

Doctrine of Hell - Part 1

by John H. Gerstner

Jesus' preaching in the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the future punishment of the impenitent, or hell, and the importance of spiritual rebirth and regeneration to escape it.

Duration: 49:22

Scripture: Matthew 23:1-3, Matthew 23:15, Matthew 23:32-39, Matthew 25:41

Topics: "Judgment And Hell", "Sin And Consequences"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the theme of judgment and warns the listeners about the consequences of their actions. He emphasizes that even the smallest sins, like idolatry, will be brought into judgment. Jesus Christ himself spoke about this in the Gospel of Matthew, where he criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for preaching but not practicing what they preach. The preacher also mentions a parable about a disobedient servant to illustrate that those who have more knowledge of God's will will be held to a higher standard and face harsher punishment.

Transcript

I'm very happy to be with you again in your lovely new chancel, which you have put up since I was your guest before, a year ago. I want to read for our scripture lesson, the beginning of this brief series, the entire chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew. While our text is the 33rd verse, I'd like you to listen to this entire chapter as our Lord relentlessly pursues this one theme in a series of very strong and warning statements.

Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do, for they preach but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men, but they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts, and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by men.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.

He who is greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men, for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say if anyone swears by the temple it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools.

For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say if anyone swears by the altar it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. You blind men. For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith.

These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity.

You blind Pharisees. First cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken... Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to... Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I say to you, all this will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not.

Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate, for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord. May God bless to our understanding this portion of his word, and especially this thirty-third verse. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? I should like to begin this message this evening with a bit of autobiography.

In the year 1950, after Mrs. Gerstner and I had spent nearly four months in visiting approximately 25 countries of the world, the Far East, we arrived at Egypt, and for the first time, we were able to relax a little from the strenuous vigors of a very hard touring campaign in the many countries of the East. We got on a very slow Nile steamer, and we had several days to make a rather short journey. I said to my wife at the beginning of this journey that I proposed for those several days on shipboard there to set a certain spiritual discipline for myself, namely the reading of the book of Matthew in the text very slowly, very deliberately, very prayerfully.

As I said to her, I didn't intend to read any newspapers which were brought onto the ship, and I wasn't going to read any books which I had with me, and I wasn't going to read anything else, and I wasn't going to talk with anybody unless it was absolutely necessary, including her, as I said to her on that day. And for several days, I did nothing but read slowly and prayerfully and meditatively in the text, very deliberately, this gospel from which I had just read to you. The indelible impression which that reading made on me, which is as present in my memory as if it had taken place last week, was this.

On every page, the gospel according to Matthew, it seemed almost in every other verse, at least wherever Jesus Christ is speaking, it seems that he was speaking about hell. There was no theme which seemed to have engrossed him so completely. There was no burden of his preaching so central as this awesome subject of the future punishment of the impenitent.

All I want to call to your attention with respect to this immediate context from which our passage is taken is that while our Lord is here speaking primarily to the religious leaders of his day, to the teachers, to those of us who today are called ministers, you will notice that he is not speaking exclusively to them and that he by no means indicates that they and they alone are destined to be judged in this awesome manner he here indicates. You will have noticed as a matter of fact that it is the teaching of Jesus Christ that these blind guides whom he here indicts lead others into their own folly and these zealous fanatics who make converts, or as he says, proselytes, make those proselytes twofold more children of hell than themselves so that the actual predicament we find represented here is that these wicked teachers who shall most certainly be incapable of escaping the damnation of God they shall bring a whole host of people so that Jesus Christ is talking to us who preach and he is talking to you to whom we preach and he is warning all of us and as I take heed to what I say it behooves every one of you to take the same careful heed of our Lord Jesus' deliverance on this subject.

The first thing which we notice about the doctrine of hell as our Lord Jesus Christ and the Bible generally develops it is this and I am certain that everyone is aware of this more or less hell is a place of suffering, pure and unalleviated it's described by various and sundry figures but they all add up to the same the people in that awful pit know nothing but woe and misery and indeed when Jesus solemnly says to the people of his day woe, woe, woe he is thereby indicating the solemn judgment and that he, his gospel of repentance and pardon is represented by various figures one of them is darkness this place is called the place of outer darkness again it is represented very common in fire not because of fire but on the contrary because no fire with which we are familiar in this to

signify the torment but the fire and the burning you say it's just a parable of the tears which says that the tears when he describes it on a wall he says he uses this awesome symbol which can do justice to the destruction which we are familiar with of the wrath of God who can know thine anger the fury of God the raging terror we have and so Jesus seems to prefer the stress of torment but the suffering whether it's going to be a literal fire the bodies we know but Jesus Christ indicates that that body shall be eternally not

only does Jesus Christ but not only the resurrection the full spree is going to reign would he give wicked men to suffer why would he give those damned spirits a new pardon now there is no meaning Lord Jesus himself speaking to his disciples he says fear not him but

fear him who can destroy body and soul in hell this was Jesus Christ's way of girding his disciples for strength before men and have endured all kind in Jesus' word holes have been filled with Jesus Christ fear not him who can torture who can destroy do you notice that Jesus Christ does that God will that's true that's the phrasing he uses but just think for a moment dear friends what kind of a deterrent would it be for a man under trial and under suffering and under agony just to know in his heart that all might be in body and soul what kind of a terror would it be to the wicked that's not a terror the Lord would persuade now when Jesus Christ says that God can he means as he says very very plainly in the third place not only is hell a place of unmitigated suffering in body and in soul

indescribably awful beyond our imagination to conceive but and this is not so well but hell is a place of degrees a place where men suffer everybody in that world yes Jesus indicates this and whosoever is each one of these times if he does that each one of these easier punishment could inflict is described in the third instance is more severe that's his way of indicating that there are some and they shall be visited with more deserves God Jesus Christ indicates who was disobedient and how Jesus commenting on this disobedient servant he says they'll be beaten with many people who've never listened to they too shall be punished and you shall be visited the way Jesus uttered that word of you best what did he mean that it's going to be tolerable what did he mean that it's going to be

tolerable for that gain of iniquity that and while Jesus Christ I think the opposite is we not only having dear friends if anybody in this company were actually which you have of the knowledge of Jesus Christ another way by which Jesus Christ indicates these varying degrees of punishment is that startling expression of the twelfth chapter every idle learner shall be brought into the judgment let it go we say we're prone to overlook we want to turn the other way God doesn't according to Jesus Christ the point is what could be more trifling than an idle if anything would escape the divine judgment what about other sins if an idle word is not going to escape the judgment do you think a gossiping word if an idle word is going to escape the judgment if an idle word won't escape if an idle word

is going to be brought into judgment one person has expressed this truth this way the differing degrees of divine judgment of sinners in the world to come is going to be so awful that a sinner in hell were he able would give the whole world that the number of his sins be one less the differing degrees of divine punishment in the world is going to be so terrible that a sinner were he able would give the whole world that the number of his sins should have been just one less but the most terrible thing about hell remains yet to be said more awful than the fact that it is a place of torment and alleviated in both body and soul in varying degrees indeed the most awful thing that can be said about it the inconceivably terrible thing about it is that it's emptiness you know and I know in this

world it doesn't make any difference what the pain is maybe something like a toothache it may be a heart attack it may be light it may be excruciating but if we can only say to ourselves tomorrow it'll be better in a year I'll be cured or whatever distress we have we know that it ends with the grave there's always some consolation no matter what the pain in the hope that it will cease a time will come when there'll be no more on the other hand suppose you had anything it wouldn't make any difference trifling, call it a toothache if you please a headache with the knowledge that you'd have it forever would never get the slightest bit better you'd never wake up one morning and find it gone how terrible it would be just something like that

with the aggravation of the knowledge that it would

always be with you that's what Jesus Christ says about the world to come it's not only punishment it's eternal punishment that's the word eternal that's the awesome word the holiest word something other than eternal but it isn't it's eternal Jesus Christ has various ways of expressing this I call your attention just to one or two of them one figure he uses you all know he describes hell as a place where the flower is not quenched the worm die if not what's the meaning of that kind of imagery well when Jesus Christ refers to the place where the worm dies of destroying the human body after it's you all know full well that when we do place a body it decays it's destroyed it's consumed but as soon as a maggot has devoured a body the maggot dies because it has no more food on which to sustain

its own existence and the body having been destroyed it perishes when Jesus Christ therefore describes hell as here is a place where the worm isn't where it's never destroyed because it doesn't die because that it's devoured it's never consumed the fire is a reference to the other method by which we we know that when a body is burned as soon as a body has been it has no more fuel to sustain it when Jesus Christ describes this place this hell this coming judgment as a place where the fire the meaning of death is unmistakable the fire doesn't go out because that which is burning is more vivid more undistinguishable the fire is not quenched the worm dies the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew represents the most complete description which we have in the entire Bible and in that twenty-fifth

chapter of Matthew when Jesus Christ is describing the great judgment to come in terms of the sheep on his right hand he says two things which make it perfectly clear that the judgment of hell first of all he uses the word I've already quoted depart from me ye cursed into the eternal fire but there's something else in that narrative the latter part into the eternal fire when that Jewish congregation heard the young rabbi from Nazareth the wicked would be consigned to the place prepared in their theology who had not visited him and comforted him and given to him and displayed their faith should actually be sentenced to death they couldn't use a thing these are some of the indications I have by no means of what our Lord and what the pretty Jesus Christ has to say about hell it is a place of

woe and misery inconceivable it is a place where we suffer our perfect anguish our exquisite misery both in body it's a place where though every individual is perfectly miserable some shall have a higher measure a greater capacity for misery than others and the real hellishness of hell is the fact that it shall never know an end there have been people in hell as far as their spirits are concerned for many thousands of years now they're there now they've been there for thousands of years and they know now that they're not a bit closer to the end than when they first began to suffer is it any wonder dear friends that Jesus Christ is the one who has to give us this teaching it's too often for us speaking for preachers I don't think any of us would be able to preach on the subject if our Lord

himself hadn't done so before us in this text what Jesus Christ says is ye serpents you brood of vipers how are you to escape being sentenced to hell what he's saying dear friends is this that they you all of the children of men in their natural condition are viperish serpentine symbol of evil it's our very nature and it being our nature to be evil corruption having penetrated all our being what are we fit for except damn them there's a certain inescapable logic in this passage how can sinful people go anyplace else and how are there any possibility of a wicked individual escaping this is just exactly the opposite of what Christ said to Nicodemus except a man be born again he can't see the kingdom he can't enter into the kingdom of God on the contrary if he is in the same condition if

he's still that serpentine nature if he's still that with which he came into this world he must be born again now the thing dear friends that's most serious of all about this is the fact that we can't change our own natures God doesn't tell us about hell just to frighten us it's very very gracious of him to let us know he does not actually do that why why why he wants you to know what's coming he wants you to be frightened properly there's nothing wrong with being afraid of something which is frightful and this is frightful beyond words and anybody who Jesus Christ wants you to be afraid of hell in the name of Christ left to yourselves in your own name you must be born here you are hanging as it were in your present condition and if we take the doctrine of hell dear God have pity dear God

change dear God make me over again dear Christ give me a new nature give me a heart a disposition that he wants you to that it's fit only God grant that you will our heavenly father we thank thee that thou hast told us and especially through the lips of thy dear son the savior of the world the awesome judgment which awaits the impenitent and the wicked give us we pray thee the candor to look honestly at ourselves to see whether we have been born again or whether we are still in our corruption unable to escape the righteous damnation of hell oh God we beseech thee that no one in this company whose heart has not been made over who is not a new creature in Christ Jesus will have peace or false security or the ability to turn his mind to other things or to be preoccupied in this world's

affairs and to forget the momentous issues of eternity which even now confront him stir us up we pray thee by this dim but true vision of the world to come and help us to seek thee until by thy grace and thy spirit we are made new creatures in Christ Jesus fit for thy presence by grace forevermore help us in our hearts we pray to say have thine own way Lord have thine own way make us true children of God thy dear disciples who shall look forward to the world to come as a place of inexpressible blessedness where we see our Savior face to face and become like him who loved us and gave himself for us in his name we ask him the lecture that you've just heard comes to you from the Mount Olive Presbyterian Church Tape Library at post office box 422 Mount Olive, Mississippi 39119 USA Further

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