# Hell

I want to talk about hell. I think we often think of hell as an issue that we talk about to unbelievers. I am struck by the fact that Jesus talks about hell to people like Pharisees, scribes, and disciples, and not to people like tax collectors and prostitutes. There are, of course, equivalents to those groups here today:

Pharisees, scribes, and disciples—that is, faculty, staff, and students. When Jesus talks about hell to people like that, he is talking to people like us. It’s hard for an Old Testament professor to talk about it, because I am used to dealing with a loving and merciful God of the Old Testament, not the God of the New Testament who talks about gnashing your teeth and hell and those kinds of things. So Iwill try to psych myself up in order to be able to deal with the tough side of the Bible. (I don’t normally come to that, because I stick to the Old Testament.)

In the middle of the words of Jesus about the Last Judgment, as found in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus gives a summary of what hell is really like. There are four elements to it: (1) Depart from me, (2) you who are under a curse, (3) into the eternal fire, (4) prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

*Get away from me! Depart from me!*

Going to hell is having Jesus say that to you. Imagine that your parents and you go to see one of your offspring, expecting to be welcomed, maybe to see your grandchildren to enjoy a time with members of your family. Imagine that you ring the doorbell and your son or daughter inside says, “We don’t want you to come in here. Get out!”

Imagine that you are on a trip to a city where your best friend from col­lege lives, and you decide to pay him a surprise visit. This is a person that you used to talk with most about the inward, most important things in your lives when you were students together. You ring the buzzer at the entrance to their complex and he answers and you say who you are and he says, “I don’t want you in here! I don’t want to see you! Get out of here!” That’s what going to hell is like.

*Depart from me, you who are under a curse.*

There is a scene in a Dutch film we saw just before we came to America. It’s a film about a period just after the war in Holland. All the men are still missing. They are out fighting, or they have been killed by the Germans, or they are in the underground or something. A group of women in this village are living together as a kind of an extended family, but all are women because of the circumstances. One of the young women has been raped by one of the occupying soldiers. For some reason this soldier has to come to the house. One of the two senior women, the mother figure of the house, goes out into the courtyard and delivers a curse of the most frightening dimensions upon this man. Because of what he has done to this girl, his life is going to wither and will never be worth living. How terrible his life is going to be because of what he has done! So in the film you see this man withering as the woman delivers her curse. As he shrinks away, you know that her curse is going to come true. That’s what going to hell is like.

*Depart from me, you who are cursed, to the eternal fire.*

When my wife, Ann, was first practicing as a physician and working in a hos­pital, one night there was a terrible fire in London. A number of people were brought to the hospital where she was on duty that night. Actually, all she was required to do was to certify them dead.

Until she talked to me afterwards, I didn’t realize that, if you die in a fire you don’t normally die because you are burned. You die because you have suffocated, because you cannot breathe. None of these people, when you looked at them, looked as if there was anything wrong with them. They weren’t in thatsense in a condition that made you think they had been in a fire. But they suffocated, and they had the smell of fire upon them.

It must have been five or eight years later, when we had a bonfire at some event in our seminary in the UK. I went to this bonfire and barbeque and came home afterwards. Suddenly, Ann burst into tears, because there was the smell of fire in my sweater. It took her back to that terrible night when all she seemed to do was to certify people, smelling of fire, dead. Going to hell means that the smell of fire stays upon you, you cannot breathe, you suffocate.

*Depart from me, you who are cursed, to the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels.*

It turns out that the company isn’t much there, either. This last element in the description is a kind of a mirror image of the first. You wanted to spend eternity with Jesus. You find yourself spending an eternity with the Devil and his angels. They are boring company; Jesus is interesting company. Get out here! You who are under a curse—to the eternal fire, prepared for the Deviland his angels!

Do you want to know how *not* to go to hell? Jesus says, “Go and visit people in prison.” “Go and get some clothes for those who haven’t got any.” “Go and get some food to give to people who haven’t got any.” “Go and look after people who are sick.” Who are these people?

There is a wonderful—not wonderful, terrible—anyway, an argument among leaders and scholars about who these people are. With some trepidation, I went and looked up my colleague Professor Donald Hagner’s Matthew Commentary and found with relief that he has the right view. In other words, he agrees with me. Or, as I’d better put it (*he* is the expert): I agree with *him.*

The people Jesus is talking about are the believers. The more liberal kind of view thinks of people in general, but it makes more sense in the kind of language Jesus uses if he is talking about your caring for *believers* who are in prison: *believers* who have no food or clothes, and so on.

Now maybe you want to hedge your bets. Maybe you want to be on the safe side, if this is the key to avoiding hell. It would be a good idea, then, to do some of these things to *both* groups of these people, believers and unbelievers. I don’t imagine that God sends us to hell for mistakes in exegesis, even though it is important to remember in this particular week of the quarter that that such mistakes can get you a bad grade. I don’t imagine if you make a mistake in exe­gesis you would go to hell for it. If you are nice and merciful and loving to the wrong group, I imagine it will be okay with God. But you might want to hedge your bets.

“Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit people in prison.” Within hundreds of yards of here, there are people who, as far as I know, aren’t believers, but they have needs of this sort. There are lots of Latino kids who grow up unable to read English. You can join in tutoring them, helping them learn to read. For hundreds of old people living in nursing homes, many of them apparently abandoned by their families, you can go and befriend them. There is a thing in L.A. called the Manna Food Bank, through which you can distribute food to people who don’t have any. The food comes from super­markets and is still quite edible, but it has reached the point where the stores can’t sell it. There are means for getting this food to people who wouldn’t oth­erwise have food to eat. You can be a mentor to fatherless children and help tutor them and do sports with them, or something like that.

There are needs that we have here at home—on the assumption that Professor Hagner and I are right about the exegesis of this passage. There are students at Fuller who sometimes don’t have enough to eat. There certain­ly are subtle needs that we have as a community. I think it is similar here to what was true in our seminary in Britain, where, for instance, single students often got really tired and depressed while living in those little rooms in their dorms. When some family invited them out for a meal, or even to babysit for them, to be able to sit in an ordinary home met a real need.

Conversely, an American couple with children told me about how a sin­gle person had given a certificate to them for Christmas that said that the giver would look after the couple’s kids for an evening so that they could go to the cinema. That was a wondrous deliverance for this couple, who were otherwise house-bound with their kids. There are ways in which we can do those kinds of things for each other that Jesus talks about. Jesus says that’s the way to avoid going to hell.

So far, I have been telling you what the Bible says so you can take some notice of it. The last bit of what I want to say is more speculative, but I will say it any­way. It is this: The longer I am here in America, the more I become aware of how unhappy many people are. I am not talking about the non-Christians; I am talking about the Christians, even some people at Fuller. Maybe there are a variety of reasons for that. There are reasons that lie in living in the God-forsaken cul­ture that we are living in. It’s not surprising if that puts constraints on people’s lives and makes them unhappy. There are probably institutional issues related to the way the seminary operates—ways in which the process of education makes people unhappy.

It is easy for us to yield to those pressures from outside us, those things that control us, that circumscribe our lives and lead us to yield to being victims of the culture or institution. I think I see people doing that and turning in upon themselves. As a result, they don’t do the caring for people and for each other that Jesus says is the key to not going to hell.

It is not surprising, then, that we are unhappy. There is a kind of paradox about it, really. We get turned in on ourselves, and the thing becomes more and more a kind of vicious vortex. We can’t reach out in a giving way to people. So we are more and more dehumanized. God made us as human beings to care for one another. If the culture and the institution combined make it very difficult for us to show such care, and we then collude with that circumstance, we become more and more dehumanized.

Paradoxically, it turns out that doing the kinds of things we are talk about generates happiness in the giver. Even if it doesn’t do anything for the recipient, it does for the giver. I know that, because I spend a lot of my energy looking my wife, who is sick. Often, people look at me, feeling kind of sorry for our nation. And, goodness! There are things about our situation that I don’t mind anyone feeling sorry for! But looking after somebody who is sick is an extremely human thing to do, something we realize that God made us for.

Isaiah 58 talks about the *real fast,* and this is the link for Lent. The real fast, says Isaiah (58:6-7), is doing those kinds of things that Jesus talks about (I expect that’s where Jesus got his ideas because, mostly, Jesus got his good ideas from the Old Testament). The passage goes on to talk about how that’s what leads to happiness. I know how we all live extremely pressured lives. Today, I don’t want to put another burden on you who already feel pressured in your life by saying, “You ought to go out and do these things.” You will say, “I’ve got already 26 hours’ worth of things to do in 24 hours every day. How can I do more?”

I just want to try on you the idea that, for at least some of us, maybe there could be time during Lent to find an hour or two each week to do some of these kindly acts. If, when it comes to Easter Sunday, it’s just been a drag and you feel worse, fine. Give them up. If, on the other hand, when it comes to Easter Sunday, you realize that doing those things has been hugely, humanly fulfilling and energy- giving, then why don’t you carry on doing those things which Jesus thinks are good ideas?

This is the key to *not* going to hell.