

“Cut It Out!”

Mark 9:42-50 ¹

On Saturday, April 26, 2003, Aron Ralston set out for a one-day hike in Blue John Canyon near Canyonlands National Park in southeastern Utah. A mechanical engineer and an experienced climber, Ralston nevertheless overlooked one of the most important aspects of such adventures: he didn't tell anyone where he was going and when he expected to be back. And he didn't take a phone with him.

As the day progressed, Aron had to use rock-climbing gear to negotiate the narrow slot canyons through which his path lay, and at one point, an 800-pound boulder became dislodged while he was climbing down from it. The rock smashed his left hand before crushing and pinning his right hand against the canyon wall. With only one wounded hand available, Aron tried various strategies to free himself, but nothing worked.

After six days—remember that no one knew where he was or even that he was away from home—having consumed nearly all of his water and his food, Aron made the awful decision to sacrifice his arm to save his life. After moving in such a way that he broke his own arm, Aron used a pocket knife to amputate his right arm just below the elbow.

Amazingly able to remain conscious through this ordeal, the twenty-seven-year-old adventurer applied a makeshift tourniquet to his arm and rappelled sixty-five feet to the canyon floor. As Aron made his way out of the canyon, he encountered a family vacationing from the Netherlands who called 911. He was rescued by helicopter four hours later. ² Keep that story in mind as we turn to this morning's text.

I don't know what you were thinking as you heard this morning's Scripture, but when I first read it—the next passage in our sequential journey through the Gospel of Mark—I was tempted to skip over it. This is a difficult text!

One of the first steps toward understanding any passage in the Bible is to look at its context. What was going on when Jesus said these words? Scanning the previous verses reminds us that Jesus and the disciples were in a house in Capernaum—maybe Peter and Andrew's home. Jesus has reminded the Twelve of His approaching death, the Twelve have been arguing about which of them was the greatest, and Jesus has brought a child to stand or sit with Him as He talked to the disciples about leading through servanthood.

John has tried to dodge the servanthood idea by diverting the conversation toward critique of a follower of Jesus who was casting out demons without the blessing of the Twelve. This other fellow was a recent believer in Jesus, as everyone was in those days, and it is with all this in the background that Jesus said, *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea”* (Mark 9:42).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 15, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 5:13, 18:6-9; Luke 14:34-35, 17:1-2.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aron_Ralston

To begin with, Jesus was probably talking about the child sitting or standing with Him, warning that causing children to lose their trust in Him—or never to have such trust in the first place—is a very, very serious matter indeed. Teaching youth and children is a privilege and a responsibility that is enormously significant both in time and in eternity!

But we also need to notice that Matthew’s account of this conversation puts it a little differently: “*Truly I tell you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:3-4). Those words help us to see that Jesus was also talking about new believers of whatever age, such as this brother who had been casting out demons in Jesus’ Name.

Throughout this passage, Jesus used the literary device we call “hyperbole,” or exaggeration, to emphasize the importance of His points. In this first statement, Jesus told the disciples that it’s better to be drowned in the sea than to face the judgment God will assign to those who lead others away from faith and into unbelief.

This is a principle about which Paul would later have a great deal more to say as he encouraged and instructed the young churches of the first century (Romans 14:13; 1 Corinthians 8:9, 13), and Jesus’ warning should frighten us all in this age of child pornography and sex trafficking.³ But there’s more.

Jesus’ main point in this passage is that it is so crucially important to enter into Eternal Life that even the most awful sacrifices we can imagine are worth what they cost in order to enter into that Life. This is the same point Jesus made when He told us that “*the Kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field*” (Matthew 13:44-46).

The main point Jesus was making in our text has to do with the unimaginable worth, the unimaginable glory, of The Life to Come. Aron Ralston notwithstanding, Jesus wasn’t talking about literally cutting off an arm or a leg or gouging out an eye. He was using hyperbole to emphasize the importance and wonder of The Life to Come.

Satan’s first effort is to get us to disbelieve in Jesus; but if he fails there, Satan tries to get us to disbelieve in the life to come and to live our lives so as to get all we can, can all we get and then sit on the can. Our aphorism, “Misery loves Company” was never truer than it is when applied to our Enemy and the forces of Darkness.

And that leads us to the troublesome images Jesus used in this passage having to do with judgment. Three times in as many verses, Jesus warned us that living with the wrong priorities will land us “*in hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*” (Mark 9:48).⁴

When Jesus spoke of “worms that do not die and fires that never go out,” He was quoting the last verse of the prophet Isaiah (66:24), which speaks of God’s judgment on the wicked. And the word translated “hell” in this passage is “Gehenna,” which means “Valley of

³ The Justice Department estimates that 9 of 10 children between the ages of 8 and 16 have been exposed to pornography online. Software company Symantec found that 47 percent of school-age children receive pornographic spam on a daily basis. And representatives from the pornography industry told Congress’s COPA (Child Online Protection Act) Commission that as much as 20 to 30 percent of the traffic to some pornographic websites is children. Daniel Weiss, “Obscenity Enforcement, Corporate Participation, and Violence against Women and Children,” www.family.org (7-23-05).

⁴ Verses 44 and 46 are not in the best manuscripts and are usually left out of modern translations.

Hinnom.” The Valley of Hinnom was just outside the walls of Jerusalem. An ancient center of pagan idolatry, in Jesus’ time that valley was the city garbage dump, and people spoke of that nasty valley as the place “where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched.” It was a place of death, destruction, and decomposition, to be avoided, if possible.

It’s also important to notice that Jesus was taking John’s complaint about the supposed error of the external exorcist and refocusing it. Jesus was telling the Twelve to be less concerned about the supposed errors of others and to look harder at their own sin, doing whatever was necessary to remove it from their lives. Jesus’ point was that the surpassing value of entering God’s Kingdom makes every other value expendable. That’s the idea behind “Cut It Out!”

Now while this is not really a sermon about hell, hell figures prominently in this passage, and so we need to look at it briefly, however difficult that looking might be. Jesus talked about eternal punishment more than anyone else in the New Testament, and He was in a position to know what He was talking about. Let’s begin by looking at the six statements at the beginning of the handout in your order of worship:

1. Jesus talked about Hell as though it is real.
2. Notice what a great proportion of what we know about Hell comes directly from Jesus.
3. Ending up in Hell is the natural consequence of refusal to listen to God’s Voice (Matthew 7:13-14).
4. Hell was prepared for the Devil and his angels, not for you (Matthew 25:41). But you can still get in.
5. Jesus told us that there is no price too great to avoid Hell (Matthew 18:9; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:5).
6. After reading these passages about Hell, *read the verses at the end of this handout to see what God’s incredible love has done to keep you from going there.*

I’ll post a good bit more information on this subject with the online version of this sermon, but for now, let me just try to describe what helps me with these questions. As always, you don’t need to agree with me. What you do need to do is to search the Scriptures yourselves, asking God for understanding.

I had an experience in the eighth grade that has helped me understand Hell more than anything that has happened since. There was a girl in my eighth-grade classes—it seemed as though she was in every one of them—who decided that she was madly in love with me. Like myself, she was not particularly popular with the in-crowd, and her attention did my own reputation no favors. She followed me everywhere, just at the edges of things, hardly ever saying anything to me, but . . . always there.

As I’ve reflected on that experience over the years, I’ve come to believe that the situation we call Hell is much like that. It seems to me that Hell is the condition of being forever pursued by a persistent and passionate Love that we perpetually reject.⁵ Let me say that again: **the situation we call Hell is the condition of being forever pursued by persistent and passionate Love that we perpetually reject.**

Or, to put it another way, **the fire of God’s love works differently than fire as we know it. This spiritual fire burns hotter the farther away we are from it.** When we come

⁵ See Francis Thompson’s powerful poem, “The Hound of Heaven”
<http://oblatesosbbelmont.org/the-hound-of-heaven/>.

near, it provides the warmth and safety and love that are the deepest yearning of our souls. When we reject it, we experience it as the fire of God's judgment.⁶

While I find these metaphors helpful, they don't tell the whole story. Jesus was very clear that, whatever the truth in these ideas, ending up in Hell is also the result of God's judgment. The Bible affirms that we are rebels all, and that because of the willful Sin that corrupts and controls virtually every aspect of our lives, the awful separation from God represented by Hell is the default destination for each and every one of us.

Our sensibilities are just as offended by God's prescription of blood sacrifice as the remedy for our Sin as they are by the Hell that is Sin's result and destiny; yet from nearly the Bible's first page to its last, blood sacrifice is the order of the day. The whole Bible points to a bloody Passover Lamb who approaches the heavenly places with blood, not of goats and calves, but with His own blood, thus securing eternal redemption for those who place their faith in Him (Hebrews 5:9, 9:12; Revelation 5:6-14).

The wonder of it all is that, even before speaking the Word of Creation, God determined that He would rather become one of us and go to Hell on our behalf rather than to be in Heaven without us (Hebrews 12:2). Let me say that again: **the wonder of it all is that, even before speaking the Word of Creation, God determined that He would rather become one of us and go to Hell on our behalf rather than to be in Heaven without us.**

My friends, Hell was never God's purpose for us. Jesus told us that Hell was prepared for "*the devil and his angels,*" not for us (Matthew 25:41). There's much that we don't understand compressed into that statement, but what we do understand is that God has gone to unimaginable lengths to ensure that no humans have to go there. The last two panels of your handout illustrate this wonderful Truth. I hope you'll read them carefully.

Again, if you want to explore this further, check the online version of this message this afternoon. For now, we need to move on to the last two verses of today's text: "*For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt should lose its flavor, how can you season it? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another*" (Mark 9:49-50).

Scholars agree that these verses are among the most difficult in Mark, which is to say that we're not exactly sure what point Jesus was making, or what point Mark intended to make. In fact, out of all the verses in this passage, commentators seemed more exercised about these than all the rest, millstones, hell, worms, and fire notwithstanding.

Over a dozen possible interpretations of these two verses are suggested in various commentaries, I could have spent the whole morning just looking at this. You may be relieved to know that our examination will be brief!

⁶ A third metaphor that helps me is to think of God's love, holiness, and righteousness as that white-hot, incredible Source from which the very stars themselves take their light. The nuclear fusion of our sun is as a single match before the glorious radiance of God's Presence.

Were we to travel to the sun in our present physical state, the sun would not have to take any action in order to destroy us—our physical nature is so incompatible with the reality of the sun that we would simply be consumed by the reality of the sun's nature. I believe our situation with God is actually very similar.

Our sinful nature is as incompatible with God's holiness as our bodies are incompatible with the sun. Were we to come into God's Presence unprotected from that holiness, our sinfulness would be consumed as fire consumes paper. The only way we can ever hope to survive such an encounter is to find ourselves covered by the blood of Jesus, by which we are granted new natures that are imbued with His righteousness. The Bible says that "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It seems likely that Jesus was combining several meanings of “salt” in these closing words, and as he often does, Eugene Peterson did a very good job getting at what seems to me to be the best understanding of these verses in *The Message*,⁷ a paraphrase of the Bible in modern English: “*Everyone’s going through a refining fire sooner or later, but you’ll be well-preserved, protected from the eternal flames. Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace.*”⁸

Jesus was warning the disciples about the persecution that would soon begin, and He was assuring them of God’s protection—not necessarily of their physical lives, but of their eternal lives with God. He was urging them to see themselves as “light, leaven, and salt” in the world, making a difference in both time and in eternity by their clear and courageous preaching of the Gospel. And He was encouraging them to stop their bickering and start out-serving one another rather than trying to get “in the front of the line.”

As we wrap this up for this morning, I want to leave you with this “light, leaven, and salt” idea. The time is drawing near when we will call someone to lead us as our Associate Pastor for Youth & Community Ministry. We are already involved in our community, of course, but try to imagine what God may be about to do in this place:

- Try to imagine us as a congregation so involved in the Village of Oakland Mills that persons in our neighborhood frequently say, “*Oh, you’re the church that . . . !*”
- Try to imagine our neighbors in Oakland Mills being genuinely thankful that CBF is in their neighborhood. Imagine them talking with each other about how good it is to have us in the village because of the tangible ways in which we’ve shown them God’s love.
- Try to imagine a significant number of CBFers actively engaged in and passionate about their work in the community, using their gifts and abilities in ways they never thought possible.
- Try to imagine our neighbors in Oakland Mills, some of whom have been cynical about and hostile toward Christian faith, actually praising God for CBF and for the positive contributions we’ve made in Jesus’ Name.⁹

I suggest to you that a good take-away from this difficult passage is to consider your own life and the various aspects of our life together. For anything in your life or our common life that makes achieving those goals less likely, Jesus’ message to us is: “Cut It Out!”

⁷ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (NavPress, 1993-2002). Peterson was for twenty-nine years the pastor of Christ the King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland.

⁸ Compare the *New Living Translation*: “*For everyone will be tested with fire. Salt is good for seasoning, but if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves, and live in peace with each other.*”

⁹ Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 13-14.

Thinking Clearly about Hell

1. Jesus talked about Hell as though it is real.
2. Notice what a great proportion of what we know about Hell comes directly from Jesus.
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Matthew 5:22

²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. **And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

Matthew 5:29-30 (also 18:9)

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. **It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.** ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. **It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.**

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³ "Enter through the narrow gate. For **wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction**, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Matthew 7:23

²³ Then I will tell them plainly, **'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'**

Matthew 10:28

²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, **be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**

Matthew 13:40-42 (also 13:50)

⁴⁰ "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² **They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Matthew 22:13 (also 8:12, 24:51, 25:30)

¹³ "Then the king told the attendants, **'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'**

Matthew 23:33

³³ "You snakes! You brood of vipers! **How will you escape being condemned to hell?**

Matthew 25:10

¹⁰ "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. **And the door was shut.**

Matthew 25:41, 46

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, **'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . .'** ⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Mark 8:36-37

³⁶ **What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?** ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

Mark 9:43-48

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."

Luke 12:5

⁵ But I will show you whom you should fear: **Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell.** Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Luke 13:28

²⁸ "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, **but you yourselves thrown out.**

Luke 16:23

²³ **In Hades, where he was in torment,** he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

John 3:18

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but **whoever does not believe stands condemned already** because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

John 3:36

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but **whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.**

Romans 2:5

⁵ But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, **you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath**, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

2 Thessalonians 1:9

⁹ They will be **punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord** and from the glory of his might.

Hebrews 2:3, 10:31

³ **How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? . . .** ³¹ **It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

2 Peter 2:4

⁴ For if God **did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell**, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment;

Revelation 14:9-11 (also 19:3, 20:10)

⁹ A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, ¹⁰ they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. **They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the**

holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹ **And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name."**

Revelation 20:15

¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life **was thrown into the lake of fire.**

Revelation 21:8

⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—**they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.**"

Hell is not God's purpose for us . . .

Isaiah 53:5-6

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Ezekiel 18:23

²³ Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

Ezekiel 33:11 (also 18:30-32)

¹¹ Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn!

Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'

John 3:16

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 5:8

⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 10:9, 13

⁹ If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . ¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

2 Corinthians 5:19

¹⁹ God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Galatians 3:13

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

1 John 1:9

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

“Thinking Clearly about Hell”

Luke 16:19-31¹

Let me say from the outset that I have not looked forward to preparing and delivering this message any more than you may have looked forward to hearing it. Today marks only the fourth time I’ve preached on Hell in more than thirty-three years of full-time ministry. This is not something I like to do or to do often, but it’s necessary from time to time in order to “preach the whole counsel of God’s Word.”

Because Jesus said more about Hell than anyone else, it’s crucial to begin such a study as this by settling in our minds just who Jesus is. In order for what follows to have validity, we have to begin by affirming that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed and that the New Testament provides us with a trustworthy record of what He did and taught. Neither of those premises is our subject this morning, but it is necessary to affirm them in order to begin at all.

If we begin with these premises, then we are soon faced with the decision about who Jesus really was—and is. C. S. Lewis, who experienced resurrection on the same day President Kennedy was assassinated, fifty years ago this week, pointed out that because Jesus clearly claimed to be God (John 10:30-33 *et passim*), Jesus didn’t leave us the choice of considering Him to be simply a great moral teacher, or even a very good man. Lewis’s famous “Trilemma” puts the choices that remain very clearly once a person claims to be divine.²

Assuming, then, that we can agree that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the Eternal God in human flesh (John 1:1, 14) and that the four Gospels provide a trustworthy record of what He did and taught, the fact that Jesus is our primary Source for information about Hell means that we must take that information with utmost seriousness, whether we like it or not.

And, while you and I might very much wish that the destiny of every human person might be the Heaven we considered last week, the fact of the matter is that Jesus told us to “*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*” (Matthew 7:13-14).

In his book, *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn points out that “God loves us enough to tell us the truth—that there are two eternal destinations, not one, and we must choose the right path if we are to go to Heaven. **All roads do not lead to Heaven. Only one does: Jesus Christ.**”³

The famous novelist, Dorothy Sayers, wrote that “There seems to be a kind of conspiracy to forget, or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. The doctrine of hell is not ‘mediaeval priestcraft’ for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin. . . . We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.”⁴

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 17, 2013.

² See <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20101003112053AAAswes> for a short commentary on this point.

³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 27. “If I had a choice,” Alcorn wrote, “that is if Scripture were not so clear and conclusive, I would certainly not believe in Hell. Trust me when I say I do not *want* to believe in it. But if I make what I want—or what others want—the basis for my beliefs, then I am a follower of myself and my culture, not a follower of Christ” (p. 26).

⁴ Dorothy Sayers, *A Matter of Eternity*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 86.

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote of Hell that “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord’s own words. . . .”⁵

With this as prologue, then, let’s look for a moment at Jesus’ parable that is our text for the morning, after which I’ll try to summarize how I understand the Bible’s teaching on the matter of Hell. It’s important to note that parables have a main point, and the main point of this one has to do with compassion, humility, and our stewardship of material resources, following the guidance of God’s written Word. At the same time, the parable clearly teaches that current behavior has very real consequences in the life to come.

The story has to do with a rich man and a poor man. The rich man is unnamed in the text but is often called Dives, from the Latin word of the same spelling that means “rich man.” The poor man is named Lazarus. Both men die, and they go immediately into very different circumstances.

Because of his self-centered and hard-hearted stewardship of his wealth, Dives goes into torment in what Jesus describes as fire; while Lazarus, whose heart had been open to God, was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side in Heaven (Luke 16:22). The parable indicates that a great and impassable chasm separates these two places, and that, at least in this case, persons on the two sides of the chasm are able to both see and speak to each other (see also Hebrews 12:1).

Randy Alcorn points out that while we don’t want to press the details of any parable too far, “Jesus could easily have portrayed the rich man and Lazarus in other ways. He could have said, ‘When Lazarus died, his spirit drifted without a body into a realm without sin and pain.’ But he didn’t. It seems unlikely that Jesus would have depicted the afterlife in such concrete detail if it had nothing to teach us concerning the nature of Heaven and Hell.”⁶

To continue our study, then, there are four biblical words that are sometimes translated as “hell.” These words are “Sheol,” “Hades,” “Gehenna,” and “Tartarus.”⁷ If we take all the New

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1940, 1962), p. 118. “As things are,” Lewis wrote, “this doctrine is one of the chief grounds on which Christianity is attacked as barbarous, and the goodness of God impugned. We are told that it is a detestable doctrine—and indeed, I too detest it from the bottom of my heart—and are reminded of the tragedies in human life which have come from believing it. Of the other tragedies which come from not believing it we are told less. For these reasons, and these alone, it becomes necessary to discuss the matter” (*The Problem of Pain*, Adobe Digital Editions, 2009, p. 41).

“The problem,” Lewis noted, “is not simply that of a God who consigns some of His creatures to final ruin. . . . Christianity, true, as always, to the complexity of the real, presents us with something knottier and more ambiguous—a God so full of mercy that He becomes man and dies by torture to avert that final ruin from His creatures, and who yet, where that heroic remedy fails, seems unwilling, or even unable, to arrest the ruin by an act of mere power. I said glibly a moment ago that I would pay ‘any price’ to remove this *doctrine*. I lied. I could not pay one-thousandth part of the price that God has already paid to remove the *fact*. And here is the real problem: so much mercy, yet still there is Hell” (*Pain*, Adobe, p. 84).

⁶ Alcorn, pp. 62-63.

⁷ **Sheol** is the word the Hebrew Scriptures use for the abode of the dead, and Sheol was not generally considered to be a place of punishment. While the King James Version translates “Sheol” as “hell,” modern translations are closer to the mark when they translate “Sheol” as “the grave.”

The Hebrew Scripture affirms that God is in Sheol (Psalm 139:8; Proverbs 15:11), that God has power over Sheol, and is capable of ransoming souls from its depths (Psalm 16:10; Psalm 30:3; Psalm 49:15; Psalm 86:13; Job 33:18; Job 33:28-30). All of these together make it most unlikely that Sheol can be equated with Hell. (See Chris Church, “Sheol,” in *The Holman Bible Dictionary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman].)

Hades was the name of the Greek god of the underworld, and the word came to generally refer to the abode of the dead, much like Sheol. “Hades” appears eight times in the Greek New Testament, and,

Testament references to all these words together, it seems to me that the basic characteristics we're given about Hell fall into five main categories. I've called these categories (1) FIRE, (2) DARKNESS, (3) DESTRUCTION, (4) TORTURE, and (5) NO MORE CHANCES. Let's look at each just for a moment. Most of these descriptions come from Jesus Himself:

FIRE: Hell is described as fire that never goes out, as a "*blazing furnace*," and as a "*fiery lake of burning sulfur*" (Matthew 5:22, 13:42, 50, 18:9; Mark 9:43, 48; James 3:6; Revelation 20:15, 21:8).

DARKNESS: Hell is described as darkness "*outside*," as "*the dominion of darkness*," as "*chains of darkness*," and as "*blackest darkness*" (Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30; Colossians 1:13; 2 Peter 2:4, 17; Jude 1:6, 13).

DESTRUCTION: Hell is described as a place of destruction where "*the worms that eat them do not die*," as a place where both body and soul are destroyed, and as "*everlasting destruction*" (Matthew 7:13, 10:28; Mark 9:48; 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

TORTURE: Hell is described as a place of "*torment*," filled with "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*," where "*the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever*," and where "*there will be no rest day or night*" (Matthew 13:42, 50; Mark 9:48; Luke 13:28, 16:23; Revelation 14:10-11).

And whether we want it to be so or not, Hell is described as a place where there will be **NO MORE CHANCES**, where the Master will finally say, "*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*," after which the door will be shut (Matthew 7:23, 25:10, 41, 46).

It's hard to know how literally to take these descriptions. If we take the words at face value, it's hard to imagine how a single location could be described as "blackest darkness" and a "fiery furnace" at the same time; but it's certainly clear that the words are intended to portray a reality that is awful beyond the ability of words to describe.⁸

Because God is the Source of all that is Good, and because Hell is outside that place where God is, Hell must represent the absence of all that is Good, a place of utter misery. This is

while the King James Version generally translates "Hades" as "Hell," modern versions often simply transliterate the word into English as "Hades," which is the case in the parable this morning.

"Hades" appears twice in Matthew, twice in Luke, and four times in Revelation. In Matthew 11:23, 16:18, and Luke 10:15, Hades refers to the realm of the dead with the implication that being in Hades is not a good thing. In our text (Luke 16:23), Jesus referred to Hades as a place of torment. And in all four instances in Revelation, Hades appears in the phrase "*death and Hades*," which seems to make a distinction between simply being dead and being consigned to Hades (Revelation 1:18, 6:8, 20:13-14).

Gehenna is the Greek form of the Hebrew words *ge Hinnom*, which mean "valley of Hinnom." The term originally referred to a ravine on the south side of Jerusalem where pagan deities were worshiped. It became a garbage dump and a place of abomination where fire burned continuously (Matthew 18:9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; James 3:6). "Gehenna" became synonymous with "a place of burning" (See Ralph L. Smith, "Gehenna," in *The Holman Bible Dictionary*) and in the period between the Old and New Testaments Jewish writing used "Gehenna" to describe the fire of Hell in the final judgment. The New International Version translates "Gehenna" as "Hell."

Tartarus was thought by Greek mythology to be far below Hades, the awful location in which fallen gods were imprisoned (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tartarus>). "Tartarus" appears once in the New Testament, in that same sense, as the place where rebellious angels are imprisoned (2 Peter 2:4), and the word is translated as "Hell."

⁸ C. S. Lewis pointed out that "the prevalent image of fire is significant because it combines the ideas of torment and destruction. Now it is quite certain that all these expressions are intended to suggest something unspeakably horrible, and any interpretation which does not face that fact is, I am afraid, out of court from the beginning" (Lewis, *Pain* [Adobe], p. 192).

why Dante, in the *Inferno*, envisioned these words above the gate of Hell: “Abandon all hope, you who enter here.”⁹

Although there are many religious groups that espouse some form of purgation or redemption from Hell, such hope is not found in the Bible. To the contrary, at the conclusion of His description of “the Sheep and Goat” judgment in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that the conclusion of the matter will be that those who fall under God’s judgment “*will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life*” (Matthew 25:46). And it seems clear that whatever “eternal” means with respect to life *with* God, it also means with respect to life *without* God.

Jesus’ statement made me curious about how “eternal” is used in the Bible, and that study was both interesting and encouraging. The words “eternal” and “eternally” appear in the New International Version eighty times. Eight of these occurrences describe God’s own Person and Power, and two describe God’s Word and Law.¹⁰ Other “eternal things” in the Bible include:

- Eternal **Covenant** (Hebrews 13:20)
- Eternal **Dwellings** (Luke 16:9; 2 Corinthians 5:1)
- Eternal **Encouragement & Hope** (2 Thessalonians 2:16)
- Eternal **Glory** (2 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Timothy 2:10; 1 Peter 5:10)
- Eternal **Gospel** (Revelation 14:6)
- Eternal **Home** (Ecclesiastes 12:5)
- Eternal **Inheritance** (Hebrews 9:15)
- Eternal **Kingdom** (Daniel 4:3, 34; 2 Peter 1:11)
- Eternal **Love** (1 Kings 10:9)
- Eternal **Pleasure** (Psalm 16:11)
- Eternal **Praise** (Psalm 111:10)
- Eternal **Purpose** (Ephesians 3:11)
- Eternal **Reality** (2 Corinthians 4:18)
- Eternal **Salvation/Redemption** (Hebrews 5:9, 9:12); and perhaps best of all,
- Eternal **Life (x42)** (Matthew 19:16, 29; Mark 10:17, 30; Luke 10:25, 18:18, 30; John 3:15-16, 36, 4:14, 36, 5:24, 39, 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 6:68, 10:28, 12:25, 50, 17:2-3; Acts 13:46, 48; Romans 2:7, 5:21, 6:22-23; Galatians 6:8; 1 Timothy 1:16, 6:12; Titus 1:2, 3:7; 1 John 1:2, 2:25, 3:15, 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 1:21)

Out of the eighty occurrences of “eternal” and “eternally” in the Bible, only six verses posit eternal things that are negative, but they are negative indeed:

Eternal **Fire** (Matthew 18:8, 25:41; Jude 1:7)
 Eternal **Judgment** (Hebrews 6:2)
 Eternal **Punishment** (Matthew 25:46)
 Eternal **Sin** (Mark 3:29).

Well, after all this, what shall we say? How are we to understand Hell? How does Hell fit into God’s purposes for Creation, and most especially into God’s purposes for humankind? Is there a way to find any redemption at all in this idea?

I’m going to try to describe what helps me with these questions, but as always, you don’t need to agree with me. What you do need to do is to search the Scriptures yourselves, crying out to God for understanding.

⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto 3, line 9.

¹⁰ Genesis 21:33; Deuteronomy 33:27; Romans 16:26; Hebrews 9:14; “*the Rock eternal*” (Isaiah 26:4); “*the eternal King*” (Jeremiah 10:10; 1 Timothy 1:17); “*eternal power*” (Romans 1:20); God’s Eternal Word/Law (Psalm 119:89, 160)

I was in the eighth grade when President Kennedy was shot, and it was in the eighth grade that I had an experience that has helped me understand Hell more than anything that has happened since. My high school years were not marked by popularity with girls, at least not popularity of a romantic sort. It was good fortune beyond all imagining when, some years later, a gorgeous, blond, vivacious, wildly-popular cheerleader fell in love with me, a wonderful woman to whom I have now been married for forty years . . . but that's another story!

In the eighth grade, I had not yet met Jill Martin, but there was a girl in my classes—it seemed as though she was in every one of them—who decided that she was madly in love with me. Like myself, she was not particularly popular with the in-crowd, and her attention did my own reputation no favors. She followed me everywhere, just at the edges of things, hardly ever saying anything to me, but . . . always there.

As I've reflected on that experience over the years, I've come to believe that the situation we call Hell is the condition of being forever pursued by persistent and passionate Love that we perpetually reject.¹¹ Let me say that again: **the situation we call Hell is the condition of being forever pursued by persistent and passionate Love that we perpetually reject.**

Or, to put it another way, **the fire of God's love works differently from fire as we know it. This spiritual fire burns hotter the farther away we are from it.** When we come near, it provides the warmth and safety that are the deepest yearning of our souls. When we reject it, we experience it as the fire of Hell.

A third metaphor that helps me is to think of God's love, holiness, and righteousness as that white-hot, incredible Source from which the very stars themselves take their light. The nuclear fusion of our sun is as a single match before the glorious radiance of God's Presence.

Were we to travel to the sun in our present physical state, the sun would not have to take any action in order to destroy us—our physical nature is so incompatible with the reality of the sun that we would simply be consumed by the reality of the sun's nature. I believe our situation with God is actually very similar.

Our sinful nature is as incompatible with God's holiness as our bodies are incompatible with the sun. Were we to come into God's Presence unprotected from that holiness, our sinfulness would be consumed as fire consumes paper. The only way we can ever hope to survive such an encounter is to find ourselves covered by the blood of Jesus, by which we are granted new natures that are imbued with His righteousness. The Bible says that "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

While I find these metaphors helpful, they don't tell the whole story. Jesus was very clear that, whatever the truth in these ideas, ending up in Hell is also the result of God's judgment. The Bible affirms that we are rebels all, and that because of the willful Sin that corrupts and controls virtually every aspect of our lives, the awful separation from God represented by Hell is the default destination for each and every one of us. Our fragile craft hurtle headlong toward the fiery fury of the sun; toward that moment when we are fully and finally captured by its gravitational power and cataclysmic collision becomes inescapable.

Our sensibilities are just as offended by God's prescription of blood sacrifice as the remedy for our Sin as they are by the Hell that is Sin's destiny; yet from nearly the Bible's first page to its last, blood sacrifice is the order of the day. The whole Bible points to a bloody Passover Lamb who approaches the heavenly places with blood, not of goats and calves, but with His own blood,

¹¹ See Francis Thompson's powerful poem, "The Hound of Heaven" <http://oblatesosbbelmont.org/the-hound-of-heaven/>.

thus securing eternal redemption for those who place their faith in Him (Hebrews 5:9, 9:12; Revelation 5:6-14).¹² The wonder of it all is that, even before speaking the Word of Creation, God determined that He would rather become one of us and go to Hell on our behalf rather than to be in Heaven without us (Hebrews 12:2).¹³

Hell was never God's purpose for us. Jesus told us that Hell was prepared for "*the devil and his angels*" (Matthew 25:41), and God has gone to unimaginable lengths to ensure that no humans have to go there. Just look at the selection of verses at the end of your handout:

Isaiah 53:5-6

⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

⁶ *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Ezekiel 18:23

²³ *Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?*

Ezekiel 33:11 (also 18:30-32)

¹¹ *Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'*

John 3:16

¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Romans 5:8

⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Romans 10:9, 13

⁹ *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . .* ¹³ *for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

2 Corinthians 5:19

¹⁹ *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Galatians 3:13

¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

1 John 1:9

⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

¹² See Russell D. Moore, "The Blood-Drained Gospel of Rob Bell," www.russellmoore.com.

¹³ Alcorn, p. 28.

These texts make it clear that **ending up in Hell has everything to do with our own choices**, and the obvious question becomes why ANYONE would *choose* to go to Hell. Well, in the first place, choosing to do evil rather than good is always inexplicable. Why, after all, do *we* choose it so often?

But beyond this, people seldom consciously choose to go to Hell. They just choose not to care about those things that prepare them for Heaven. C. S. Lewis put it well when he noted that “People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, ‘If you keep a lot of rules I’ll reward you, and if you don’t I’ll do the other thing.’ I do not think that is the best way of looking at it.

“I would much rather say that **every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before**. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself.

“To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. **Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.**”¹⁴

When all is said and done, Hell is a place for people who truly don’t want to go to Heaven. “In the long run,” Lewis wrote, “the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does.”¹⁵

My friends, if at times we are appalled by the depths to which, in the history of this world, wickedness has been allowed to descend, and the extent to which it has been allowed to prevail, we may take these depths and this extent as the measure of the value God sets on our created freedom being genuinely free. God alone is able to bear within His heart the fire of Hell as the everlasting price of our freedom.

In the end, the problem of Hell defies a rational solution. It is a mystery that we are never done with, that we can’t explain, and that is undoubtedly more serious than most of our statements about it. Where there appears to be an irreconcilable contradiction between the omnipotence and the goodness of God, there our finite wisdom has come to the end of its tether, and we do not understand the solution that we yet believe in.

The Bible says, ²⁷ *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,* ²⁸ *so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him* (Hebrews 9:27-28).

Hell is separation and banishment from anything that matters, separation from all value and all good, banishment not only from God but also from those who know and love Him. And to this very moment, God’s invitation continues to be that “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13). The choice is yours.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Adobe Digital Edition, p. 172.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Pain*, Adobe, p. 197.