

The Eternal Punishment

BROADCAST September 16

SCRIPTURE—Matthew 13:41-43

TEXT—“*And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal*”—Matthew 25:46.

Two women were comparing the preaching of their present pastor with that of his predecessor. Finally one said, “Well, they both preach that lost people are going to hell. But I prefer the way our present pastor does it. Our former pastor did so as though he were glad. But our present pastor does so with a broken heart.” Doctor J. W. Storer once wrote that a preacher should never preach on hell unless he does so with a broken heart. God grant that I shall do so now.

The doctrine of eternal punishment is too seldom heard in present-day pulpits. Some preachers say that it is below their dignity to hold out a promise of reward and a threat of punishment as incentives toward righteous living. We should be grateful that neither Jesus nor His interpreters in the New Testament shared this view.

The absence of this note in modern preaching is one of the major contributing factors to the alarming breakdown in the moral fiber of our day. Indeed, this should not surprise us. For the apostle Peter almost two thousand years ago spoke of “*scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming . . .*” (II Pet. 3:3-4) with the consequence of judgment and punishment for the unrighteous.

The fact is that fear of punishment is one of the major controls in society and within men's hearts. We should constantly teach the positive principles of good citizenship and righteous living. But we should never fail to point out the consequences of a violation of these principles. To do so is to teach half-truth. Likewise, we should preach the love of God and the joy of godly living. But we should just as faithfully declare the judgment and punishment of a righteous God with respect to unrighteousness. To do otherwise is to preach a half-gospel.

Jesus preached a whole gospel when He said, “*And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal*” (Matt. 25:46).

When someone spoke jokingly to Dwight L. Moody about the suffering of the lost in hell, he did not laugh. Instead he said, “You might at least speak of that with tears in your eyes.”

Only twice do the Gospels speak of Jesus as weeping. One was before the tomb of a friend. The other was when He spoke of judgment and punishment for Jerusalem's sin. But knowing His infinite love for all men we may be sure that He never spoke of eternal punishment without tears in His eyes

and heart.

Therefore, as we consider "The Eternal Punishment" let us note, first, the picture; second, the people; third, the plea.

First, consider the picture. ". . . everlasting punishment . . ."

These are not the words of some sadist or a demon out of hell. They are the words of Jesus, the Son of God, the Saviour, the Lord of infinite tenderness and love. There are those who deny the idea of eternal punishment on the basis that it is incompatible with a God of love. For this reason I shall confine my thoughts to the words of Jesus alone.

Jesus drew the original picture of the place of eternal punishment. Unfortunately the English word "hell" in the King James Version is used ten times to translate the Greek word *hades* which refers primarily to the abode of the dead (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Lk. 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14; "grave" in I Cor. 15:55). Where it renders the word for the place of eternal punishment the Greek word is *Gehenna* (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; Lk. 12:5; James 3:6). And outside of James 3:6 this word is used only by Jesus.

Now what is the meaning of the word *Gehenna*? It means Vale of Hinnom, a valley just south and east of the city of Jerusalem. It was here the pagan fire god Molech was worshipped by throwing infants into its burning arms. To show their contempt for it the Jews used it as a place in which to throw their garbage. So in Jesus' day it was the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Into it was thrown all of the filth of the city, including the bodies of dead animals and the unclaimed bodies of executed criminals. To consume this filth fires burned day and night. Maggots worked un-

ceasingly in the repulsive mass. When the wind was wrong it blew its smoking stench into Jerusalem. At night its fires could be seen from the city. And the snarling of wild dogs could be heard as they gnashed their teeth and fought over the edible portions of garbage.

It was a picture of repulsive horror indeed. In this light the words of Jesus take on a terrible realism. ". . . hell . . . the fire that shall never be quenched: where their worm dieth not" (Mk. 9:43-44). "And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 13:42, 50).

Now it was this scene which Jesus chose to depict the horrors of the eternal punishment of the wicked. Indeed, He spoke the words of our text while sitting on the Mount of Olives from which He could see this very scene. And if it appears repulsive to you that is exactly what Jesus wanted it to do. His are the words of infinite love warning you against it.

At this point let us look at the word "punishment." While the English word appears several times in the New Testament, the Greek word used by Jesus appears only here and in I John 4:18 where it is rendered "torment." The verb form is used only twice: Acts 4:21 where it refers to severe punishment, and in II Peter 2:9, "*The Lord knoweth how . . . to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.*"

Now what is the significance of Jesus' choice of this word rather than other words used for punishment? It is because this word has reference to the suffering of its victim with no thought of satisfaction on the part of the one who inflicts it (Aristotle). In short, God gets no pleasure out of the punishment of the wicked in hell. It is the suffering which comes through the rejection of God's gift

of infinite love and forgiveness.

Second, note the people. "*And these shall go away into everlasting punishment . . .*"

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that there are those who in the final reckoning of God will be nothing but garbage. Unfit for the Holy City they can only be cast into the garbage dump of eternity. One man asked another, "How can a God of love send men to hell?" The other asked, "How can a God of righteousness take a sinner to heaven?" How, indeed, except through the redeeming blood of Jesus. Otherwise, he is only eternal garbage.

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that if you live like an animal you must die like an animal. Not that you will cease to exist. For man is more than an animal. He is an immortal soul. But if you live only at the animal level with no thought for your soul, your eternal fate is to be cast into the eternal garbage dump outside the presence of God, as dead animals were cast outside the city of Jerusalem.

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that if you live as a spiritual criminal in rebellion against God, your spiritual fate will be that of the unclaimed bodies of executed criminals outside the city of Jerusalem. Outside of Christ you are dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1).

If you refuse to become a child in the family of God, choosing rather to be a child of Satan, who can claim you in the day of judgment? God cannot claim you as His own, which you are not. Satan cannot claim you outside of the garbage dump, for he too will be there. Your eternal fate will be to dwell forever in the garbage dump of eternity, where the fire is not quenched, where the worm dies not, where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Some would say that hell is only a purging place from which souls may depart after a time of cleansing. The Bible knows no such teaching. In one verse Jesus uses "eternal punishment" and "life eternal." Literally, He says "age-abiding punishment" and "age-abiding life." If the one is temporary, then the other is. If one is eternal, then the other is. Plain language says that both are eternal.

It is no wonder that Jesus warned men against hell. He warned against wrong attitudes which endanger us with hell. (Matt. 5:22). He said that it is better to lose your right eye or right hand in this life than to go into hell with a whole body (Matt. 5:29-30). He said that instead of fearing men we should fear God who has the power to cast us into hell (Matt. 10:28).

Now if these are unpleasant thoughts to you they were infinitely more so to Jesus. If you hear them with resentment in your heart, He spoke them with tears in His eyes. For He knew the awful horror awaiting the doomed and damned in hell. And He has done all that even God can do to save you from hell.

Third, consider the plea. ". . . but the righteous [justified ones] into life eternal." Jesus pronounces judgment, but He extends His plea. He is saying that your eternal end need not be punishment. So long as you live there is hope.

The Son of man is come to seek and save that which is lost (Matt. 18:11). His call is ever "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matt. 11:28).

Every teaching of Jesus about eternal punishment is His plea to you to escape it. Take, for instance, the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff.). Both died and entered *Hades*, the realm of the dead ("hell" here translates *hades* the realm of the dead).

Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom, a symbol of heaven. The rich man is in torment in the flames.

The point here is that immediately on death one enters heaven or hell. In vain does the rich man call for Lazarus to relieve his suffering. Because of the impassable gulf between them it is impossible. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers. If every person in hell could do so, he would so warn you to avoid it. Abraham reminds the rich man that his brothers have their Bibles to read. But he says, "Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent." Abraham replied, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Do you get the picture? Jesus warned men about hell, but they did not heed. Then on the cross for them He endured the pains of hell. The beginning of sin is to forsake God. The end of sin is to be God-forsaken. So when Jesus cried, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Matt.

27:46) it was the infinite suffering of the infinite God to save you from hell. He entered the regions of death for you. He conquered death and the grave for you. He is One "rose from the dead" for you. He offers you eternal life, not everlasting punishment. But if you do not hear Him there is no hope.

Many years ago a nurse attended Voltaire in his last illness. Later she was asked to nurse another critical case. She inquired as to whether or not he was a Christian. "Yes," came the reply, "but why do you ask?" "Sir," she answered, "I was the nurse who attended Voltaire in his last illness, and for all the wealth of Europe I would never see another infidel die."

I do not wish to appear morbid. But death is one of the most certain realities for each of us. You have no assurance that today death will not take you into eternity. Maybe you will live for many years. In either case you are not even prepared to live until you are prepared to die.

Jesus said, "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." In which group do you fall? ●

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