

“ISN'T THE IDEA OF HELL TOO UNCIVILIZED?”Matthew 25:31-46**THEME:** Biblical doctrine of hell and eternal punishment.**DATE:** 1/28/07

Dr. John Crocker, First Evangelical Free Church, Rockford, IL

Is hell just a primitive notion that smart, civilized people should dismiss as mere poppycock?

The pastor of an upper-middle-class church said its parishioners were well-educated critical thinkers who view God as compassionate and loving, not someone who's going to push them into eternal damnation.

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.'*

But now we're supposed to be too sophisticated to believe that tommyrot.

- Hell has become a favorite expletive. People hook hell onto every interrogative, *Who the hell, and What the hell, and Why the hell, How the hell and When the hell!*

It has also become the standard default simile for some folk. 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 *good as hell, or fun as hell, or sweet as hell, even cold as hell!*

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

- I wonder if people speak of hell trivially to avoid taking it seriously.

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 lot of people speak of hell as the atrocities perpetrated here on earth, such as the genocide at Darfur in Sudan, where the population of whole villages was burned alive. They say those people went through hell. So hell is something that people create on earth.

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 in 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.'*

- Is it silly to talk about hell?

When was the last time you heard a sermon about hell? In my 33 years as a pastor I have preached on hell only about four times.

A well-known 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 12th Article of Faith in our denomination's Statement of Faith reads, *'We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead; of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord, of the unbeliever to judgment and everlasting conscious punishment.'*

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

In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus Christ provides **answers** to some of our tough questions about hell.

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

Judgment is actually separation. A judge has the responsibility to separate truth from error, good from bad. Judges in athletic contest separate the fast from the slow, the best from the good.

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

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.*

It was a 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.

A shepherd knows the difference between a sheep and a goat. It's not a challenge he has to fret over.

- Jesus gave this as an analogy for judgment at the end of the age when he will finally separate all people into two classes.

It's the "Super Bowl of separation."

It also applies to the church.

Jesus warned that 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.

What is the single great issue that this final judgment will settle? It's the answer to the question: "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?

Sometimes I hear people saying these are the poor, the weak, and the underprivileged of the world. I'm sure our Lord is pleased when we show compassion to hurting people. 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)

There's an important point we all must get here. Doing good deeds and helping those who are serving Christ's purposes does not make a person righteous in God's eyes.

What Jesus is explaining is that those who are righteous will be recognized by what they do—not justified by what they do!

Christ the Judge sees perfectly clearly 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 love and care for the least of his brothers—or sisters, you reveal who you really are. If you don't care about Christ's work, Christ knows if your faith is authentic or not.

- 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.

[2nd answer to some of our tough questions about hell]

II. HELL IS A FINAL RETRIBUTION (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.

A woman viewing proofs of a 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.

Those who have been born anew spiritually by faith in Christ will serve God by serving others and supporting God's purpose in the world.

[3rd answer to some of our tough questions about hell]

III. HELL IS A DREADFUL CULMINATION (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 scholars believe there is a literal hell, but they say those who ultimately reject God will be put out of existence in the consuming fire of hell. (vis. Clark H. Pinnock, John R.W. Stott, Philip E. Hughes) That view is called annihilationism.

Another notion that has persisted for centuries is the hope 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.

The rules in most competitions and contests usually include this clause: 'the decision of the judges is final.'

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.

It would be wrong for a perfectly good and holy God to allow evil to go on unchecked and 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)

Because of that, all who put their trust in Jesus Christ receive God's mercy instead of his wrath.

- God didn't prepare hell for human beings. The Apostle Peter emphasized that *'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.

How has this focus on hell affected you? Maybe you're upset, because you came to church to hear a message of love and hope.

C.S. Lewis said there are no ordinary people. They are either immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

If hell is real and if Jesus Christ is the only hope for people to be saved from everlasting torment, what does this mean for some members of your family or your neighbors or the people at work? Do you care?

If we don't believe in hell, then our wonderful gospel message about Salvation is nonsense. If we talk about God's gracious gift of salvation for sinners, we must ask, "salvation from what?" That's where we have to address the reality of hell.

- I hope you will leave here with deep gratitude to God for what you have in Christ. I hope you'll have a profound peace and a joy in your soul. I hope that along with compassion will stir in you for a lost world that begins in some of you closest relationships.

If you're afraid of going to hell, I beg you to confess your sins to God now, and believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, so that you will be saved from a real hell.

God will save all who will believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior and receive him by placing their complete trust in him.