified**'. All who die at peace with the Catholic church- but who are not perfect- must undergo penal and purifying suffering in an intermediate realm known as purgatory. The Roman Church holds that baptism removes all previous guilt, both original and actual, so that if a person were to die immediately after baptism they would go directly to heaven. All other believers- except the Christian martyrs but including even the highest clergy in the church- must go to purgatory to pay the penalty for sins committed after baptism. In purgatory a Catholic by their suffering can atone for their sins and eventually they can be released from purgatory and enter Heaven. Such a teaching drives a horse and cart through the teaching of Scripture on many fronts...

- i) Firstly, no person cannot atone for their sin either when they are living or when they are dead; Christ alone has made atonement for sin; Hebrews 9v26, '**For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself**'.
- ii) Secondly, when a sinner dies in their sin the soul of that sinner goes to Hell- not purgatory- from which there is no release; Luke 16v22+23, '**And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom**'.

- iii) Thirdly, to say that a sinner by their suffering can have their sins purged implies Christ's suffering on the Cross is insufficient to accomplish the putting away of the sinner's sins; Hebrews 10v12, '**But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God**'.
- iv) Fourthly, it contradicts the pronouncement that Jesus Christ made to the dying thief on the cross when He said to him, '**Today shalt thou be with me in paradise**' Luke 23v43.
- v) Fifthly, it refutes the claim of Paul who said in Philippians 1v21, '**For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain**' and '**absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord**' 2 Corinthians 5v8.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live and die in fear of spending an unquantified number of years in the pain and anguish of a place called purgatory; to live and then die without having any hope or prospect of being in Heaven? And yet that is exactly how the Roman Catholic lives.

In general it is held that the period of suffering in purgatory can be shortened by gifts of money, prayers by the priest and masses. Those gifts, prayers and masses can be provided by the person before their death or by relatives and friends after death. But what saith the Scriptures? In Psalm 49v6-8, '**They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him: (For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever:)**'. Salvation is without money and price. There's no need for you to fill the coffers of any church in order to obtain salvation. Salvation is offered to you freely; we are to receive salvation as the gift of God. The teaching of purgatory is to be rejected because it finds no basis in the Scriptures.

Let's look at a second matter, namely the matter of **prayer**. In relation to prayer let's consider firstly...

A. The Rosary

When we think of the rosary we think about the mechanical device used in counting the prayers. The short and more common form of that prayer device is a string or chain of beads divided into five sections, each consisting of one large bead and ten small ones. But the term 'rosary' can also refer to a series of prayers. In its long form this series of prayers consists of 15 Paternosters- the Lord's Prayer, addressed to God the Father- 15 Glorias, and 150 Hail Mary's, addressed to the Virgin Mary. Just think about that; the rosary has ten times as many prayers addressed to Mary (150) as to God the Father (15), with none addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ. From its composition we see that the rosary is designed primarily as a devotional to Mary, thus exalting her to a position higher than the Son of God.

As the Roman Catholic says the rosary they will repeat time-and-time-again the same prayers as they feed the rosary beads through their fingers. This repetitive praying is forbidden in Scripture; by Jesus Christ no less. In Matthew 6v7 the Saviour said, '**But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking**'. The rosary certainly fits into the description '**vain repetitions**'. **Application**

Beloved, let's be on our guard of falling into the same trap as the Roman Catholic; repeating the same prayers in a mechanical manner that really goes no further than the ceiling. Let our prayers arise from our hearts with a freshness and fervency that originates from the Author of prayer, God the Holy Spirit.

As we continue to think about the Roman Catholic in prayer, we want secondly to think about...

B. Praying for the dead

A common practice in the Roman Catholic Church is that of praying for the dead. This practice is closely connected with- and is a logical consequence of- their doctrine of purgatory. Prayers for the dead imply that the state of the dead person has not yet been fixed, and that it can be improved by the prayers of the living. The basis for this practice is based on the words of 2 Maccabees 12v46, '**It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins**'. Yet the Word of God- of which the book of Maccabees is not- makes no mention of praying for the dead.

John Calvin- in his writings against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding purgatory and prayers for the deceased- wrote, '**When, therefore, my opponents object, that it has been the practice for thirteen hundred years to offer prayers for the dead, I, in return, ask them, by what word of God, by what revelation, by what example it was done? For here not only are passages of Scripture wanting, but in the examples of all the saints of whom we read, nothing of the kind is seen**'.

All our prayers cannot reverse the destiny of the soul of any departed loved one. It is for us to pray for them now- while they are living- praying that God will regenerate their hearts and draw them savingly unto Himself. The gulf fixed between Heaven and Hell cannot be bridged by the prayers of others.

The final matter I want to address tonight- as we conclude our messages on the Roman Catholic faith- is the matter of **penance**. Penance is one of the seven sacraments. The word is used two different senses. As a sacrament, and in the broad sense, it refers to the act of confession on the part of the penitent, together with the priest's pronouncement of absolution and his assigning of certain works to be done by the penitent. In the narrow sense penance has reference only to the works assigned by the priest and their performance by the penitent. It's this latter way that I want to think about penance as we thought about the former way when I dealt with the subject of confession.

The Roman Catholic is taught that they must make satisfaction for their sins themselves. Therefore fasting, offerings, prayers, going to Mass, partaking of the sacraments, works of charity, pilgrimages are undertaken by the Catholic in order to merit the forgiveness of sins. With their works the Catholic attempts to compensate for their transgressions and merit God's pardon. And yet the Scriptures plainly teach that it is not by our works- but by God's grace and mercy- that we are saved...

- Romans 4v5, '**But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness**'.
- Ephesians 2v8+9, '**For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is the gift of God: not of works*, lest any man should boast**'.
- 2 Timothy 1v9, '**Who hath saved us, and called *us* with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began**'.
- Titus 3v5, '**Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost**'.

Can the Scriptures be any clearer; salvation is by God's grace and not by our works.

The Church of Rome's demand for acts of penance to be performed by the Catholic before she grants forgiveness, infers that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was not sufficient to atone fully for sin and that it must be supplemented to some extent by good works. Yet the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that Christ has made full satisfaction for sin. When the Saviour died upon the Tree He paid the penalty of our sins; 1 Peter 2v24, '**Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed**'. God does not demand penance from the sinner; He requires repentance. One Christian author wrote, '**Romanism has a Christ, but He is not sufficient as a Saviour. What He did on Calvary must be repeated (in the Mass) and supplemented (through works of penance), and this makes priestcraft and sacramentarianism necessary**'. **Application** How grateful every believer ought to be that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We don't pray, come to church, witness to the unsaved, contribute to missionary enterprises, serve in some church ministry to merit salvation; we do these things because we have been saved by the grace of God. How tragic for the Roman Catholic to never know the assurance of sins forgiven through the work of Christ as they attempt to obtain salvation for themselves by their works and deeds.

The matters we've considered over the last weeks regarding the Roman Catholic faith should have instilled into your mind that the Roman Catholic Church is not a true church; it is a false church. We say that because we have seen that her teaching does not correlate with the teaching of God's Word. Therefore we cannot have fellowship with her; but rather we reprove her and we seek to win those within the system to Christ and the liberty of the gospel.

May God be pleased to draw many of our Roman Catholic neighbours to Himself. Many of them shame us for their dedication and loyalty to their church. May we be loyal and dedicated to Christ, His cause and His Church in these days.

Let's pray.