

“ISN'T THE IDEA OF HELL TOO UNCIVILIZED?”

Matthew 25:31-46

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Is hell just a primitive concept that civilized people should dismiss as witless poppycock?

Since the fourteenth century, Dante's *Inferno* in *The Divine Comedy* has stirred up images of people tortured in flaming, multileveled subterranean caverns. Popular paintings of the middle ages depicted hell in terrifying terms.

On July 8th, 1741, the New Englanders who heard Jonathan Edwards' sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, trembled in fear. Here's an excerpt from that sermon: *'Therefore natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, . . . the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and are eager to grab hold of them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no interest in any Mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them.* (Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*)

- But over the years the term “hell” has become a favorite expletive. “Oh hell!” is a common exclamation of shock or disappointment.

Lots of people use hell in almost every question: *Who the hell*, and *What the hell*, and *Why the hell*, *How the hell* and *When the hell!*

For many “hell” has also become the standard default simile. Everything is as (something) as hell. When I was in college I worked as a truck driver during the summers. One of my fellow drivers, quite a pleasant chap actually, compared just about everything to hell. It was either *good as hell*, or *fun as hell*, or *sweet as hell*, even *cold as hell!*

An angry person tells someone who ticked him off to *go to hell*, not having even the foggiest idea whereof he speaks!

This makes me wonder if people speak of hell as such a trifling thing because they can't bear to take it seriously. They make the word “hell” so commonplace that there's no longer any bite to it.

- We are now supposed to be too sophisticated to believe all that tommyrot about hell.

Enlightened critical thinkers want to believe in a God who is compassionate and loving, not a God who damns people to an eternal inferno

People speak of hell as the abuses and atrocities perpetrated here on earth. They say some people have gone through hell, or they're going through hell.

- Last week a new book entitled, *Love Wins* came out. The writer suggests that hell is found in the cruelties of war and the tragedies of life. He says God wants us to emphasize his love, because in the end *love wins*. Actually there's nothing much new in that thesis. Throughout the centuries philosophers who have choked on what the Bible says about hell have tried to come up with something more palatable for people's refined tastes.

Rudolph Bultmann, one of the most influential liberal theologians of the last century declared that you can be a Christian without believing in a literal heaven or hell.

A Hebrew professor give his opinion: *'The hottest fires of hell probably burn in the human heart, in the harmful ways we treat others.'* (Barry Kogan, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati)

John Dominic Crossan, a prominent philosopher/theologian at Loyola University in Chicago, said *'Once we discovered we could create hell on earth it became silly to talk about it in a literal sense.'*

I'm not minimizing the horrors that some people have suffered that prompt them to grab the word “hell” as the most extreme term they can think of to explain their traumatic experience.

- But is that all there is to hell? Is it silly to talk about a literal hell?

Church historian Martin Marty, said, “Hell has disappeared and no one noticed. If people really believed in hell, they wouldn't be watching basketball or even the TV preachers. They'd be out rescuing people.”

C.S. Lewis said, *'There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this [hell] if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, especially, of our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and has the support of reason.*

The 10th Article in our church's statement of faith includes this affirmation: *'We believe that God will raise the dead bodily to judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of his glorious grace. Amen.'*

We're not embarrassed to affirm this, because it's in the Bible.

Kenneth S. Kantzer, late Dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, said, "To the amazement of many, the most explicit words in all Scripture, and certainly the most uncompromisingly dreadful, flow from the lips of the divine Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ." (Kenneth S. Kantzer)

He then cited Jesus' words about eternal punishment in Matthew 25:31-46.

- This is our text for today's study.

³¹ *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.*

³² *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

³³ *He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,*

³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

³⁷ *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*

³⁸ *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?*

³⁹ *When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*

⁴⁰ *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*

⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the the devil and his angels.*

⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,*

⁴³ *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

⁴⁴ *"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

⁴⁵ *"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

⁴⁶ *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus Christ gives us answers to the nagging question: what is hell, really?

I. HELL IS THE ULTIMATE SEPARATION. Matthew 25:31-40

Judgment is actually separation. A judge has the responsibility to separate truth from lies, good from bad.

The root word behind the expression "to judge" in the New Testament refers to sifting or dividing.

This is exactly how Jesus described the judgment of the nations

³² *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

It was common practice in Palestine during the daytime for sheep and goats to pasture together. But at the end of the day the shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats and take them into the fold.

- Jesus gave this as an analogy for the judgment at the end of the age.

He knows those who are true believers and those who are believers in name only.

Jesus said true and false followers would both call him "Lord." *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"* (Matthew 7:21-23)

In the judgment at the end of the age Jesus Christ will separate the true from the false. His judgment is accurate.

- In the final judgment Jesus Christ will be revealed as Lord and king. Judgment will be based on a single issue: "What have you done with Jesus Christ?"

- ³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*
- ³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,*
- ³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*
- ³⁷ *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*
- ³⁸ *When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?*
- ³⁹ *When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'*
- ⁴⁰ *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'*
- ⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

Those who have rejected Jesus Christ or have ignored him—regardless of how good they may think they have been—will be separated from Christ and condemned to a place of punishment.

- Who are “the least of these brothers of mine” to whom Jesus refers? (40)

Most people assume these are the poor, the weak, and the underprivileged of the world.

I’m sure our Lord is pleased when we show compassion to the hurting people of the world. But this is not about them.

The littlest brothers here are Christ’s followers—especially those who are persecuted for their faithfulness.

When Jesus sent out the twelve apostles as his messengers he said, *‘He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.’* (Matthew 10:40)

Jesus explained that the righteous are recognized by what they do.

Christ the Judge sees perfectly who people really are. Nobody enters heaven or escapes hell of the basis of his good deeds. No one can earn eternal life.

But when you go out of your way to show love to even the least of Christ’s followers, you reveal who you really are.

- A person’s relationship with Jesus Christ is the basis of the ultimate separation..

Those who have no relationship with Jesus Christ will be separated from the presence of our loving God forever and ever

II. HELL IS A FINAL RETRIBUTION. Matthew 25:41-45

Retribution means giving people what they deserve for what they have done.

Christians are people who by faith have received God’s mercy because on the cross Christ suffered the judgment they deserved. We need God’s mercy.

A woman viewing proofs of portrait of herself complained to the photographer, “These don’t do me justice.” He was quite offended and said, “Ma’am, you don’t need justice, you need mercy.”

The Apostle Paul addressed this matter of God’s justice: *‘But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” . . . But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil.’* (Romans 2:5-6, 8-9)

This is a principle of God’s moral universe: every person sooner or later receives what he deserves.

Jesus Christ, God the Son, is at the end of this earthly life’s road for everyone, without exception.

- In verse 34 to those on his right, the sheep, he said, “come.” Now in verse 41 to those on his left he says “depart from me.”

⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,*

⁴³ *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'*

⁴⁴ *"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'*

⁴⁵ *"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'*

There's something we mustn't miss here. It's not what people have done that condemns them, but what they have not done.

They have demonstrated no interest in the truth about what Jesus came into the world to do, nor in his messengers who are often persecuted and imprisoned for preaching the gospel.

There's a saying that what you go after here reveals where you will go hereafter.

People who don't have Christ's life in them have no spiritual incentive to help others receive salvation in Christ because they don't have it themselves.

In the final judgment the evidence will be clear to Christ.

III. HELL IS A DREADFUL CULMINATION. Matthew 25:41, 46

There is no way to remove the horror from hell.

Hell is not a big, wild, unholy fraternity party. It is dreadful beyond our comprehension.

In the Book of Revelation hell is place that is the expression of God's fury, where the smoke of torment rises forever and ever. It's a lake of fire into which anyone is thrown whose name is not found in the book of life (Revelation 14:11; 20:15).

Some people believe in a literal hell of consuming fire where those who reject Christ will be annihilated. Their existence will be snuffed out. It's called annihilationism.

Another notion is that hell is remedial—after a suitable period the evil will be burned from people's souls and they will go to heaven. That's poppycock!

The Westminster Larger Catechism states that in hell there will be "grievous torments in soul and body" as well as "everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God."

- God's judgment is final. Hell is not remedial.

Christ's judgment results in either an inheritance with God forever (v.34), or eternal punishment in the fire of hell.

⁴¹ *"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

⁴⁶ *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

God's justice is perfectly consistent with his holy nature.

Because of his perfect, holy nature, God cannot allow evil to go unpunished. Unpunished sin is evil in itself.

- That's why God sent his Son to bear the punishment for sin that his holy justice demanded. *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'* (John 3:16)

The gospel of Christ announces that all who put their trust in Jesus Christ receive God's mercy instead of his wrath.

If we try to soften hell we trivialize the gospel.

Why would we bother to urge people to place their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, if what they're saved from really isn't all that serious?

- God didn't create human beings for hell. The Apostle Peter wrote, *'the Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.'* (2 Peter 3:9)

The greatest anomaly in God's universe will be the presence of people created in God's image being in torment in a place prepared for the devil and his angels.

If we don't believe in hell, then our gospel message about Salvation is nonsense. If we talk about God's gracious gift of salvation for sinners, we must make it clear that it is salvation from the eternal horrors of hell.

Are you deeply grateful to God for his gift of salvation through Jesus Christ? It is salvation from hell.

Do you care about the eternal destiny of spiritually-lost people all around you, some very close to you?

- Are you afraid of going to hell? I beg you to confess your sins to God now, and believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

God has promised to save all who believe in Jesus Christ and receive him by placing their complete trust in him.