

IS THERE REALLY A HELL?

Luke 16:19-31

Sermon for Peace Church

February 22, 2009

PURPOSE – To share the clear Biblical conviction that there really is a hell – a place of everlasting torment – and lead people to respond in repentance, faith & obedience.

MAIN IDEA – The Bible, and Jesus in particular, teaches that hell is eternal conscious punishment for sin. How do you respond?

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to LUKE 16:19 (p. 1626)

1. This morning we conclude a 2 month sermon series on QUESTIONS SKEPTICS ASK ... about God / the Bible / Christ / miracles – we've covered a host of topics.

But ARGUABLY there is none more important than today's subject: IS HELL REAL?

(i) In our liturgy this morning, we've just covered Article 37 of the Belgic Confession – concerning "The Last Judgment".

Along with the "glory & honor" that crowns the faithful & elect on that Day ... it also states, "Evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal – but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

2. Do you believe that? Really?

A poll taken last year by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life – of 35,000 Americans – found that 59% agree ... when asked if there is a hell where people who have led bad lives, and die without being sorry, are eternally punished.

74% - significantly more – believe there's a heaven.

But of the 59%, only 4% believe that hell is their own personal destination!

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT HELL?

- This is a deeply significant question!

3. Last month I was listening to an NPR radio interview with Bishop Gene Robinson, an openly gay clergyman in the Episcopal Church, the man who offered prayer at Obama's inauguration (on a different occasion than Rick Warren).

He was fielding phone calls about his stance on homosexual practice. A woman called in to respectfully state that she did not believe his position was true to the Bible (he responded he believed it was) and she added that the Bible teaches (1 Cor. 6) that unrepentant practice of homosexuality would send someone to hell ... to which the Bishop responded – "Well, I believe that the Bible teaches that God's love will save everyone. There's no such place as hell."

(i) Universalism is the official title of this position, and has been around the teaching of the Church through the centuries. = Can a loving God can't send people to hell?

... Historically, wherever that position has grown, the church has left orthodox Christianity and moved toward Unitarianism.

= away from the divinity of Christ; and the historic meaning of his Atonement.

In other words, this doctrine of Hell reverberates in major ways!

4. A more recent challenge to the position expressed in the Belgic Confession is that of Annihilationism.

- It teaches simply that the UNREPENTANT will eventually be extinguished / "snuffed out of existence".

It cites Biblical words about the ungodly "perishing" / "being DESTROYED" as proof texts of this position. Jehovah Witnesses, 7th Day Adventists hold this position, as do some prominent Christians.

- IS THAT WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES?

5. There's much at stake in this issue:

If all people will one day be saved ... or even if the unrepentant will one day be annihilated, how serious is Sin? Evangelism? Life? even Salvation!?

John Piper writes, *"What a difference it makes when one believes in hell – with trembling and with tears. If we do, there's a seriousness over all of life, and an urgency in all our endeavors, and a flavor of blood-earnestness that seasons everything and makes sin feel more sinful, and righteousness feel more righteous, and life feel more precious, and relationships feel more profound, and God appear more weighty."*

DO YOU BELIEVE IN HELL? ... with trembling and tears?

6. As we cover the Bible's teaching on this subject, may His Word shape us.

Let's begin by reading this story of Jesus'.

(You may be aware, Hell was a common topic in Jesus' teaching. He spoke upon IT more than heaven!).

Read Luke 16:19-31

I. BIBLICAL TEACHING

1. This story of Jesus – it's NOT A PARABLE, it's a TEACHING in STORY-FORM – contains significant statements about life beyond this age.

First of all, it reflects on what had evolved from Old Testament teaching by the time of Jesus.

(i) In the Old Testament, there is not much taught about Hell.

The OT uses the word, "SHEOL" to refer to the place of the dead – kind of a HOLDING PLACE for all people until the "Day of the Lord" – when His judgment will be executed.

Upon that Day – Daniel 12:2 – *"the righteous would be resurrected to everlasting life; others to shame & everlasting contempt.*

By & large, that's it in the OT – SHEOL – a holding place and then a COMING DIVIDE.

(ii) By Jesus' day, however, this holding place itself – SHEOL – had been divided into 2 sections in ANTICIPATION of that Day! That's the context of this story.

A. One section is "Abraham's bosom" – v. 22 – *"where the angels carried Lazarus upon his death."* (= the fellowship of the saints). It was also known as PARADISE – (Jesus to thief on Cross – "Today you will be with me in paradise.)

B. The other section of The Place of The Dead was known as HADES! That is the place where the Rich Man ends up.

- This is not yet the ETERNAL STATE – that awaits the Judgment Day. But its CONDITIONS anticipate the torment of that state (after the resurrection of the body). And even here there is an "UNCROSSABLE CHASM" (v. 26) fixed between the two eternal conditions.

Heaven & Hell – Jesus regularly taught the reality of both.

2. His most common word for Hell was GEHENNA.

Gehenna was literally a garbage dump located in a valley just south of Jerusalem.

- It was a place whose FIRES NEVER CEASE BURNING ... and ITS WORMS DON'T DIE!

Have you ever been to a garbage dump?

It's a place that stinks / smolders / rubbish burning / maggots all over the place!

= CONTEMPTABLE!

MARK 9:48 – Jesus says – *If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (Gehenna) – where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”*

(i) GENEHNNA is eternity's garbage heap – images of burning, rotting, alienation - not that hell is necessarily a LITERALLY flame or worm, it's a METAPHOR for the destruction and filth and torment of hell.

“I'm in AGONY in this fire” – says the Rich Man to Abraham (v. 24).

Jesus uses images from this age, from his surrounding context, to warn us about the next.

(ii) The other fitting quality of this garbage dump – GEHENNA – is that it was a place OUTSIDE of the city.

In Matthew 8, Jesus spoke of hell as being a place where people are cast OUTSIDE of the banquet of God's kingdom – into darkness – v. 12 – where there will be weeping & gnashing of teeth.

A. The apostle Paul also speaks of hell as being “SHUT OUT from the presence of the Lord and the majesty of his power” (2 Thess. 1:9).

HELL IS DARKNESS / PAIN / DESTRUCTION / ISOLATION FROM GOD'S MAJESTIC PRESENCE.

- Do you believe that? Really?

3. FOR HOW LONG?

Here's what Jesus taught on that question: Mt. 25 – Just as the righteous are ushered into eternal life; those who did not minister to Jesus in his thirst, nakedness & hunger are given this judgment:

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the ETERNAL FIRE prepared for the devil & his angels ... whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to ETERNAL punishment.

(i) Jesus was no ANNIHILATIONIST!

About JUDAS the Betrayer, He said it would have been better for him not to have been born (Mt. 26:24). If Judas was only annihilated, that statement would make no sense.

- For those in hell, it would be better if they had not been born!

A. Nor does the rest of Scripture teach annihilationism:

Just as John described God (rev. 15:7) as the one who “lives forever and ever”, so he described the fire of hell as lasting “forever & ever” (14:11). = SAME WORDS (hands X-X)

(ii) HELL & HEAVEN ARE ETERNAL, according to Biblical teaching.

Now I do believe there’s a measure of humility we carry with that statement in that we now know that TIME IS FINITE. God did not create IN time. He created time. And one day, as the hymn puts it, “time will be no more”!

So ETERNAL DEATH refers as much to a QUALITY of destruction as a QUANTITY.

A. But that said, Jesus & Scripture uses the STRONGEST / BIGGEST terms possible to describe the punishment of hell ... the same terms as we use for as for HEAVEN

- They are balanced & equal in terminology.

THAT’S HEAVY – when you start to put faces on those scales of term ... loved ones!

4. WHO goes to this Hell?

(i) What the Bible teaches – reflected in our passage – is that Hell is the destination for UNREPENTANT SINNERS.

= the Rich Man who did not use his riches to do good.

= those who have disobeyed Moses (v. 29) and ignored the prophets.

ELSEWHERE: - John 5:29 – Those who have done evil

- 2 Peter 2:9 – the unrighteous

- Those whose mind is on earthly things – Phil. 3:19

= LAW-BREAKERS (as all of us are) who are UNREPENTANT!

A. C.S. Lewis once said, “There are 2 kinds of people in this world: Those who say to God, ‘Your will be done’ ... and those to whom God says, ‘Your will be done’.”

- HELL IS POPULATED WITH THE LATTER ...

... with those who PREFER DOING THEIR OWN WILL OVER God’s ... who have not humbled themselves before the will of God in desire & repentance.

As it's sometimes put, hell is populated by those who say, "*I'd rather be a KING in hell, than a servant in heaven.*" (My will be done, no Thine) ... = that's my choice!

- And, in on way, the Judgment of Hell is God simply saying: OK, HAVE IT YOUR WAY!

(ii) Hell is the END for UNREPENTANT SINNERS. That's the Bible's teaching MORE SO than the destination for those who reject Jesus.

You'll often hear that: WHO GOES TO HELL? It's "those who reject Jesus".

THAT'S TRUE! Those who reject God's mercy in Jesus do go to Hell.

- But that's not the focus of the Biblical answer ... and there's a couple of important applications to this:

A. ONE, what about those millions & billions who've never heard about Jesus?

- Some even wonder that about OT heroes who lived before Jesus – Did David go to heaven? Abraham? - Or are they in Hell? They didn't "accept Jesus"!

Well, the Bible clearly teaches that they were saved – this holding place, in anticipation of Heaven, is ABRHAM'S ARMS!

OT saints are saved because they were repentant before the will of God. They knew that they had to cast themselves on God's mercy. And to whatever degree they understood that mercy, they put their trust in it.

David knew the beginnings of God's mercy in the Old Covenant sacrificial system – which PREFIGURED His mercy in Jesus.

Abraham knew God's mercy in the sparing of his son, Isaac (also a witness).

They were repentant sinners and, as much as they comprehended the mercy of God, they put their trust in it.

B. This also helps us think through the issue of others who've never heard about Jesus.

- The first question of heaven & hell is, "Are they repentant people?" ... "How have they handled MOSES & THE PROPHETS?"

The will of God is known by everyone – Romans 2 – through creation & conscience.

- But what has been their HEART'S RESPONSE to the knowledge that they are not the people they should be?
- Are they humbled & sorrowful before the Holy Maker in light of that revelation?

God has made that witness available to everyone in this age.

For those who, by the power of the Spirit, become the truly repentant, God has and will reveal His mercy in Jesus Christ. And the repentant will CLING TO IT in the recognition that HERE is the only way I can be right with the Holy Maker ... and be saved ... even as that knowledge of mercy comes in its ULTIMATE & FINAL REVEALING at the personal return of Christ Jesus in human history.

Yes, Hell is populated by those who have and will reject Jesus, but the PRIMARY ANSWER that the Bible gives to the WHO of HELL is the UNREPENTANT:

In Acts 17:30, Paul teaches that "In Jesus, God has established a day of judgment. And he now commands all people everywhere to REPENT ... in order to embrace Jesus – today and in the final revelation!"

III. CONCLUSION - RESPONDING TO THE TEACHING OF HELL

... which leads to my other APPLICATION

1. In whose company are you? The REPENTANT OR UNREPENTANT?

(You'll see on my outline that I have 3 responses to this teaching on Hell – upward, inward, outward. Let me begin with the INWARD.)

(i) Hand in hand with this misunderstanding that the PRIMARY of question of heaven & hell is whether one has accepted Jesus or not, can come this MISCONCEPTION that, if at one point in my life – back in 1975 – if I made a decision for Christ – everything's FINE & EASY thereafter. => "I've made a decision. I've taken out my fire-insurance! Hell is no longer an issue for me!"

A. That may or may not be true. Here's the deception in this:

- For those who've made that decision and THEREUPON began a life of GROWING IN REPENTANCE under the Lordship of Jesus, as His Spirit teaches them the will of God ... they belong to Christ.

- But for those who've made a decision and are not passionately living in the will of God ... simply embraced living a religious self-satisfied lifestyle ... for those, they are living in deception ... and HELL IS A DANGEROUS REALITY!!!

It is of those Jesus teaches in Matthew 7 – *“Many will say to me on that day, ‘LORD, LORD’ ... and I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers! ... only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter the kingdom.”*

The ongoing repentant are the “sick ones” for whom Jesus came - ARE YOU IN that COMPANY?
 ARE YOU INCREASINGLY SEEING PRIDE in your life? Hardness of heart? Weakness of character? Shallowness of love? Self? Inflexibility? Spite? Coldness?

- Eternal life is laying that garbage at the Cross in thanksgiving for forgiveness, being healed, transformed from glory to glory in the will of God.

But if you cannot honestly affirm that, ETERNAL DEATH AWAITS!

Hell is every bit as real as heaven – and movement already happens in this age in one direction or the other!

2. Second response – UPWARD!

(i) Can a loving God send people to hell? No one can treat that question lightly.

But this much I do know – we have such a LIMITED SENSE of the MAJESTY of God’s holiness. (Isaiah got a glimpse ... Woe is me – Is. 6)

And just as limited a sense of the OFFENSE – “slap-in-your-face” offense of each and every sin!

Those coupling realities should always back us away from saying anything MORE THAN OR OTHER THAN He clearly says in His Word (like Paul does in Romans 11).

(ii) Further, the reality of Hell DOES reveal God’s love in UPHOLDING JUSTICE.

Good is right; Bad is wrong – because JUDGMENT COMES ... and HEAVEN & HELL are the just rewards of righteousness & unrighteousness.

JUSTICE IS REAL – praise God – it would be unloving if evil was not justly punished.

(iii) Also, the reality of Hell also shows us God’s love in the:

DIGNITY of being human (created in His image) – our choices matter

The SERIOUSNESS of life – IT MATTERS – everyday!

The Bible teaches that there are DEGREES of HELL (& degrees of heaven) based on your decisions and actions in this world. It’s part of a loving God’s creation! We’re not chimps, we’re humans – created in God’s image – with great responsibility & opportunity!

(iv) Above all, see His love in Christ Jesus.

In Him is our only hope to escape from the just judgment of hell.

A. He took on the curse of Hell to save the company of the repentant.

- He was tormented in thirst / treated like garbage / tortured / cut off / separated - that His people might be forgiven

B. If Hell is not real, how precious is His blood?

The ETERNAL witness of Hell is the ETERNAL WITNESS of the glory of the Savior!

As Dorothy Sayers puts it, *"We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ."*

3. Finally, the OUTWARD response.

What does the reality of Hell – eternal conscious punishment for sin – mean for our love for others?

(i) In a moment, Dave / Mary / Alisa are coming to give us an update on the ministry of CAYA GROUPS. Their mission is INFUSED WITH MEANING ultimately because of Hell & Heaven.

Through relationships – getting to know others, serve others, build trust & respect ...

We have to let people know that life matters

- Each individual is responsible for their character – and apart from Christ, we cannot stand before the holiness of God.

A. This world must know that the deep sense of failure in the heart of every human being is not the end of the story.

- We needn't deny it – guilt is real. Instead, CONFESS ... and then EMBRACE the healing mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

- Apart from those 2 movements of the heart - repentance & faith - the Bible teaches – & Jesus especially – that Hell awaits our neighbors, friends, even family.

PEOPLE MATTER – And it is our mission in the world to care for people, pray and look for opportunities to share God's truth in this world. That is our MISSION!

Jesus ministered with power in the reality of hell and heaven.

May we do likewise – in His name.

AMEN!