

A Natural Spiritual Law

David Orendorff

Matthew 25:31-46

November 20, 2005

Imagine I take you to the edge of a cliff. The cliff is a clear drop of a couple hundred feet. I know that some of you get dizzy and a bit fearful just thinking of heights. And several of you won't even make it to the edge of the cliff.

Now I tell you that there is a choice to be made and that it is your choice alone. The choice is whether to jump or not. The very thought of jumping over a cliff will make most of us back away. I don't believe any of us would jump without some kind of protective equipment.

I believe this is so because we all understand enough natural law to know that if we jump off a cliff we will fall at 16 ft/sec². We know that once we have jumped there is no changing our mind, no turning back. And we know that the higher we are the more it will hurt when we hit the hard things below. We hate being hurt and so to avoid physical pain we quickly learn some physics.

Or suppose I take you to the stove in the kitchen and I turn on the burner. Then I tell you that you have a choice. You can either hold your hand on top of the lit burner or not, it is entirely up to you. Some of you, even though I have only asked you to use your imagination, have already begun to withdraw your hand. None of you would hold your hand on the burner very long if you held it there at all.

Because we hate pain we quickly learn some basic principles of thermodynamics and are cautious around hot stoves. Because we hate pain we learn at a gut level to respect and closely observe the natural laws of gravity and thermodynamics. We know that to break a basic and natural law of the universe is to suffer the consequences, to suffer pain and even death.

Now suppose instead of a cliff or a stove, you stand before the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the oppressed, the ill and imprisoned. Your choice is to help or not to help, to have compassion or not.

What Jesus would teach us in today's parable is that to break a spiritual law has consequences which are just as dire as jumping off a cliff or placing a hand on a hot stove. To live lives void of compassion is to choose to be hurt, or as Jesus calls it, to choose "eternal punishment."

I want us to go carefully here. We often translate "eternal punishment" as if Jesus was talking about "going to hell" in some life that follows this life. But when the Greek words *κολασιν αιωνιον*, which we usually translate as "eternal punishment" are examined they yield a broader meaning, a meaning about this life and its quality.

Κολασω, translated punishment, has a field of meaning centering on not only the word punishment but also chastisement

and correction. This word is about consequences designed to change behavior. It is not about revenge or the desire to inflict pain. It is a word hoping for something better from us and for us than what we must have given. Its point is to correct, to improve, and to make our actions better.

And like all corrective consequences, the chastisement ceases when there is a change in behavior. The correction lasts only as long as the bad behavior. When the behavior changes the punishment ends. Hell is not forever, it is only as long as we insist on jumping off spiritual cliffs and putting our hands on spiritual stoves. It will quit hurting when we learn and obey the natural spiritual laws with the same caution we obey the natural laws of physics.

What we translate as eternal, *αιωνιον*, also has a broader field of meaning; most literally translated it means all times, past, present and future. Eternal in the sense of this word is forever in our now, in what led up to now and in what will follow now. Taken together then, eternal punishment is about the corrective consequences of our failure to act compassionately and means that the spiritual forces of nature will be constantly trying to correct us toward love, correcting and acting on our past, present and future toward compassionate action.

I once heard it put this way. Life is designed to teach us to love. When we fail to love life will correct us. When we fail to learn the current lesson we will be miserable and we will repeat the class. When we learn the lesson joy finds us and we move to another lesson.

I know well a man who has been married four times. In this final marriage he has learned to love and they are quite well suited and happy with each other. But it took him three marriages to learn the compassion he needed to know how to stay married and for joy to find him.

I worked with a woman once that alienated her family repeatedly. For years she blamed them. She thought her family was hard to live with. Finally it dawned on her that maybe she had something to learn about herself and how she tried to love them. Now reconciliation has begun with a part of her family. And in truth they are as much of the problem as she is. But she has had to learn that she can't change them, she can only make changes in herself. And until she learned this fundamental spiritual law of compassion, she was miserable. Now, though her family is just as a crazy as it ever was, she has greater peace and greater joy because she has fed, clothed, and loved even the least of her kin.

The other side of the parable is, of course, those times when from our compassion for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the ill and the imprisoned, we inherit "the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world." God's reign

of love, peace, hope and joy is the consequence of our obedience to the spiritual law of compassion. At the end of the parable Jesus calls this place of wonderful grace "eternal life."

Again, we often think of eternal life as a life after this life called heaven and we contrast it with hell. But like "eternal correction" the Greek meaning here is much broader.

What we translate is the phrase ζῶντων. Again we have the word for eternal which means all time, past, present and future combined with a word that literally means "to be alive and well." The combination of the two words yields a field of meaning which has to do with being wonderfully and fully alive in past, present and future; in our memories, in our experiences and in our hopes, when we live from acts of compassion.

The spiritual laws of living not only correct us when we fail to be compassionate; they also reward us when we act compassionately. Just as gravity punishes us when we jump from a cliff, it rewards us by keeping us anchored to earth and in orbit around the sun. When used properly hot stoves cook great meals.

So too are the spiritual laws, when properly applied, for our good. If we act in compassion we are wonderfully and joyfully alive in all times. We remember life as good, we live life, even hard life, as good, and we see tomorrow as filled with the same wonderful good. It is just that simple.

There is, however, one significant difference between natural law and spiritual law. If I jump off the cliff there is no turning back. I cannot in mid fall decide I made a mistake and turn back. Gravity will not let me turn back. However, if I act without compassion, if I pass a hungry one by, it is never too late to turn back, to decide again, to repent. And by my repentance and God's forgiveness I escape the consequences of my failures. This fall from grace will not wound.

In Jesus death and resurrection we are guaranteed that no matter what our failure God is ready to forgive us and save us from the "eternal correction" that we would rightfully have gained by our failure to love. There is no forgiveness in gravity, but there is abundant mercy in the Lord.

I am not perfect and neither are any of you. None of us is spiritually perfect because none of us is perfect in compassionate love. We have all, at one time or another been a goat and not a sheep, have belonged on the left side of the king and not on the right, have gained eternal correction and not eternal living. There is in every personal history, no matter how young or old, something for which we remain secretly ashamed because it represents clearly to us our failure to compassion.

I invite you, when you get home, to take a piece of paper, make a mark, draw a symbol, write a word that embodies a significant failure and then burn it as an offering to God. If you live with others or have a few trusted friends, you might do

this as a family/group exercise.

I invite us to not only be good stewards of the gifts we have by acts of compassion, but also to give to God our moments of failure that we might be released from "eternal correction" and be escorted into "eternal living." When we are alive in love and grace, then the world is fed, watered, clothed, and comforted, and we are joyful in all times.

Shalom and Amen.