

I. Set Up:

A. Matthew 13:47: “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

B. ⁵¹“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

C. “Yes,” they replied.

II. Introduction:

A. You don’t, you don’t believe in hell, do you. You don’t think I am going to hell do you? You’re not one of those. Please tell me you’re not one of those. You don’t think my Mom is in hell, do you? My Mom? She was an atheist, but she was a wonderful lady. Do you think she is in hell? My Mom? Please tell me you believe in a God of love.

B. Charles Spurgeon, a prominent early-20th century British preacher told his students, who were all training to be pastors, “When you speak about heaven, you need to smile a lot. When you speak about hell, your normal face will do just fine.”

C. Well, this morning, as promised - or maybe, as threatened - my normal face “will do just fine.” This series:

1. Started in Luke 6, where I noted that Christ’s life, death, teaching and resurrection only make sense if we live after we die.
2. We then turned to Psalm 90:12 to explore the importance of being alert to the fact that we will die.
3. We then moved to I Cor. 15 to learn about the resurrection.
4. We then - last week – moved to 1 Corinthians 3 to explore Final Judgment.
5. Next week we get to Heaven. Finally! Yes! We’re almost there. I can’t wait.
6. But today the topic is hell.

D. According to the polls:

1. although not many people talk about hell - and although it is considered very out of synch with more enlightened views about God and reality - most people believe in some form of it.
2. And there is a fair bit of “Hell anxiety,” out there, especially among the non-religious.¹

E. And so, I want to walk us through an overview of what the Bible says about what happens if we die estranged from God. Our text is Matthew 13.

III. You just heard it read. Before we unpack what it means, let me say three things:

- A. First, my overview today is modest.
1. A lot has been written or said about hell by people who appear privy to lots of details. I'm not in that camp. I believe there is a lot we do not know. The Bible's teaching on hell raises questions for which I do not have answers. So, I am going to focus on the big ideas, which are more than troubling enough.
 2. The clear teaching of Jesus is that there is a narrow road that leads to eternal life (which is wonderful beyond our imagination). And there is a more heavily trafficked path that leads to eternal death (which we want desperately to avoid).
- B. I expect you will be looking for a loop hole. I have. I've spent a bit of time trying to find a way around this doctrine.²
1. I've thought, "If only Christianity was a democracy, and we could vote this doctrine out. If only God would open his constitution to one amendment, this could be it." I keep looking for ways to embrace purgatory, annihilationism, universalism – pretty much anything that would make this go away.
 2. I can relate to C. S. Lewis who said that he would do anything within his power to be able to say that all will be saved.
- C. Third, my expectation is that what I say will offend some of you. Which is never the goal, but which is also not much of a concern. My job is not to tell you what you want to hear but to explain what the Bible teaches. I actually expect several things about what I say to strike you as scandalous, not just the doctrine itself.
1. I know that some of you are thinking, "I can't believe he is talking about hell. This is in such poor taste. It's too emotional. Too negative. Too triggering. Too small-minded. Too barbaric."^{3,4}
 2. It's not just that I'm suggesting it's real and that God's love demands it (which I will say more about in a moment).
 3. It is my belief that your beliefs don't change universal reality.
 - a) Yes, I'm playing with words and being intentionally ironic and circular.
 - b) And yes, I know – and believe – what Paul wrote in Romans 10 – that if we confess with our mouth and believe with our heart then we will be saved. So, yes, there is a sense in which I believe that your beliefs matter.
 - c) What I am trying to underline is that our beliefs do not change what is true. I believe that objective truth exists and that there is an absolute moral order that is grounded in God. And that we do not have the ability to change any of this.
 4. In this postmodern, post-Enlightenment, post-liberal moment, many assume that their beliefs do change things. That we are able to declare all manner of things, and reality is expected to conform to what we declare. You can have your truth and I can have my truth. After all, we each have our own lived experience. Reality adapts. I do not think this is true. I do believe that some people are rich enough to hold reality at arm's length for a time. But I believe that eventually reality prevails. And that reality will prevail when we die.

IV. So, Matthew 13 – the passage that was read - where Jesus provides the disciples with some remedial instruction on hell.

A. He had been teaching a crowd - telling them parables about both the kingdom of heaven and about hell. The disciples had indicated that they didn't understand. So, he pulled them aside and said, "Let me explain this in terms you can relate to. You're fishermen – some of you anyway. So, try this. The kingdom of God is like a lake and that two men take a dragnet and collect all the fish out of the entire body of water. And then they start to sort them out. And they end up with two piles.

B. They have the good fish. The marketable fish – the salmon, bass and trout. They go in one pile. And they end up with the other fish. The bad fish - the carp and dogfish. The fish that have no value. They go into a different pile and are burned.

C. Well, it's just like that with people. The world is going to be drained, and people are going to be sorted. There will be two categories: the righteous and the wicked. Or - to frame it slightly differently - those whose sins have been paid for and those whose sins have not. Those who have humbled themselves before God and those who have not. Those who have said to God, "your will be done." And those who have demanded their own way. The first go to be with God. And the second are cast aside.

D. "Do you understand?" He asked them. And they all said, "Yes."

V. I don't think we do. I don't even think we try. I think that, for the most part, we ignore

A. passages like Matthew 13.

B. We ignore passages like Matthew 25 - which I referenced last week. This is the one where Jesus divides people. And then say to one group: **'Depart from me** (which is the worst thing possible to hear from God. We were made for a relationship with him. We were created to be in his presence. To be cast away from him is bad beyond comprehension). **Depart from me you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.'**

C. We ignore Matthew 10:28, where Jesus said, **"Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul. Instead fear those who can destroy both body and soul in hell"** – i.e., God.⁵

D. We ignore Matthew 5 – as you can tell, I am just staying in Matthew here. There are other books where Hell is developed. We ignore passages like Matthew 5, where Jesus said that those who give into sin will be in danger of hell fire.

E. We ignore – well, you get the point.

F. The idea that anyone will be separated from God and suffer is not popular. It has not aged well. We don't think much about it. But we should.

VI. I have five points.

A. One: Jesus is the one who talks about Hell.

1. Jesus actually said more about hell than about heaven. He is the one who gives us the horrific descriptions of it – “lake of fire” “bottomless pit,” “blazing furnace,” and “gnashing of teeth.” These are not obscure Old Testament passages that we are free to ignore or claim are being yanked out of context.

2. We might like to think that Jesus only spoke about love - about nice things. That he embraced 21st century, upper middle class suburban values. But that isn’t true. He did speak about love. He taught about it and personified it and magnified it. But that is not all He had to say. Jesus also spoke about sin and wrath and suffering and death. He spoke about justice and judgment and heaven and hell.

3. So, the biblical picture of hell comes from him.

4. Of course, some of what people think about hell is not from him. Many get their ideas from the Medieval illustrations of *Dante’s Inferno*, or from other works. Sartre described hell as three people locked in a room for ever, with no ability to get away from each other even for a second.⁶

5. There are other ideas in circulation. But we need not concern ourselves with them. What we need to recognize is that it was Jesus - the one who was friends with all the broken and oppressed people. The one who hung out with thieves and outcasts. The one who was kind and compassionate. The one who said he was laying down his life for others who talks about hell.⁷

6. And he makes it clear that he says what he says as a warning.

B. Two: The lake of fire isn’t an actual lake of fire.

1. When people ask me if I believe in a literal hell – i.e., a lake of fire, bottomless pit - I say, “No. I suspect the language is figurative.” And then when they say, “good.” “I say, that’s the wrong response.”

a) It is at this point that Tim Keller and others say, “It’s not a lake of fire. It’s worse.” I don’t say that because I can’t imagine that. But I do say, “Breathing a sigh of relief is the wrong response. It means you don’t get it. Jesus makes hell sound as bad as he possibly can.”

2. The English word “hell” is a translation of several different Greek words:⁸ *hades* - which is a somewhat opened ended term that can mean little more than the realm of all dead, but sometimes is used to describe the pre-resurrection body place of suffering. And *gehenna*, which derives at least some of its meaning from a valley outside the southwest walls of Jerusalem.⁹

3. A few hundred years before Christ, this area was used as a place of human sacrifice to the God Molech. It ended up being viewed as a wicked place – some would say cursed. And then it became the city dump: a big garbage heap where there was always smoldering fire.¹⁰

4. The meaning of words change over time, but you can see where the term hell gets started.

5. Of course we also have other efforts to explain and describe it. I'm not thinking of those who suggest that hell is one big fraternity party, where everyone who is anyone has gone to hang out together. I'm thinking of more serious reflections.

a) There is *Dante's Inferno*, the first part of his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. It's an allegorical journey in which the Roman poet Virgil guides Dante as they descend through nine concentric circles of Hell, each reserved for different categories of sinner - from the virtuous pagans to the most heinous traitors. The circles are depicted as increasingly horrific and punishing, with each sin met with an ironic, fitting punishment that reflects the nature of the sin.

b) You've also got CS Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which is also an allegory - this time a novel not a poem. In it, heaven and hell are the backdrops for a group of residents from hell who take a bus ride to the outskirts of Heaven, where they encounter some residents of heaven.

(1) And these residents are recruiting, which to be clear, I don't believe can happen. But the residents of heaven try to persuade the residents of hell - the latter being these wispy, weightless, disfigured, so-self-centered-and-consumed-with-pride-and-lust-that-they-are-becoming-like-Gollum) don't want to stay in heaven.

c) Which sets up point three

C. The Bible portrays hell as self-chosen.

1. People ask, how can you worship a God who you believe consigns people to hell? Well, that is not the way this is framed.

2. God is holy and just, but the prevailing revelation of God is that of a father who relentlessly, tirelessly pursues us. He goes to stunning lengths to recover the lost sheep, find the lost coin, run after the prodigal. He does not want anyone to be lost.¹¹ But who eventually gives us what we want - which is to walk away.

3. In Romans 1-2, Paul notes that God "gives up" those who reject him. That he eventually turns us over to the "the sinful passions of our hearts." Which, at it's the most basic level - is a quest for independence. We want to go our own way.

a) Isaiah 53:6 - All we like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;

b) We want to get away from God. We want to be our own God. This was Eve. This was Cain. This is us. We want to go our own way, which leads us away from God and down a self-destructive path. This is what God warns us about - sin turns us into slaves. It brings blindness - the more we reject God the less capable we are of perceiving truth about God or the world or ourselves.¹²

4. JI Packer writes, "Scripture sees hell as self-chosen . . . [H]ell appears as God's gesture of respect for human choice. All receive what they actually chose, either to be with God forever, worshipping him, or without God forever, worshipping themselves."¹³

5. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis – who in other places will argue that the gates of hell are locked on the inside – in *The Great Divorce* he will write: There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.

6. Tim Keller preached a number of messages on hell – for which I am very thankful. I used to complain that I’d only ever heard a few messages on hell in my life, and most of them I’d given. In addition to stating that hell is “God banishing us to regions we have desperately tried to get to all our lives.” He then goes on to note that when God removes himself from us – and all we are left with is our own self – we find that our desires become rapid lusts that burn like flames.¹⁴

D. Four: The existence of Hell helps us live at peace.

1. Number one: Jesus is the one who talks about hell. Number two: It’s not an actual lake of fire. Number three: The Bible suggests hell is self-chosen. Number four: Hell helps us live at peace.

2. I’m sure some of you are thinking, “What are you talking about? How could the reality of hell bring any comfort?” Well, we can relax and depend on God to bring justice.

3. Miraslov Volf – the Croatian theologian who has written a lot on peace, and who teaches co-teaches classes on geo-political affairs with Tony Blair at Yale (Blair is the former PM of the UK) - thinks hell sounds like a really bad idea... if you live a modern, privileged life. But not if you live the lives of most people, for whom there is no justice.

a) Volf argues that a belief in hell curbs violence in the world because those who believe in a God of justice can leave revenge to God.

b) Volf argues that if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship.... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God....My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many...in the West... [But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God’s refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die...[with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.¹⁵

4. When you believe in a God who is just, you can trust that ultimately all wrongs will be put right.

5. Conversely, the person who does not believe in God is left to make sense of the cruel injustices done to them, to those they love and to many others throughout history.

E. Finally, five, Hell helps us comprehend God's love.

1. Some think this is crazy. They believe in a sentimental God who is "all love" but not concerned about justice. Some water everything down – i.e., God's holiness and our sin, the Gospel itself. This is what led H. Richard Niebuhr to issue his famous description of liberal Christianity: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."¹⁶
2. That is not who God is. And, what that view often fails to see is that God's love cost him. What the Bible shows us is that God's extravagant love costs Him infinite amounts of pain in every way imaginable - to the point of entering hell Himself to satisfy what His perfect justice rightfully demands.
3. Christ's death on the cross demonstrates God's unfathomable love for us and His unflinching commitment to pay whatever costs our sin justly deserves -- all to reconcile you and me to Himself.
4. In Matthew 10:28, a passage I quoted earlier in the message, Jesus suggests that no physical destruction can be compared with the spiritual destruction of hell – of losing the presence of God. And yet, that is what happened to Jesus on the cross. He was forsaken by the Father.¹⁷ In the Luke 16 passage – where the rich man is in hell asking Abraham to send Lazarus – the rich man says, "I thirst." This is exactly what Jesus says on the cross. He cries out, "I thirst." Don't you see – because of his love for us, he suffered for us."
5. In other words, you will never know how much you mean to God until you understand hell.

VII. So, let me wrap this up.

- A. To those of you who know Christ, how do you respond to a talk as heavy as this? How do you process the idea of eternal punishment?
 1. Your first reaction should be one of thanksgiving, because you don't have to go there. We do not deserve the chance to be with God in glory for all of time, but that is what we get. **We bypass hell altogether.**
 2. Your second response should be one of action. There should be "apocalyptic urgency" in telling others about Christ. If you are not involved in telling others about Christ,¹⁸ helping them grow to maturity, investing your life in kingdom causes, you will regret it, I need you to hear, you are doing life wrong. And you will regret it.
- B. To those of you who are here this morning and do not know Christ
 1. To those of you who, by your own admission, are not following him. Are not sure that if you die today, you will gain eternal life not eternal death. Let me plead with you to follow Christ.
 2. It's been said that some people turn when they see the light and others wait until they feel the heat. I prefer to motivate you with the carrot not the stick, but you cannot read the Gospels and not realize, Jesus talks about the stick. So let me say, the good news is only good news if you hear it in time and turn.
 - a) You do not need to do anything to go to hell, because God is perfect, and we are not. And so we need to be helped. Rescued. That is what Jesus offers.

- b) I hope you understand that there isn't a thing in this world, in this life—this one short life—worth going to hell for. And I hope you understand that hell is real.
3. And now let me say this: I'm not going to say another thing about hell because I want you to know about God's love and provision.
- a) I want you to know that our Father's desire that no one should perish, but that all should have eternal life.
- b) I want you to know that you have a divine invitation to be redeemed. To be restored. To be forgiven. And to be invited to spend eternity in heaven.
- c) And I want you to know that that offer is still available today, and that I think you should make that decision.
- d) That I think you should heed Isaiah's words and, "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near." (Is. 55:6)
4. I wrestled with this decision for a couple years before I made it . But in the end, it came down to a realization that there was no one like Jesus. And that I could do no better than to follow Him.
- a) To study His teaching.
- b) To follow His example.
- c) And to accept His provision.
- d) I'm not much inclined to rush anyone into a decision. But I can't very well—in good conscious—talk about hell and then not give you a chance to know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.
- e) And the Bible is clear: 1) Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and narrow is the path; 2) But also, that as many as receive Him, to them He gives the right to become children of God.
5. As we close, I am going to pray a prayer similar to the one I prayed over 20 years ago, and if it's your desire to follow after him, pray along silently with me.

¹ In "Who Worries About Hell the Most," (David Briggs, *Christianity Today*, Feb. 4, 2019) about two-thirds of Americans believe in hell, but researchers found that an "unhealthy fear" of Hell is not connected to "religious fundamentalism" or "dogmatism." Nor is the conviction that Hell is really associated with neuroses or any kind of pathological fear. In fact, "those who have a strong belief in Hell seem to have greater qualities of cooperation, less selfishness, more generosity, avoid addictions, and cultivate more long-lasting relationships than those who do not." I would add, it appears that, as much as we chafe at the topic, ignoring it is not a working. God has written some things too deeply on our heart to be easily suppressed.

² I suspect part of the reason we find it hard to comprehend this doctrine is because we do not understand how broken we are. Right now, we have a lot more in common with the Hitlers, the Stalins and the Pol Pots than we do with Christ. We are too close to the scene to be objective about what God should do with evil. We relate too well with sinners and with sin – because that is who we are. There are ways it makes intellectual

sense to me. I mean, the whole idea of salvation is to be saved from something. But I don't think we can fully and emotionally affirm this. I think we hit tilt before that. But I am going to tell you that you'd better not ignore it.

³ If I am mad, I can say, "Oh, yeah, well I think you and everybody that looks like you should just go to hell." - That's OK. But I cannot say, "Jeff, I really care for you and I am scared that you are headed straight for hell." - That's not OK

⁴ In seminary we stayed up late talking about it. Hoping against hope that we could explain it away – especially those of us who have friends or family who do not know Christ. Or who had already lost friends or family that died without any relationship with him. We wanted to dilute it. We wanted to come up with some kind of alternative plan that we could buy into.

⁵ It is worth reflecting that in the end it is not Hell we should fear, but God.

⁶ In Sartre's hell, there are three individuals stuck in a room existing in total isolation for all eternity. The door is locked from the outside, and they can't get out. Furthermore, they can't get away from each other even for a moment. Nor can they even close their eyes, as their eyelids won't shut. There is no escape, and they are driving one another insane.

⁷ Dr. Kenneth Kantzer, the former Dean of Trinity Divinity School and also a former editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote this: "In actuality, the teaching of Jesus Christ (on the reality of hell) is abundantly clear and persuasive. Even if the Gospels are only a remote reflection of the life and teaching of our Savior – and they are not – they show this to be one of His deepest convictions. If they are wrong on this, they are wrong about everything." Kenneth Kantzer, "Do You Believe in Hell?" *Christianity Today*, Feb. 21, 1986.

⁸ In 2 Peter 2:4 – "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment . . ." Peter uses *tartarus*, a term from Greek literature where it refers to a place below the normal habitation of the dead (the kind of shadowy underworld) where judgment is meted out. It's unclear if this is the same as *gehenna* or *hades*.

⁹ It was called the Valley of Hinnom.

¹⁰ See 2 Kings (16:3, 21:6 and 23:10), and Jeremiah

¹¹ Matthew 18:12-14

¹² I am indebted to Tim Keller's sermons and writing here, most specifically, *The Importance of Hell*, August 1.

¹³ J.I.Packer, *Concise Theology* p.262-263.

¹⁴ Unpacking the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in which the rich man no longer even has a name, Keller argues that if we allow anything (such as our own identity) to be our God, we get addicted to more and the flames of hell are our desires unquenched for eternity. He bases this on the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian who published a book entitled *The Sickness Until Death*. In it, he defines "sin" as building your identity on anything but God. When we build our identities on temporal, finite things, people, achievements, etc. -- anything other than God and His love for us -- those things become a form of addiction.

¹⁵ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*.

¹⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), 197.

¹⁷ Matthew 27:46

¹⁸ Penn – the rather outspoken atheist famous as half of the Penn and Teller comedy / magician team – said: I don't respect people who don't proselytize. If you believe there is a heaven and a hell and people could be going to hell ... and you think it's not worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward ... how much do you have to hate someone to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?