

A number of years ago, two Jehovah's Witnesses came to my door. In our initial exchange I let them know, in no uncertain terms, that I was Catholic, hoping that would discourage them, it didn't. One of them in particular seemed eager to shake my faith.

“Did you know,” he challenged me, “that the pope said Hell is not a place?”

Now we were speaking of Pope John Paul II and this was a twisting of words worthy of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Because that is not what the pope said. In one of his weekly addresses Pope Saint John Paul the Great, said that Hell is more than a place, it is state of spiritual existence.

Jesus likens Hell to fiery Gehenna. Gehenna was an actual place in ancient Jerusalem. In pagan times it was a place of human sacrifice offered to false, foreign Gods. When those practices were abandoned it became Jerusalem's garbage dump, an open air incinerator. It was a worm-ridden place of constant fire, smoke, and an unbearable stench.

This is a vision of Hell that has come down to us through the centuries, a place of fire and brimstone. But for many, this vision no longer holds any meaning so I would like to offer an alternative way of thinking about Hell.

In this life here on earth we know that when we speak to God, when we pray, God hears us and answers us. We know this because scripture tells us so. God may not always answer us in the way we would like, but we know with certainty that He does indeed answer us.

Now imagine a place where you know, with absolute certainty, that when you call upon God He does not hear you, He does not acknowledge you, He does not even know you exist. That is the most horrifying vision of Hell I can imagine. The eternal loneliness of being separated from God.

Heaven on the other hand is a complete union with God. To be in Heaven is to be united with God in a covenantal, that is, a family bond. God relates to humanity as a family. The history of our relationship with God is a history of covenants. God is continually seeking to reestablish Eden, a place, a state of existence, where He can live among His people.

A covenant creates family. Marriage, for example, is a covenant which brings two families together, making them one.

We are given this time here on earth to allow us to make a choice. We can accept the offer of covenant that God extends to us, an offer to be part of His family, or we can reject it. This is the choice Jesus describes for us, a choice between Heaven and Hell.

That choice has consequences. Covenants have conditions. A marriage covenant is dependent upon the man and woman fulfilling their vows to love and honor each other.

Jesus tells us the conditions under which we must live if we are to accept the New Covenant in Christ.

We sometimes forget that in addition to being God, Jesus was fully human. He experienced the same passions, desires, frustrations and temptations that we experience. He is not asking us to do anything that is beyond our ability. He spent His life here on earth modeling for us what it means to fulfill the law.

Jesus does not give us a new overly burdensome law. He shows the fulfillment and original meaning of the law, the commandments, given to Moses by God.

God is loving in His Covenant. And so we are called to love each other, even those who hate us. We are called to manifest that love to everyone we meet, including strangers and those hostile to Christianity. But how can we do that when we harbor anger against our brother and sister Christians?

We show our love for God by how we love each other.

God is faithful in His love for us. And so a man and a woman in a sacramental marriage are called to be faithful to each other.

God is truthful in His faithfulness. And so we are called to be truthful in our dealings with others. We do not swear oaths that may call God to bear witness to a lie. We are to simply let our yes be yes and our no be no.

It is for us to choose. "If you choose, you can keep the commandments, they will save you."

So how do we do this? In this world that is increasingly hostile to Christian morality, how do we live according to the Divine Law?

In 1989, author and business expert Stephen Covey wrote a book titled "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." This book has become wildly popular, selling over 15 million copies. Its success is attributed to the fact that it ignores trends and pop psychology. It does not offer us advice that is contrary to human nature. Rather it focuses instead on timeless principles that are in harmony with our nature, fairness, integrity, honesty, and human dignity.

The second "habit" he discusses in the book is this: successful people "begin with the end in mind." This advice is constantly repeated to business people and entrepreneurs. If the "end" is to have a successful business, then every decision you make throughout the day should be based on answering the question: will this action make my business more successful?

This is part of our nature and we practice it all the time. We choose a career based on a goal we want to achieve. We choose a spouse based on a vision of family.

It makes sense then to apply this habit to our entire lives. Every day is a new beginning, a new opportunity to make decisions that will bring us closer to Heaven, closer to a union of eternal joy and happiness. But those decisions have to be made consciously, we have to be determined to choose the good and reject the evil, or, even the distracting. Our

world is full of distractions that threaten to pull us away from God. We can be distracted or even deceived into following the wrong road.

A successful business man once said, "I spent my life climbing the ladder of success, only to find it was propped up against the wrong wall."

We need to begin each day with the end - Heaven - in mind, in order for us to make good choices during the day.

Jesus' teachings on Heaven and Hell may seem harsh to us, but they are born out of love. He wants us to remember that our day to day choices have consequences. They can bring us closer to Him, giving us the strength to continually seek His love. Or they can distance us from Him making us weak and more subject to temptations that drive us even further away.

One way we can remember this is to fill our environment, our homes, our workplaces, our schools, with sacred or religious images. Crucifixes, images of the Blessed Virgin, holy cards, statues, images of saints, can all be powerful reminders of our goal for eternity. Wake up to an image of Jesus or Mary before you venture out into the noisy distracting world of the here and now. Filling our homes with sacred imagery can help us to stay focused on what is truly important.

I once heard of an Orthodox man who had created a little prayer corner on his desk at work. He had small icons of Jesus, Mary, and one or two saints to help him focus on his relationship with God as he went about his daily business.

Now the company he worked for forbid the display of religious imagery on employee's desks and so eventually the man's boss came over and asked him for an explanation.

“Those are pictures of my friends and family,” the man explained. The boss had no choice but to simply walk away. Pictures of friends and family were not forbidden.

Every Catholic business person should have some kind of religious image on their desk at the office - to remind them that their work is part of God's plan for their lives.

Every Catholic home should have crucifixes or pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to remind us that we are part of a larger family.

Every Catholic's car should have a holy image somewhere in sight, because the little trips we make every day are part of our longer journey in life and our destination is God Himself.

So let us all remember the journey we are on. Let us all be guided in that journey by remembering our destination. Let us all live in such a way that we will all, one day, be welcomed into the joy of the Father's house.