

Did Jesus Believe in Hell? Luke 16:19-31

Introduction

C.S. Lewis said of the doctrine of hell something I myself also feel: “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; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.”¹ For some, if hell does exist, then it is only reserved for the really bad people. Others believe hell will be a type of party where they will see some of their friends.

Mark Twain reportedly said of hell: “Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company.” The famous Playwright, Ben Jonson, said of hell, “There is no greater hell than to be a prisoner of fear.” Jerry Lee Lewis said, “If I’m going to hell, I’m going there playing the piano.” Oscar Wilde said, “We are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell.” John Milton said, “Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.”

There are all kinds of thoughts and opinions concerning hell but a better question is what did Jesus think about hell? There are three questions I think are worth our time considering this morning: Did Jesus believe in hell, what did he say about it, and why does it matter? I think the best way to answer these three questions is to turn our attention to a parable Jesus told in Luke 16:19-31 because it highlights the way we typically live out our days and the little we think about what happens after death.

Did Jesus Believe in Hell?

Jesus used parables as a teaching tool. Parables are stories or depictions of earthly life that illustrates spiritual truth. Not everything in parables, such as the characters in such stories are meant to be taken literally, but the truth the story conveys is to be taken literally. For example, when Jesus told the story of person who sowed seed on four different types of soil, the point of his story was not the historical accuracy of the sower, but the way different people respond to the gospel in the same way different types of soil a seed is able to grow in (see Luke 8:4-15).

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the point is not necessarily whether or not these men in Jesus’ story were actual historical figures. There is a much more important point Jesus is making in his story, and that point is what you do with your life today has eternal consequences.

Here is what we are told about the two men. The rich man is never mentioned by name, but he, “**was clothed in purple and fine linen**” and “**feasted sumptuously every day**” (v. 19). The

¹ C. S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*

poor man is not anonymous, but has a name unlike the rich man, and his name is Lazarus (not to be confused with Jesus' friend in John 11). Instead of the purple and fine linen that covered the rich man's body, Lazarus was covered with sores while hungry and longing for whatever fell from the rich man's table. The other irony here is that while the rich man was oblivious to Lazarus' suffering the dogs were more aware of Lazarus' suffering than any other creature as they **"licked his sores"** (vv. 20-21).

At some point both men died. Lazarus was carried to Abraham's side while the rich man was buried. The rich man received a burial while Lazarus' body was most likely "dumped unceremoniously in an unmarked grave."² Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's side which was a Jewish metaphor for heaven, but the rich man found himself in Hades and in torment which is also known as hell. We know that Abraham's side in Jesus' parable is heaven and the rich man's torment is hell because of the other ways Jesus describes heaven and hell throughout the four Gospels (i.e. John 14:2; Luke 23:43; Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 7:13-14).

Notice what Jesus says of the rich man while in torment. He lifted his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side, which was the place of honor. The rich man called out, **"Father Abraham, have mercy on me..."** (v. 24). The rich man most likely assumed that because of his family connection to Abraham that his religious identity was enough to get him to heaven while he lived his life eating and living sumptuously. As he found himself in hell, he begged that he send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water to cool his tongue. The rich man's torment was so severe that he believed that just a drop of water on his tongue could ease his agony just a little bit.

Abraham's answer was not what the rich man wanted to hear. Abraham reminded him of his life of easy living while he ignored Lazarus' suffering and that while he had a lifetime to show compassion and mercy, he chose to fill his belly while Lazarus watched, and now it was too late. The chasm between heaven and hell is fixed and there is no reversing the judgment the rich man received and deserved.

Jesus shared this story within the context of his teaching concerning faithfulness to God and the love the Pharisees had for money. Just four short paragraphs earlier in the same chapter, Jesus said something that will help you make sense of the point he is making in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus: **"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"** (Luke 16:10-13). After Jesus said this, we are told that the Pharisees, **"who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him [Jesus]"** (v. 14). Listen to Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees: **"And he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before me, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God'"** (v. 15).

Listen, the rich man was not in hell because he ignored Lazarus, he was in hell because he loved his money more than God. Had he loved God, he would not have been able to ignore Lazarus.

² Sproul, R. C. (1999). *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (p. 316). Christian Focus Publications.

Jesus described a time that is coming when he will judge the nations. He will separate the people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep, he will place on his right (the place of honor) and the goats will be placed to his left. Here is what Jesus will say to the sheep: **“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’”** (Matthew 25:34–36). Jesus will then turn to the goats,

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:41–46).

So, did Jesus believe in hell? Yes, he did. How long is the type of torment the rich man will have to endure? The same duration that will be meted out to the “goats” who symbolize those who do not belong to Jesus: a punishment that will be eternal.

What Did Jesus Believe About Hell?

Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about love or heaven, and he did so for a reason. He spoke so much about hell because he came, **“...to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). The reason why Jesus described the distance between the rich man in hell and Lazarus in heaven as a **“great chasm”** is because hell is the place, where those who are sent there, **“will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...”** (2 Thess. 1:9). So, what did Jesus say about hell?

For starters, Jesus described hell as a place of eternal destruction, and warned, **“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”** (Matt. 10:28). The destruction is not annihilation or temporary because when he described the final judgment, he said that the goats will, **“go away into eternal punishment...”** (Matt. 25:46).

What else did Jesus say about hell? Well, he said that it is a place of torture (Matt. 18:34), a place where the wicked are cut to pieces (Matt. 24:51), and a place of scourging (Luke 12:47–48). According to Jesus, hell is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 24:51; Luke 13:20), and a place of outer darkness (Matt. 22:13; 25:30). This means that, to Mark Twain’s great disappointment hell is not a place where you will be aware of any company, for you will only be aware of your own existence and the terrible agony that you are in.

Jesus believed the torment in hell to be so severe that he used the most horrific language possible to make the point that the experience will be as such that those who suffer there will long for only a drop of water on the tip of their tongue to find some ease from their suffering.

In describing the nature and horror of hell, Jesus warned about the danger of sin: **“And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’”** (Mark 9:45–48). Here, Jesus quotes from an Old Testament passage concerning the nature of hell: **“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh”** (Isaiah 66:24).

There is so much more that the Bible teaches about hell; I only wanted to show you that Jesus not only believed in hell, but wanted us to take it very seriously. I have not even touched on what the Bible says concerning the final state of hell as the **“lake of fire”** (see Rev. 20:11-15) where all who are cast into it, **“the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night...”** (Rev. 14:11).

Why Does it Matter?

So, why does hell matter? Well, for starters, hell is real! The language Jesus uses to describe hell is severe, and it is severe for a reason. Hell is severe because our sin is serious. The problem we have with the severity of hell is that we do not understand the severity of our own sin, nor do we understand the nature of the God we have sinned against.

Maybe you feel that a good God would not send anyone to hell. Maybe you believe that the love, grace, and mercy of God cannot coexist with a hell created by that same God. To do so is to bring God low and to make him more like yourself than who he truly is. The reality of hell is proof that God is both holy and good, but it also proves that he is also a God of love, grace, mercy, and justice in equal measure. This is why we read of God over and over from the Bible: **“There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might”** (Jer. 10:6). In Exodus 15:11, we read of God: **“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”**

The problem with the doctrine of hell is not God, but us. The testimony of holy scripture against us is this: **“alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...”** (Col. 1:21), **“dead in trespasses and sins... carrying out the desires of the body and the mind”** (Eph. 2:1-3), **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.... There is no fear of God before their eyes”** (Rom. 3:9-10, 18). Considering our nature compared to the nature of God, someone said: *“The gates of hell are locked from the inside.”*

We are the ones who are not good. We are the ones who do not get love, grace, mercy, and justice right. When it comes to holiness... we fall terribly short. We run to our sin instead of fleeing from it, for what was written in Jeremiah 2:12-13 is what we find most natural: **“Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water”** (Jeremiah 2:12–13).

Now, against the backdrop of the hard and striking things Jesus said about hell, listen to the hope offered to undeserving sinners such as ourselves:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:16–21)

Listen, sin will send you to hell! However, it doesn't have to be that way because of Jesus who endured our hell on a roman cross for our sins. We deserve hell, but the Bible says, **“For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Cor. 5:21). The empty tomb of our savior is evidence and affirmation that his cross is enough for our forgiveness and redemption.

The rich man in Jesus' parable begged that since nothing could be done for his torment, that Lazarus be sent to the rich man's five brothers that they may be warned so that they do not enter the same fate. The answer the rich man received is sobering: **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them”** (Luke 16:29). The rich man said, **“No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent”** (v. 30). Listen to how Jesus concludes his story: **“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead”** (v. 31).

The death of Jesus is a picture of the ugliness and seriousness of our sin; it is also proof of the love of God for lost sinners. This past Sunday, we celebrated the reality that he is risen from the grave. Yet, some of you are still trivializing your sin and do not take hell as seriously as you ought. Understand that I am not talking about our ability to sin, but the sin you refuse to turn from because you love it more than you love God.

Some of you ignore the One who died in order that you would be pardoned from your guilt so that heaven instead of hell could be your reality. Maybe it is because you think you have time? My question to you is, “How do you know that you have any more time than this moment? There is one better and greater than Lazarus who is risen from the grave. Turn to Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins before it is too late for you. **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16).