The Damned in Michelangelo's Last Judgment.

The artist's goal is frank and forthright. He wants to frighten.

Because this is in the Pope's own chapel, could the artist be saying something to the church's leaders during the start of the reformation? Would it also be a call to anyone in this period to think carefully about your actions, attitudes and beliefs? Luther's 95 theses are posted in 1517. King Henry VIII left the Catholic Church in 1533. Michelangelo's work on the last judgment begins in 1535, under Pope Paul III. This pope marks Rome's transition from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation. He orders the work of the Council of Trent to begin. cf. H.Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, Harper and Row (1974) p. 240. This is one of history's great councils that caused much needed reform in the Catholic Church while responding to Protestant theology.

The people on Christ's left, beneath the saints, seem to be in a chaotic jumble. 1Cor. 14:33 "God is a God not of disorder but of peace".

The angels are locked in a furious battle with those who are lost, forcing them down to justice. Col. 3:25 "For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality."

The hands and arms of the woman above could indicate grief; she seems to be praying, but it is too late. Matt. 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one
who does the will of my Father in heaven. "NRSV.

For me this is one of the most powerful images every produced. This man has just realized his fate. Could it be that he had fooled himself for years about how he was living? Notice the dread and despair. Notice too the demon that has him. The simple color coding may imply that the demon is really evil (dark, almost an olive color, like dead flesh). The man on the other hand is lighter than the demon and some of the other damned. Could it be that he was not the worst sinner? Just bad enough?

The man below has lost his battle and is falling into the mouth of hell.

Take a closer look at what is there.

How did the artist decide how to visually represent the condition of the damned? He is drawing from Greek Mythology concerning Hades and the new Testament.

Mark 9:47-48 "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched." Rev. 20:13-15. "And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire." However, the fire is probably best understood as a symbol for the separation from God by being "thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and
The Boat of Charon.

This image of Charon's boat on the river Styx should inspire fear and horror as the damned are driven off the boat into hell.

Charon is a mythical figure from antiquity who would ferry the dead in his boat across the river Styx to the land of the dead, Hades. In Michelangelo's hands he becomes a very frightening figure, a demon. Other paintings of him don't have the same feeling at all. Look at Dali's interpretation, or Joachim Patinir's Charon Crossing the Styx at Carol Jackson's Virtual Art Museum. You can see a short description of Charon maintained by a Dead Pool site.
The dead tumble out of the boat at the feet of Minos, to receive their sentence, and "to be dragged by demons to the bottomless pit, where are marvelous contortions, grievous and desperate as the place demands." Ibid., p. 245, quoting Condivi. Notice that he has something coiled around him. It looks like the snake from the Garden of Eden.

"The effect of the fresco was overwhelming from the first: Paul III, upon its unveiling, reportedly fell to his knees, crying 'Lord, charge me not with my sins when thou shalt come on the Day of Judgement.' Nevertheless, Michelangelo's nudes in the fresco were the subject of prudish criticism..." Ibid., p. 252. (One has to wonder if the criticism was from those who did not want to be confronted with their own sinfulness. It is easier to criticize the messenger than deal with the message.)

Few of us would enjoy thinking about the damned, but it is important. We need to avoid the mistake of thinking there is no such place, or that we will escape no matter what. If we want to be given a place in God's Kingdom, we must do what is pleasing to God. "The lives of all of us are to be revealed before the tribunal of God so that each one may receive his recompense, good or bad, according to his life in the body." 2 Cor. 5:6-10 (NAB). For Catholic teaching on Hades and Hell see sections 633 and 1033-1037 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

So what can we say after looking at this painting? If Christ is not a serious part of our lives now, then it is time to do some thinking. God is merciful, but if we have not sought to center our lives on him, as are the saints depicted in the Last Judgment, where does this leave us? Might we not be like the man pictured above, i.e. someone bad enough. "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." Matt. 12:30, and Luke 11:23 (RSV).
If you act as though death is never going to come for you, take a look at

You could also take a look at Giotto's Rule of Satan, Van Eyck's "Crucifixion and Last Judgment" or Bruegel's The Triumph of Death. Also see Dali's interpretation of Hell in the Divine Comedy, especially the "Appearance of Dis".

I am not an art critic or artist. I just invite others to think about the message presented by the work of art and then in meditation reflect on its application in your life. In addition, use your imagination. Put yourself in the position of one of the people depicted and feel what they feel. A painting may have tremendous spiritual meaning for you whether or not the artist intended it, or the art critics would agree. If you find meaning, work with that meaning thanking God.

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