

- The Sistine Chapel in Rome is one of the most beautiful and compelling places of worship in the entire world. Dominated by Michelangelo's famous fresco, *The Last Judgment*, one cannot help to ponder the question of salvation when visiting there.
- In this mighty scene, Christ our Lord is depicted as He will be at His second coming, surrounded by His saints. Below Him are souls rising or falling to their eternal fate based on Christ's judgment. It's both hopeful and frightening.
- You see, *The Last Judgment* is not simply an artwork of extraordinary beauty. It's a powerful confrontation with the most pressing of questions: who will be saved?
- We are confronted in a similar way by today's Gospel, in which someone asks: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?"
- While our Lord doesn't answer this question with a direct no, His response that we should strive to enter through the narrow gate, and that many attempting to enter will not be strong enough to do so should make us sit up and take notice.
- What we know from our first reading today is that God desires to save all mankind. He loves us more than we can imagine, and He wants us to accept His gift of salvation.
- Yet, as I mentioned last Sunday, the hard truth is that while God desires our salvation and will pardon even the gravest of sins if we are truly repentant, He will allow us to damn ourselves if we fail to reconcile ourselves to Him and the Truth He has revealed through His Church.
- Our salvation is a process with which we must cooperate. Specifically, we must conform our lives to our Lord's teaching as it is divinely revealed to us through the Church. And we must beg pardon for those times that we fail.
- We must seek out the Truth that our Lord has so lovingly revealed in the teachings of the Church and written upon our hearts, and then do our best to live by that Truth.
- We must come to know Christ, to love Christ, and to be like Christ.
- From our Lord's words in today's Gospel we know that only those who make a serious effort to enter Heaven will do so. Salvation is not something easily obtained. While our salvation is a free gift from our Lord, we must cooperate with the process.
- And there will always be obstacles for us to face along the way. First, there are our unruly passions that pull us downwards and lead us into sin. We are creatures of flesh and blood, and sometimes the demands of our flesh prove to be overpowering.
- Second, we have the temptations against faith and hope in God that are constantly hurled at us by the sentinels our post-Christian world: those people who attack our Catholic faith and make us question the rationality of believing in God.
- These include certain leaders of our Faith who, by their sinful words and actions or their failure to live the Faith with integrity, distort the truth of our Catholic Faith and can undermine our personal faith.
- Then there are also our earthly sufferings, which at times can make us question God's love for us – and thus challenge our ability to love Him in return.
- So the life of the Christian is one of unending struggle: struggle to turn away from both sin and from those who would poison or damage our Faith, while also trying to pursue God with faith, hope, and charity, despite not always understanding Him or His will.

- Jesus goes on to tell us that even knowing the Lord and listening to His Word is not enough. We must have much more than just a casual acquaintance with our Lord if we hope to go to Heaven. We must respond to His grace and do His will.
- Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life. No one goes to the Father except through Him. And thus we must prove to be His friends if we hope to be saved.
- Of course, this means being obedient to Him and to the teachings of the Catholic Church. But it's not sheer obedience to our Church's teachings that assures us a place in Heaven.
- No, it's being guided and motivated by an authentic love for God and neighbor in all that we say and do that guarantees us a place in Heaven.
- St. Augustine once said, "Love, and do what you will." His point is that if the love of God and neighbor is at the root of our actions, our actions – regardless of how they appear to others – will be rightly ordered in God's eyes and help us grow in union with Him.
- So a real love for God – a love stronger than our self-love – must reign in our hearts. And when a genuine love for God *does* reign in our hearts, it opens our eyes so that we begin to see things as God sees them and begin to understand God's ways.
- When we see things as God sees them, it is easier to summon the strength to battle our unruly passions, rather than just succumbing to them – and to beg pardon for the times we fail.
- When we see things as God sees them, it is then that we can see the foolishness of those who would attack our faith in God and His Church and refuse to be persuaded by them.
- And when we see things as God sees them out of our love for Him, it is then that we can come to understand our earthly sufferings as one of God's greatest gifts to us.
- The author of the Letter to the Hebrews sums this up so beautifully in our second reading today. He tells us: "My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He disciplines; He scourges every son He acknowledges."
- We are God's children, and because we are sinners, He disciplines us by allowing suffering in our lives. Whatever our sufferings may be, they are correctives that help us mend our ways, grow in virtue, and make reparation for our sins.
- In short, by allowing us to suffer in this life, God perfects us as gold is tested in fire, and in this way He prepares us for Heaven.
- Today's Gospel is another rather sobering Gospel – as have been the Gospels for the past several Sundays, all of which have spoken of God's justice.
- So as we ponder our readings today, we have to ask ourselves: what will keep me out of Heaven? What am I doing or not doing that is hurting my relationship with God?
- This isn't just a matter of determining which sins we commit, but of asking what are our attitudes and beliefs toward God, His Church, and our fellow man.
- As faithful Christians, we must always keep our eyes on Heaven. We mustn't get so bogged down with this life that we forget about Heaven. While we do not know how many souls will ultimately be saved, we do know that getting to Heaven is not easy.
- So let us be sure that a genuine love for God is at the heart of all that we say and do, and trust that in loving God and neighbor as we should, we will assure ourselves of God's eternal love and mercy in return.