

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

Matthew 25:31-46 Text vs. 46 *"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."*

A few years ago, a US News and World Report discovered 78% of Americans believed in Heaven and they believed they were going there. 60% believed in Hell, but only 4% of them believed they were going there. Then, another survey found 35% of Baptists; 54% of Presbyterians, 58% of Methodists, and 60% of Episcopalians don't believe in a real place called hell.

And Hell is a subject that upsets a lot of people. Some have tried to redefine it. Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy taught death and all the emotion surrounding it is to be completely denied. There is no death. Sin, sickness, and death have a physical cause. They're only states of mind curable by prayer. On 1 May 1954, South Korea, officially founded New Age cult leader Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church that's now in 100 countries around the world. It believes everyone will eventually receive salvation. The Unification Church sees a person's destination after death as dependent on how much one's work during this life corresponded to its teachings. Mormons believe when you die, your spirit goes to a place called the *Spirit World* and waits for resurrection and judgment. That *Spirit World* is divided into two parts: paradise and prison. Where you wind up depends on how you have lived your life. In the *Spirit World*, everyone gets an equal chance to hear and accept the gospel, if they didn't while on earth. The unrepentant soul will suffer. And that suffering is "hell." Bertrand Russell, an atheist, said anyone who preaches Hell is inhumane. And that includes Jesus Christ! Robert Ingersoll opposed Christianity in the late 1800's and said, *"The idea of hell was born of revenge and brutality on one side, and cowardice on the other. I have no respect for any human being who believes in hell. I dislike the doctrine. I hate it. I despise it. I defy the doctrine. It's outrageous beyond all power to express."*

So, our lesson this morning may make some feel uncomfortable. I hope not! But it's about something everyone would like to avoid! We just read a parable from the Gospel of Matthew about the sheep and the goats. Jesus described how, at the end of the age, He will separate the righteous, called sheep, from the wicked, called goats. *"The wicked goats will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous sheep to eternal life."* What does that mean? What is eternal punishment? What is eternal life? How can you be sure you will be among the righteous and not the wicked?

Well first, you have to understand the difference between eternal punishment and eternal life. In the Bible, the word *"eternal"* describes God and eternal life. God is eternal. He has no end and no beginning. He is the beginning. And He is the end of all things. Eternal life is redemption God gives to those who trust and serve Him. It's not just the length of time God gives to his people. It's the quality of life they may enjoy as they worship and serve him. And the word *eternal* in the original Greek means *"pertaining to an age"* or *"age-long"*. It doesn't mean endlessness. It means a *quality of life* that belongs to a certain age, or a time. It's the age to come when God will establish His Kingdom on earth and make all things new again.

As we've been learning about that these past two Sundays, *Eternal punishment* isn't a never-ending torment in fire. It's a state of being. It's when you are excluded from God's presence. Forever! It's not ever being in the presence of God. Not ever receiving God's blessing in the new creation. It's shameful. It's sorrowful. And it brings despair because there's no hope, no joy, and no peace. It's a death where there's no possibility of ever having a satisfying life again. No love. No light! It's eternal darkness in which there is no growth. No beauty. There's no fellowship. No closeness. No relationship with God and His people. Total separation from God is eternal punishment. That's hell! And it's not just your imagination! In several places in the New Testament Jesus used various images to describe hell as a *real place!* In fact, Jesus spoke about hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He referred to it as a place of *"utter darkness"* where *"there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Matt. 8:12) In other words, all the pleasure associated with light will be removed. All the fears connected with darkness will be increased. He described it as fire and warned hell is a real danger for those who reject God and His will. No one can escape it after death. That's why He urged His listeners to repent and believe in Him *before* they die. He's the only way to avoid hell and enter into eternal life with God.

Specifically, in John 3:16 Jesus declared *"God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. But whoever does not believe in Him is already condemned, because he loves the darkness, rather than the light."* John 3:16 is the most famous verse in the Bible. It's often quoted as a summary of the Christian faith. It's considered by many to be the most famous verse in the Bible. So overall, the message of Jesus is that *hell is a real place.* It's a dreadful existence. And it can be avoided *only* by trusting in Him and following His commands. He is the Savior who came to seek and to save the lost. And He is coming to reward the faithful and punish the rebellious. He's calling everyone to repent and believe the Gospel. And to love God and your neighbor as yourself, those being the two greatest commandments. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And since *"He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him"* being in the heavenly kingdom never ends. You are always in God's presence. You receive His blessing in the New Creation. It's a state of honor. It's joy and hope. It's where there is fullness of life. Abundant grace. And everlasting glory. It's a life where there is love, light, and truth. It's rebuilding a life where there is room to grow. And there is beauty all around. Fellowship is there. A relationship with God and His people.

So, you need to understand how you can be among the righteous, and not the wicked. The deciding factor Jesus used for that was to separate the sheep from the goats. It's not based on your religious affiliation. Your doctrinal beliefs. Your moral conduct. Or your spiritual experiences. It's based entirely on how you treat the least of your brothers and sisters. He said that in verses 34 to 40: *"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. 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. 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"* The *righteous* show compassion and mercy to the poor, the oppressed, the overlooked, the suffering. The *righteous* share their bread with the hungry. Their water with the thirsty. Their home with the stranger. Their clothes with the naked. They care for the sick. They visit the prisoner. They recognize the reflection of God and the presence of Christ in every human being. Especially the least of them. The *righteous* love God by loving their neighbor as themselves.

Maybe you've heard the story about the man who was walking along the beach early one morning and noticed a man ahead of him picking up starfish and putting them back into the water. He asked the man what he was doing. The man picked up another starfish and said it would die if left out in the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and miles, and there are millions of starfish. How can you make a difference?" The man looked at the starfish in his hand, threw it back into the safety of the waves and said, "It makes a difference to this one!" . . . *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me."* The *wicked* ignore the *starfish* of humankind! . . . They neglect the poor, the oppressed, the sidelined, the suffering. They keep bread from the hungry. They keep water from the thirsty. Their home from the stranger. Their clothes from the naked. Their care from the sick. And their presence from the prisoner. They hate God by hating their neighbor.

My friends, the final judgment is coming. And it's not something in the future you can postpone. You can't avoid it. It is a reality. It's coming! It is going to happen! And you face it every day. Every time you meet a person in need, you meet Christ. Every time you help a person in need, you are helping Christ. Every time you serve a person in need, you serve Christ. And every time you do, you're deciding your destiny. It's either eternal punishment. Or it's eternal life. So, don't be deceived by the false security of your religion. Your doctrine. Your morality. Your spirituality.

Don't be satisfied with your comfort, your privilege, your wealth, your power. Don't be uncaring to the cries of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. Don't be a goat. Be a sheep! Don't be wicked. Be good! So, *where are you going?* Don't go the way that leads to eternal punishment! Go the way that leads into eternal life, through Jesus Christ! Then you will hear Him say to you, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me."* Amen.