



Matthew 24:41–46

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. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ 44 “They also will answer,

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ 45 “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ 46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Reflection

Today’s passage is the last recorded teaching of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. In it Jesus speaks of hell, a topic that no-one likes to think about and that many of us have deep and unresolved issues with. It’s a passage and a topic that we’d rather avoid. For similar reasons we sometimes hear people say that they cannot believe

in an Old Testament God who is full of wrath and judgment and that they prefer the God of the New Testament, the gentle Jesus. But as we've seen in Matthew's gospel, time-and-time again, Jesus speaks and warns us most urgently about the reality and the horror of hell. In chapter 3 John the Baptist spoke of hell in terms of unquenchable fire. In chapter 5, Jesus taught us that harbouring pent-up anger against our Christian brothers and sisters leaves us in danger of the fire of hell. The same language was used again in chapter 7, bad trees bearing bad fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire, 'Away from me I never knew you!' Jesus said. In chapter 18, in exaggerated language to make his point Jesus even spoke of plucking out eyes and cutting off hands and feet rather than sinning and

being at risk of being thrown into the fire of hell. And now today, in his last recorded words of teaching before he goes to his death, Jesus again, urgently warns us about the reality of hell.

Just because we don't like something doesn't make it untrue. And just because we don't like hearing about something doesn't mean that it isn't good for us to be reminded of it. Jesus certainly doesn't enjoy speaking about hell. But hell is a reality, and a reality so awful that one who loves us so much cannot help but to warn us as often and as passionately about it as he can. So Jesus ends with this,

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.

Hell wasn't prepared for us. It was prepared for them, the devil and his angels, who sinned and rebelled against God. We don't need to go there. But here's the reason that many of us will,

42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

Jesus is speaking here in the same terms as he did yesterday. But the contrast could not be more extreme. It's Judgment Day.

Jesus has returned in all his glory to judge the living and the dead. He's divided all of humankind into just two groups. Those on his right and those on his left, those who lived their lives as members of the kingdom of God and those who lived their lives as members of the kingdom of this world. They're divided simply by their response to Jesus. Jesus' words confuse those on his left just as they did those on his right,

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

Jesus replies,

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these,

you did not do for me.'

What does Jesus mean? He means that those on his left are judged and found wanting by the way they responded to the gospel, and to the bearers of the gospel, Christians down throughout the ages. The way they treated them and their message directly correlates to what they think of him. Some they murdered, others they slandered, ridiculing their message, whether that be to their faces or behind their backs. But most often they simply ignored them. They didn't listen to the gospel and they ignored those God sent to warn them. It's important to see here that Jesus isn't simply condemning those on his left for things that they have done, but also for the things that they failed to do. We sin, not only when we do evil, but also

when we fail to do the things we should do. And their gravest sin was something they failed to do. They failed to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, and the proof of this was the way they treated his people. The result says Jesus, is eternal punishment.

Think & Pray

As hard as it will be, take some time today to think deeply over the reality of hell. John Ryle wrote about it in this way,

Who shall describe the misery of eternal punishment? It is something utterly indescribable and inconceivable. The eternal pain of the body; the eternal sting of an accusing conscience; the eternal society of none but the wicked, the devil and his

angels; the eternal remembrance of opportunities neglected and Christ despised; the eternal prospect of a weary, hopeless future – all this misery indeed: it is enough to make our ears tingle, and our blood run cold.

It's enough to make our blood run cold and enough to make Jesus' blood run down a splintered wooden cross so that we might avoid the reality of hell at all costs; at the greatest of costs to himself.

We find hell abhorrent. We find it hard to reconcile with a God of love. But the reality of hell is completely reconcilable to the God of the Bible. In fact, God could not be God without hell. How could God be a God of perfect love if he was not also a God of perfect justice? Can you imagine

a God who could turn a blind eye to evil? The beheadings in Syria, international war criminals dying in luxury in their old age, the untold abuse that goes unreported behind closed doors – can you imagine a God that would just sit by and pretend to be all about love while letting all this go unpunished? For those who can, he's exactly that, a God of their imagination. Because the real God who made the heavens and the earth and everything in it is a God of perfect love and of perfect justice which means he cannot and will not let evil go unpunished. Not big sins and not little ones either, none of them. And the biggest sin of all, the most preposterous, the most unspeakable sin and the root cause of all other sin is turning your back on God himself, who gave you life and breath and everything. Every sin, and especially this

one, cries out to God for justice.

And one day soon every single person who has ever walked the earth will be perfectly held to account for their every single thought, word and deed, seen and unseen. We all will be held to account for every evil thing that we have done and for every good thing that we did not do that we should have done. Perfect love demands perfect justice which means the only hope for humankind is God's perfect mercy. And its only at the cross of Jesus Christ that the perfect love, justice and mercy of God meet.

The reality of hell was never far from Jesus' mind. Warnings about hell were never far from Jesus' lips. And saving people from hell was the mission of his life. As

followers of Jesus we must follow him in this as well. Pray that we would love those around us so much that it to be impossible for us not to warn them, just as it was for our Lord.