

WHAT ABOUT HELL?

MATTHEW 25:41-46

Several soldiers were buddies in the military and had in common a rejection of anything spiritual. You could call them hardcore non-believers. One day they asked a chaplain whether he believed in hell. The chaplain thought about his answer for a few moments and then replied, “No, fellas, I don’t.” One of those soldiers shot back, “Then you’re wasting your time. If there is not a hell, then we don’t need you. If there is a hell, you’re leading us astray. Either way – we’re better off without you.” He’s got a point!

We’re in the midst of a message series I’m calling *Heaven: A Restored Place for Redeemed People*. I think it’s important to spend one message on a very much related but uncomfortable topic: Hell. Opinion polls say most Americans believe in Heaven, but most don’t believe in Hell. It’s easy to understand why. We tend to believe in things that are pleasant and not believe in things that are unpleasant. Unfortunately, that’s an ineffective way of determining what is true or false. Cancer is true even though it’s very unpleasant. Racism exists even though we don’t like it. There isn’t anything more unpleasant than Hell. But the fact that Hell is unpleasant doesn’t disprove its existence or make it less real.

You may be surprised to know that Jesus spoke more about Hell than He did Heaven and that no one spoke more about Hell in the Bible than Jesus. If you believe Jesus was a great man and a great teacher, but you don’t believe in Hell, then logic demands that Jesus was wrong about something very important. Not only did Jesus most certainly believe in Hell’s existence, but the Bible itself assumes Hell’s existence and gives us information about it. If you believe the Bible is the Word of God, you have no choice about believing in Hell. Let’s read one Bible passage in which Jesus clearly teaches the existence of Hell and then try to answer three questions this morning.

WHAT IS HELL LIKE?

First of all, Jesus reveals that Hell is one of two possible destinations when people die. He says elsewhere, “You can enter God’s Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.” (Mt 7:13-14 NLT) The religion of Hinduism – which has been popularized in our country through many New Age beliefs – teaches reincarnation. When you die, you come back as another person or life form. The Bible rejects reincarnation. It says, “... each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment.” (Heb 9:27 NLT) You and I have one of two destinies awaiting us at the moment of death: Heaven or Hell.

Secondly, Jesus’ words there in Matthew 25 teach that Hell is an eternal condition. Jesus refers to “the eternal fire” and to “eternal punishment.” That agrees with other Bible passages. For instance, in the Old Testament book of

Daniel, God is speaking to Daniel about events in the future and He says, “Many of those whose bodies lie dead and buried will rise up, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting disgrace.” (Dan 12:2 NLT) Look at that word “everlasting.” We all enjoy believing that Heaven is eternal and everlasting. But the same adjectives that describe Heaven also describe Hell at this point. The experience of Hell is eternal, everlasting and forever. There will be no end to Hell. As a result, Hell is the ultimate horror in God’s universe simply because it is an eternal reality for all who end up there. Hell is endless.

What is hell like? Thirdly, Jesus’ words reveal that Hell is the place of God’s ultimate judgment and punishment. It’s easy to get so fascinated by the imagery the Bible uses about Hell that you can lose the real point of the imagery. One of the most common descriptions of Hell is that it’s a place filled with fire. Jesus referred to it as “eternal fire.” Elsewhere in the Bible, Hell is described as a “furnace of fire,” “a lake of fire,” a place filled with “fire and brimstone,” and a place of “unquenchable fire.” Does that mean that Hell is full of literal fire and flames? Perhaps. But more importantly, in the Bible fire is always an image of God’s judgment upon sin and punishment of sin. But Hell is also depicted as a place of total darkness. How can a place be utterly dark if actual flames are burning all of the time. Fire provides light as well as heat. Regardless, the point is not that people’s flesh will literally be on fire forever and ever but that Hell will be a place of intense, terrible and unimaginable suffering forever.

Another image of Hell is of worms eating human flesh. That’s based on something Jesus said, “It’s better to enter the Kingdom of God with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, “where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.”” (Mk 9:47-48 NLT) What is that about? In Jesus’ time, thousands of animals were slaughtered and sacrificed in the Temple every week. There was a sewage system that took away the blood and other body parts and deposited it into a refuse pool. Worms were there constantly ingesting this stuff. It was a very ugly place. The point is not that there will be literal worms in Hell, but that Hell will be the most disgusting, revolting place in God’s universe.

Another image of Hell is of people grinding their teeth. Of Hell, Jesus said, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth....” (Lk 13:28 NLT) Your first impression might be of people being painfully tortured. But actually when that description is used elsewhere in the Bible it refers to a state of tremendous anger, absolute frustration and the realization of great and permanent loss. People in Hell will forever be faced with the consequences of their decision to reject God. Unless you understand these images, you can easily conclude that Hell is this fantastic chamber of horrors that God has created to torture people forever who don’t like Him. I’m going to address that issue in a few minutes, but it’s a mistake to think of Hell as God’s torture chamber. Instead, it is a place God had to create to keep those who want nothing to do with Him. Indeed, Hell is the last refuge for a person who wants nothing to do with God.

Now, someone might say, “Rick, if fire, worms and grinding teeth aren’t necessarily true, you are minimizing the horror of Hell.” On the contrary, I don’t think there are human words to describe how awful and terrible Hell will be. Because Hell is the final, ultimate punishment for rebellion against God, the reality of Hell will be far worse than eternal fire, worms or gnashing teeth. It’s all beyond human imagination, beyond human description and beyond human comprehension. It’s a place of utter heartbreak. It’s the loss of everything. Hell is utter catastrophe – the worst possible destiny and destination that could ever be experienced by a human being. Now, here’s a second question today.

WHO GOES TO HELL?

Clearly, the Bible teaches that those who reject God by refusing to trust Jesus for salvation will go to Hell. Jesus said this about Himself, “No one who has faith in God's Son will be condemned. But everyone who doesn't have faith in him has already been condemned for not having faith in God's only Son.” (Jo 3:18 CEV) Jesus also said, “ ‘... If you don't have faith in me for who I am, you will die, and your sins will not be forgiven.’ ” (Jo 8:24 CEV) Most of us have a pretty good sense of what sin is: the Ten Commandments – murder, adultery, lying, and stealing, for example, attitudes such as hatred, selfishness, pride and envy – just to name a few, or a failure to do what is right – failing to show compassion or failing to stand up for someone who’s being exploited. But the Bible makes it clear that the worst sin of all is unbelief. Even if you never verbalize it, when you live in such a way that says to God - “I could care less about what You created me. I could care less about Jesus’ death on the cross. I’m going to ignore all of that and live to please myself” – now that’s the ultimate sin. And that sin – if it isn’t replaced by an all-embracing trust in God and an all-consuming love for God – will send you straight to Hell for all eternity.

Ted Turner is a multi-billionaire. He happens to be the country's largest landowner with more than 1.6 million acres on which he runs his herd of 17,000 buffalo. His successes have included ownership of television channels CNN, the Superstation TBS and serving as the Vice Chairman of Time Warner. He won the America's Cup sailing trophy in 1977 and when he owned the Atlanta Braves they won the 1995 World Series. Ted Turner does a lot of good, philanthropic stuff. But listen to this quote: “You know, I'm not looking for any big rewards. I'm not a religious person. I believe this life is all we have. I'm not doing what I'm doing to be rewarded in heaven or punished in hell. I'm doing it because I feel it's the right thing to do. Almost every religion talks about a savior coming. When you look in the mirror in the morning, when you're putting on your lipstick or shaving, you're looking at the savior. Nobody else is going to save you but yourself.” Now, there’s much to like and admire about Ted Turner, but right there in his own words is found the fundamental attitude that sends people to Hell for all eternity.

Who goes to hell? Secondly, even religious people who don’t trust in Jesus for salvation will go to hell. It’s revealing to see how Jesus addressed different

groups of people. When He's talking about God's grace, who's He speaking to? Usually, it's dishonest tax collectors, prostitutes and other moral outcasts who'd been rejected by respectable people. But to whom did He say the most about God's judgment? The Pharisees and the other religious leaders. On one occasion, Jesus said to the very religious Pharisees, "You are nothing but snakes and the children of snakes! How can you escape going to hell?" (Mt 23:33 CEV) It sounds as if Jesus assumed many of them would end up there. Those Pharisees were very moral, very religious and very outwardly godly. But they had no use for Jesus. Their hearts were filled with unbelief towards God and His way of providing salvation – through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees had the same mindset that most Americans have today. Essentially, they believe that God grades on a curve. Back in June 2006, Warren Buffet, the world's second-richest man at the time, announced that he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Commenting on this extreme level of generosity, Buffet said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way." That's just how most people think when the subject is how to get into Heaven. If your good deeds outnumber your bad deeds, how can God keep you out of Heaven?

But getting into Heaven and staying out of Hell has nothing to do with either the quantity of your good deeds or the quantity of your sins. Because we're all sinners, we all deserve Hell. The real question is whether you've taken God up on His one and only offer of escape. Do you believe that Jesus died on a cross to pay the penalty for your sins? Have you admitted your spiritual bankruptcy to God and thrown yourself upon His mercy and grace? Do you today trust in Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Is Jesus the center of your life? You can be a member of this church and go to Hell. You can be a very moral person and go to Hell. You can do compassionate things and go to Hell. You can think deep, spiritual thoughts and go to Hell. Please don't take my word for it. Listen to what Jesus said, "Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, "We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles." But I will tell them, "I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!" (Mt 7:21-23 CEV)

Who goes to hell? Where there is a question, let God be God. What will happen to people who have never had someone share the good news of Jesus with them so that they could believe in Jesus? What about all the people down through the centuries who've never had even one missionary come and share the good news about Jesus with them? Will God send those people to Hell? My study of the Bible leads me to the conclusion that there are unanswered questions. But here's what I do know beyond any shadow of a doubt. God is justice perfected, grace unfathomed and love personified. I can trust God fully to be God and to do the right thing. So can you. But no one here today can make the claim he or she

has never heard. You're heard the good news about Jesus again today and you've probably heard it numerous other times. On the Day of Judgment you will be without excuse when you stand before God. That's why you must surrender your life to Jesus today. Now let me address a third and final question quickly.

WHY IS HELL NECESSARY?

First of all, Hell is necessary because it reveals God's complete character. People reject the concept of Hell because they think it contradicts the fact that God is love. God certainly is the God of love. But He is more than just love. He is also holiness, righteousness and purity personified. He is also the Judge of the entire universe He's created. For Him to allow sin to go unpunished would itself be a sin. It would mean God Himself is unjust. God is also sovereign. In other words, God always has the last word. That's part of His character. God's will ultimately triumphs. God can't be defeated by human sin and rebellion. The Bible says that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord of all. It doesn't say that every person will rejoice over that fact. It simply states the fact that every person will recognize the Lordship of Jesus. Is Adolph Hitler in Hell? Probably. Does he now know that Jesus is Lord? By all means! Is he happy about that? No, but he recognizes it nonetheless.

Secondly, Hell is necessary because God respects human choices. How does God feel about people going to Hell? The Bible says, "Tell them that as surely as I am the living LORD God, I don't like to see wicked people die. I enjoy seeing them turn from their sins and live...." (Ezk 33:11 CEV) It also says, "The Lord isn't slow about keeping his promises, as some people think he is. In fact, God is patient, because he wants everyone to turn from sin and no one to be lost." (2 Pt 3:9 CEV) No, Hell is not God's eternal torture chamber for people who reject His authority. God is the most generous, loving, wonderful and attractive Being in the entire universe. The fact is that He created you with the capacity to defy Him, to reject Him and to rebel against Him. Why? He wants your choice for Him to be real, authentic and true. He doesn't want a manipulated or manufactured choice. God doesn't force people to go to Heaven who don't want God or to be with God. This is what the Bible says about those who will be in Hell, "Their punishment will be eternal destruction, and they will be kept far from the presence of our Lord and his glorious strength." (2 Th 1:9 CEV) Ultimately, Hell is a place where people who reject God get what they want – life without God and life separate from God forever. If you want life without God, God will respect your choice. He won't overrule your decision. I guess you could say that Hell is the very last refuge for someone who doesn't want God or anything to do with Him.

New Testament scholar, D.A. Carson put it well, "Hell is not a place where people are consigned because they were pretty good [people], but they just didn't believe the right stuff. They're consigned there, first and foremost, because they defy their maker and want to be at the center of their own universe. Hell is not filled with people who have already repented, only God isn't gentle enough or

good enough to let them out. It's filled with people who, for all eternity, still want to be at the center of the universe and who persist in their God-defying rebellion. What is God to do? If he says it doesn't matter to him, then God is no longer a God to be admired...."

Thirdly, Hell is necessary because this life matters. If we all end up at the same destination ultimately, then how you live your life now is irrelevant. It makes no difference if you trust in Jesus or not. It makes no difference if your sins are forgiven or not. It makes no difference whether you follow Jesus or not. It makes no difference how you live your life. It makes no difference if you're a Mother Teresa or an Osama bin Laden. If there is no Heaven and no Hell, then this life is essentially absurd. It's just a meaningless joke from your first day to your last day. The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "If what we do now is to make no difference in the end, then all the seriousness of life is done away with."

But this life does matter. This is the opportunity God gives every person to turn to Him in faith, trust in Jesus – God's way of salvation - and discover the joy of living life with Him. The Bible says, "...Indeed, the 'right time' is now. Today is the day of salvation." (2 Cor 6:2 NLT) Every one of us here today has a family member, a neighbor, a friend in school, someone you work with or a long time friend who has not yet opened his or her heart to Jesus. No, I don't think God sends someone to Hell because I didn't get around to sharing the good news about Jesus with him or her. God will send someone else. But I will forfeit an eternal blessing. On the other hand, can you imagine the eternal joy you will have in Heaven knowing another person is there because God used you to share the good news about Jesus with him or her? This life does matter. The choices you make in this life matter.

On July 4, 1864, a well-known criminal in London by the name of Charlie Peace was executed by hanging. The Anglican Church, which apparently has a ceremony for everything, even had a ceremony back then for hanging people. So when Charlie Peace was marched to the gallows, a priest read these words from the Anglican Prayer Book of that time, "Those who die without Christ experience hell, which is the pain of forever dying without the release which death itself can bring." When those true but chilling words were read, Charlie Peace stopped in his tracks, turned to the priest and shouted in his face, "Do you believe that? Do you believe that?" The priest, a bit taken aback by this unexpected verbal assault, stammered for a moment and then said, "Well, ... I suppose I do." "Well, I don't," said Charlie Peace. "But if I did, I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl all over Great Britain, even if it were paved with pieces of broken glass, if I could rescue one person from what you just told me!"

Hell is a terrible, eternal and necessary place. Many will end up there. That is your default destination and mine. No one just ends up in Heaven. You must choose to go to Heaven. Have you made your choice for Jesus? If so, are you choosing to share Jesus with others?