



# Razing Hell

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Matthew 25:31-46

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There is one topic I have avoided in my preaching. It's not abortion or same-sex marriage. It's not gender debates or gun control. It's preaching on judgment and hell.

I don't go looking for trouble. Neither do I want to run people off. Maybe I'm guilty of over-correcting, a distortion in the opposite direction. Some of you have had your fill of hell-fire preaching. I subscribe to Reinhold Niebuhr's caution that preaching should not speculate too much on the temperature of hell or the furniture of heaven.

I'm not alone in my avoidance of hell. Most preachers I know are equally skittish about preaching on God's judgment. Hell has become a taboo subject in our day. God's judgment has been conveniently expunged from our vocabulary. People pretty much take for granted that everyone is going to heaven. A naïve optimism, I would say.

It's tempting to downplay the bad and focus exclusively on the good. How can we appreciate the good without talking about the bad? To preach good news, we must preach the bad. Why do we need the cross if everyone is saved in the end?

The question I hear with increasing frequency is, "Why would a loving God send anyone to hell?" I have two reactions to this question. First, God doesn't send anyone to hell. People who reject God receive what they supposedly want, separation from God, now and into eternity. Second, would we be pleased if God was altogether tolerant of evil? Our sense of justice would be offended if God ignored horrendous evils such as sex trafficking and child abuse.

Love demands justice. We do not want a God who winks at evil and shrugs his shoulders at monstrous crimes.

Today's reading brings us to an uncomfortable truth. Jesus talks a lot about hell. He speaks more about judgment and hell than anyone else in the Bible.

We come today to the last of Jesus' five major discourses in Matthew's gospel- extended teaching sessions, we might call them. Matthew 25 is called the Olivet Discourse, for the simple reason that Jesus delivered it on the Mount of Olives. It's Jesus' final discourse. Three days later, Jesus is arrested, setting into motion his mock trial and jury-rigged death on a cross.

Jesus announces in verse 31, "When the Son of Man will come in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him." The phrase, "All the nations" is code for "everyone." No one will be excluded from his coming judgment.

"He will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats and he will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:32-33). What Jesus describes was a common occurrence. Palestinian shepherds permitted sheep and goats to graze together during the day. They are routinely separated at night since sheep can handle the cool night while goats must be herded together for warmth.

Maybe you can see where Jesus is going with this parable. Some people are sheep while others are goats.

Jesus first addresses those on his right, the sheep in his parable, “Come, you who are blessed by my father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you” (Matthew 25:34). Circle this word *inheritance*. We’ll come back to it later in this sermon.

Jesus enumerates six acts of kindness that are shown to him. “I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was a prisoner and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

The sheep ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?” (Matthew 25:37-39) The element of surprise jumps out at me. They haven’t a clue that the kindness shown to needy people equates to kindness shown to Jesus. Jesus’ bottom line reinforces this same point, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

So much for the sheep. Now we go to the goats. Those on Jesus’ left don’t fare so well. “Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). So much for Jesus, meek and mild.

Jesus revisits his six acts of kindness. Only this time he inserts “not” into the equation. “I was hungry and you did not feed me. I was thirsty and you did not give me drink. I was a stranger and you did not take me in. I was naked and you did not clothe me. I was sick and you did not care for me. I was in prison and you did not visit me” (Matthew 25:42-43).

The goats are equally surprised, “Lord, when did we not see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?” (Matthew 25:44) The parallelism between sheep and goats is now becoming obvious. The sheep attend to human need; the goats do not.

Jesus brings the hammer down at the end, “Truly, I tell you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away unto eternal punishment, but the righteous unto eternal life” (Matthew 25:45-46).

There is danger in turning this parable into a simple morality tale. The sheep are people who do good deeds while the goats do not. Good deeds get you to heaven. Bad deeds send you straight to hell.

We recently finished a sermon series on Romans in which Paul asserted that salvation is God’s undeserved gift to people. It is not a reward for good works. Jesus declares in verse 34, “Come, you who are blessed by my father. Take your inheritance.” Inheritance is determined solely by the giver, not the receiver. We do not earn our way into heaven. Good works are the result but not the cause of our salvation. Salvation results in providing food, drink, hospitality, clothing, health care, and visitation.

So what? What difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to my mind. One pertains to people; the other relates to God.

First: People. Jesus’ close ties to people in this parable surprise everyone. Sheep and goats alike are astonished by Jesus’ intimate identification with marginalized people. People of Jesus’ day looked for the coming Messiah among

the strong and powerful. Jesus prefers to hang out with his little brothers and sisters.

We see poor people as objects of our charity. Jesus sees them as people worthy of his presence and honor. We see prisoners as deserving jail time. Jesus sees them as people to be cared for and visited. We regard foreigners with suspicion. Jesus singles them out, along with widows and orphans for special consideration.

We can extend the point of Jesus' parable in most any direction. Consider what this passage could mean for race relations in this country. Instead of jumping to conclusions about people who look different from us, Jesus invites us to look for him in them. I read yesterday in Malachi, "Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane God's covenant by being unfaithful to each other? (Malachi 2:10)

Bill Robinson learned a valuable lesson about serving people while president of Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. Bill arrived at the state penitentiary in Stillwater, Minnesota to teach a seminar to a group of inmates. Since it was Bill's first visit to the prison, the chaplain took him aside to give him a few pointers. The chaplain concluded with the memorable words, "Don't forget, Bill. If Matthew 25 is right, you didn't come to bring Jesus to these guys; you came to find him." It forever changed the way Bill looked at service—to look for the living Christ in every act of human kindness.

Second: God. We have an overly sentimentalized view of God in our day. We have eliminated virtually every attribute from God except for kindness. The only attribute

left of God is his niceness. We have come to regard God's primary job as helping us feel better about ourselves.

Jesus is kind; exceedingly so, yet he is also holy and just. He will come again in the language of our Apostles' Creed, "to judge the quick and the dead."

There will come a day of judgment for you and me. The very thought of standing before the judgment seat of Christ terrorizes me. It's intimidating to comprehend that I am accountable to God. Yet here's the silver lining. Jesus our Judge also acts as our Savior. He issues the sentence as Judge and then pays the penalty himself. Jesus Christ offers his life as payment for our sins.

I titled this sermon *Razing Hell*. I meant it as a play on words. Raising hell can mean to cause trouble. Some of you know firsthand this kind of hell-raising. Razing hell can also mean to tear it down, as one would raze a building. Jesus dismantles hell. He razes it to the ground through the cross. The cross is God's remedy for hell.

There is an insightful conversation in C. S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* between Susan and Mr. Beaver. Susan is one of four siblings who play hide and seek in an old wardrobe and find themselves in an enchanted land called Narnia. Mr. Beaver tells Susan that Aslan, the ruler of Narnia is in actuality a great lion. Susan is surprised, since she supposed Aslan to be a man. She asks Mr. Beaver, "Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about approaching a lion." "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? Of course he's not safe, but he is good. He's the King, I tell you."

Lewis picks a lion as a stand-in for Jesus. The lion is the king of beasts. Add to it the words in Revelation that Jesus, the Lion of Judah triumphs over everything that the devil throws at us (Revelation 5:5).

Jesus is not a tame lion. There is a certain wildness to his love. Jesus leads his disciples on dangerous missions. We cannot possibly domesticate him. He will come again one day to rule and reign.

Yet he is also good. Christ disables death. In the words of the prophet Hosea, he takes the stinger out of death (Hosea 13:14). Jesus disables death. It is now a broken power. Hell has been vanquished. Such goodness. Such love. Thanks be to God.