

What Happens When the Unbeliever Dies?

Luke 16:19-31

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Introduction: We are taking a break from our ongoing series on discipleship. Call it a break with a definite purpose. We have a few more items that I feel are important for us to have a comprehensive view of discipleship, but I want us to have a bit more intentional focus on our upcoming revival. So, to help us prepare, we are thinking about a subject that quite frankly, we do not like to think about—dying. But not just dying, but “What happens after we die?” To put it rather bluntly, when we die, some people go to heaven and some people go to hell. Last week we talked about heaven. Today we are talking about hell. Quite honestly, it is a lot more fun to talk about heaven, but it is necessary and important to talk about hell.

Though Jesus talked much about eternal punishment, the passage before us is arguably the most comprehensive one place to consider the reality of Hell. Consider then the parable:

Text: ¹⁹“There was a rich man who would dress in purple and fine linen, feasting lavishly every day. ²⁰But a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, was left at his gate. ²¹He longed to be filled with what fell from the rich man’s table, but instead the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side. ²⁴‘Father Abraham!’ he called out, ‘Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!’

²⁵“‘Son,’ Abraham said, ‘remember that during your life you received your good things, just as Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, while you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us and you, so that those who want to pass over from here to you cannot; neither can those from there cross over to us.’

²⁷“‘Father,’ he said, ‘then I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸because I have five brothers—to warn them, so they won’t also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹“But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’

³⁰“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said. ‘But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹“But he told him, ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’”

Introduction: I have carefully taught you before that parables are stories that we need not necessarily find a teaching in every detail of the story, but rather look to find the “one-point” in the story. What is the point of this story?

Life is a series of choices. The reason that this is an important point is that hell is a choice. No one forces you to go to hell. You choose to go to hell by not choosing to believe in Christ in this life. As C.S. Lewis

put it, “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end.” Or as Max Lucado put it in this rhetorical question asked by so many, “How could a loving God send sinners to hell? He doesn’t. They volunteer.” (Max Lucado, *3:16—The Numbers of Hope*, p. 99.)

I’m going to ask you to make an important decision at the close of my message. I’m going to give you the choices now.

1. I am already a follower of Jesus Christ and because of that I am not going to hell.
2. I am deciding today to follow Jesus Christ so that I will not go to hell.
3. I still have questions.

To me—this is the greatest decision that you will ever make in your life. It is the decision by which all other questions in your future will be based.

What do we learn from this parable?

The unbeliever dies physically, but continues to live spiritually.

And, because of this, we better know that...

1. Hell is fair.

For many, their argument against hell is more an argument of logic. Philosophically, they argue that if God is a God of love, there can be no hell. This is the position of noted atheist Bertrand Russell, author of an essay of the 1920’s, “Why I am Not a Christian.” Russell said, ““Christ believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment.”

This is not only a classic atheist or agnostic argument, but also the opinion of many within so-called liberal Christianity. The tone of their argument basically suggests, “How could a perfectly loving God send someone to Hell?” Listen, God sends no one to hell. In fact, Hell was not created for people; **hell was created for the devil and his demons.**

Beyond that, **we cannot begin to understand the love of God until we understand the reality of hell.** Only in seeing the reality of hell can we see a God who loved us enough to send His only one of a kind son, to take on our sin and die.

2. Hell is for real.

Verse 23 of Luke 16 describes hell as a literal place. In fact, verse 28 uses the word translated from the Greek, “place.” It is the same word that is used in Acts 1:25 to describe that Judas went to “his own place.”

As I said a moment ago, people want to talk about the justice or fairness of God when debating the existence of hell. What about the fairness of God in writing to us through inspired men to make us believe in a literal place of hell, but then there not really be a literal place.

What about the fairness of Jesus—the only begotten son of God—humbling Himself on a cross to die for sin, but yet in the end all—even those who have blasphemed God—go to Heaven?

Furthermore, if you decide there is not a literal place of hell, you better apply those same rules to heaven.

3. Hell is forever.

Some are going to argue that hell is not forever. The technical term for this is annihilation. But, what do we do with these Scriptures.

- Matthew 25:46, “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (From parable of the sheep and the goats.)
- Mark 9:44, 46, and 48, in describing hell, “Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”

You were created an eternal being. You are going to spend eternity in either heaven or hell. This is part of our being made in the image of God.

4. Hell is to be feared.

Torment is the word that grabs our attention. Inquiring minds want to know what hell is like. What have you heard about heaven? (Place of no pain, grief, crying, and best of all a place of no sin) Hell will be the reverse. Ultimately, hell is the absence of God. Earth and history, even in the darkest of days, does not know what the absolute absence of God is like.

The unbeliever believes, but it is too late.

As many times as I have read this passage, something struck me this week. The greatest evangelists are the residents of hell. That which they have rejected is now known. Indeed, every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. The problem is it is too late.

Let me read you what someone said about evangelism.

“I’ve always said that I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize. I don’t respect that at all. If you believe that there’s a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—and atheists who think people shouldn’t proselytize and who say just leave me alone and keep your religion to yourself—how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?”

“I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn’t believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.”

Now, what if I told you that these are the words of atheist Penn Jillette of the comedy act Penn and Teller?

How much more this will be true of those who are already in hell!

So What?

If an unbeliever, believe and repent, because hell is avoidable.

The point of this parable is that hell is avoidable. The purpose of Jesus' coming is that hell is avoidable. You will be either judged according to your works or His work. If judged according to works, none have a chance.

We all know *John 3:16*, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." **Hell is avoidable.**

I began by telling you that I would ask you to make a decision today. I'm ready to do that.

1. Again, here are the choices: I am already a follower of Jesus Christ and because of that I am not going to hell. In reality, it is a choice you have already made.
2. I am deciding today to follow Jesus Christ so that I will not go to hell.
3. I still have questions.

If a believer, live life in praise and on purpose.

Second, those who already follow Christ must make a decision to make Him known to others. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:20, we are to be ambassadors for Christ.

Some years ago I spoke at another church for the occasion of the National Day of Prayer. I spoke about the crisis that we have in America. I spoke about the leadership crisis, the economic crisis, and the moral crisis—all reasons for earnest prayer. Nothing much has changed in America. We are in greater crisis than when I preached that message. After the program was over, a man in his 80's came up to me and with tears in his eyes said, "Pastor, I don't really disagree with anything you said except I would like to add that the real crisis in America is that there are people all around me who are dying and going to hell—many of whom are my dear friends." God, give us that kind of passion!

Dr. L. R. Scarborough, was President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1915 until 1942. One particular Sunday morning, Dr. Scarborough was in worship when the congregation as an invitation hymn were led in singing the hymn, "Rescue the Perishing."

Listen to the words of the hymn:

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;
weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen, tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.

Refrain: Rescue the perishing, care for the dying; Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.

Though they are slighting him, still he is waiting, waiting the penitent child to receive;
plead with them earnestly, plead with them gently; he will forgive if they only believe.

Rescue the perishing, duty demands it; strength for thy labor the Lord will provide;
back to the narrow way patiently win them; tell the poor wanderer a Savior has died.

Dr. Scarborough became so moved by the words of this hymn. He became so broken for some of the men in the congregation that he literally got out of his seat and approached the men and begged them to walk forward with him and trust Jesus as Savior. At one point, another man in the congregation yelled out to Dr. Scarborough, "Hey, Lee, don't get too excited; it's only a song."

I am afraid that for too many of us the thought of heaven and hell, eternal life and eternal damnation is not real. May that change today!