



# Boston Catholic Journal

Nihil nisi Jesum

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Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

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## “The Third Rail and the Kingdom of Heaven”



# “HARD SAYINGS”

**There are many “hard sayings” in Holy Scripture.**

In other words, there are many parables and other verses that are *uncomfortable* to listen to ... they are likely to make us fidget in our seats because we know that they well may apply to us.

You will recognize them at once:

**They do not assure us of our salvation**

**They do not canonize us before we are dead.**

“Third Rail verses” in Holy Scripture are verses to be avoided at all costs: they are fatal to the one touching upon them much as the third rail in an American subway system exceeds 1000 volts and will electrocute you instantly. Such verses, of course, precede Third-Rail Homilies — to be avoided for the same reasons..

## **Third-Rail Homilies**

A “third-rail” homily would begin with, let us say, Saint Paul’s address to the Philippians: **“With fear and trembling work out your salvation”**<sup>1</sup> — to mention nothing of the numerous admonitions from our Blessed Lord that do not merely

“suggest”, but **clearly warn us in no uncertain terms** of eschatological realities that we may find both appalling and unacceptable — while being undeniably true.

They, too, are in the category of the “third rail”: touch upon them and you are dead. Speak of them and you may receive a call from your bishop to “tone down the rhetoric” and subsequently restore the cash flow.

### ***Three of the Four Last Things***

**Death, Judgment, and Hell** ( ... but not Heaven). Few wish to hear of the first three. Your pastor knows this. To preach about or to dwell upon such verses is likely to cause “discomfort” — perhaps even “outrage” — and consequently diminish the congregation. They will go elsewhere, and find *another* parish and *another* priest who *will* assure them of their salvation (*despite* what Christ says), their invincible goodness, and their being “The lights of the world” and “The salt of the earth”. Such parishes and priests abound.

### **“Not Open”**

Any hint that *Heaven may be closed to some, if not many*, is mocked as “pre-Vatican II nonsense” — in spite of Christ’s telling us so:

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Saint Matthew 7.13)

Likewise, the notion that

“the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and

**those who find it are few**” (Saint Matthew 7.14)

These are but two of many, many, third-rail verses found in all four Gospels and many of the Epistles (Letters).

“Surely”, we console ourselves, “a good, merciful, and forgiving God would not allow such things to happen!”

To which we reply: **Why, then, did He say them?**

*We do not seek God, but a heaven with a god to our liking* and made in *our* image. This is another way of saying “We ourselves will be our own gods — for *we* are *more* merciful, *more* loving, *more* forgiving, *more* just, than the God we find in Sacred Scripture. We will not bend our knee before *that* God, but our own god. *Ourselves!* We will find or make priests and churches that “affirm us”, comfort us, and tells us that our illusions are realities or that reality is just an illusion.

This is further to say that we will continue to maintain the illusions and fabrications that *comfort* us, but cannot possibly *save* us — rather than defer to “hard sayings” which are enunciated to the end of *saving us* and bringing us to genuine happiness (Heaven).

**Other factors enter into this obstinate refusal to accept the “hard sayings”, and we point to them with the deepest sorrow:** these “hard sayings” do not simply involve *us* — they involve *those we have loved* — who have died.

Some of them, perhaps most of them did not accept these “hard sayings” either. Some of them led extraordinarily sinful lives, heedless of God and man. Some were little more than evil. Many simply did not believe, or would not relinquish what they perceived to be their freedom to do as they wish, or simply scorned religion altogether. But we loved them — and love always invests us in the being of another. Hence our pain.

## **All or None**

Nevertheless a choice was placed before them, as it is placed before us now: to accept the “hard sayings” as earnestly as we accept the more comforting ones. We cannot choose which teachings of Christ we will accept any more than we can choose what we wish to be real or true. We must accept all of them or none of them. God does not tamper with our freedom, nor interfere with our choices. We are free to accept or reject, but in either case our choice is total. We cannot accept or reject the part without accepting or rejecting the whole, for the parts are integral constituents of the whole.

Much more to the point, the terms are not of our own making — they have been *divinely* instituted. Salvation is not a referendum any more than Heaven is a democracy. The means of attaining it have been clearly defined by Christ — as well as the means of losing it. The choice is yours alone.

**“Lest they also come into this place of torments”**

To return to the discussion of those we love and who have died, here we encounter the most painful legacy imaginable: our realization that the road they chose was

the one that was “**broad and easy**” ... To imagine them in torment everlasting is beyond our ability to comprehend without verging on despair.

“How wicked of you”, you tell me, “to compound the grief of those in bereavement! Have they not suffered enough by the loss of one loved?”

No. It is not wicked. It is painful beyond words. It is sorrowful beyond description. None of us may presume salvation, for to do so is to *presume* upon God’s mercy, itself a mortal sin! Indeed, I identify more with the departed than the surviving. I have no assurance of salvation for I refuse to *presume* on God’s mercy and may yet myself be accounted among the lost — *even as Saint Paul himself feared*. (1 Corinthians 9.26) Should I fear less?

There *are* indeed those who go to Hell — and likely many (or Christ is a liar). **We must allow this realization to motivate us with all the more urgency to bring those still with us to Christ, lest they, too, choose “the road that is broad and easy” and add to our sorrow greater sorrow still.**

This was the whole point of the *Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man*: the rich man in Hell implores Abraham “**send him [Lazarus] to my father’s house, for I have five brethren, that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torments.**” (Saint Luke 16. 27-28)

Can we do less?

We call our children out of a burning house — suffer burns and torment to save them — but when they verge on a **lake of fire that is the second death** <sup>1</sup> from which there is no return ...we say nothing.

We do not *call* them back. We do not rush in horror to *bring* them back! Our love for them slumbers before the frowning face of society ... that no longer has any room for our God ... or His children.

***Pay attention to the third rail! Ignore it to your peril.***

This applies equally to priest and pew alike.

And when you chose your “comfort zone”, you would do well to consider its “duration”.



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