

## What's the Big Deal About Hell?

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Mark 9:42-50, Psalm 124

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit  
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/sermon10-28-2018.mp3>*

I remember the question vividly – and terrifyingly. I was about fourteen years old and attending a “Jesus People” music festival. An older teen pulled me aside and after a little chat asked me, “But seriously, Dave – if you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?”



I remember being scared to death. First, I was afraid of dying. Then, I was afraid of going to sleep that night. Mostly, I was afraid of Hell. I mean, I didn't know much about it, but I knew it wasn't a place I wanted to have a coke, let alone be there forever. So I asked my friend: “Um, how do I get around this ‘spending Hell in eternity’ thing?”

He told me about “the sinner’s prayer”, in which all I had to do was ask Jesus into my heart, accept his forgiveness, and then – BAM! I was in the club. No Hell for this guy! Say this. Believe that. Get saved.

I liked it, for a while. It felt good to be living without fear of going to Hell. After all, I had my ticket punched. Jesus and I were good. I wasn't particularly interested in Christian growth or discipleship, and I only stuck around the church because there was a cute girl there... But mostly, I was in it to get out of Hell. Amen. Thank you Jesus.

And I was not alone. For many people, that is the essence of the Christian walk. In fact, that question is at the heart of “Evangelism Explosion”, a training program that has been called “the best known and most widely used evangelism training curriculum in church history.” According to officials at Evangelism

Explosion, more than 10.7 million people were “saved” through this strategy in 2016 alone.<sup>1</sup>



We are afraid of Hell, aren't we? And we are fascinated with it at the same time. And once we're “saved” from it, we really get worked up about it, and make it our business to decide who's going there and who's not.

My formative conscious experience with the Christian faith was rooted in a fear of eternal torment. How interesting to note, then, that Jesus has been walking around the Holy Land proclaiming the Kingdom of God for years before he gets around to addressing the topic of Hell. In fact, the passage you've heard is the only time that Mark mentions Jesus ever referring to Hell.

Bible  
Verses

There are a couple of things that are worth mentioning as we encounter the text this morning. First, you may or may not have noticed as the scripture was read, but almost all of your Bibles omit verses 44 and 46 from the reading. Why? Because the oldest copies of the Book of Mark do not include those verses. When the first copyists were sharing this gospel, they could not help themselves. They were so entranced by Jesus' description of the place where “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” that they had to add that phrase twice more. They, like many of us, found the idea of eternal torment – particularly eternal torment of other, less-correct, people – to be so fascinating that they had to keep talking about it.

So what does the Master actually say about Hell?

For starters, he doesn't really use the word “Hell”. In fact, the word isn't in the Bible. Ever. I know, you may think that your Bible says “hell”, and it sure sounded like Peter said “Hell” a moment ago, but that word isn't in Jesus' vocabulary. There are

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism\\_Explosion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism_Explosion)

four words that show up in various translations as “Hell”: Sheol, Hades, Tartarus, and Gehenna. The first two might be more appropriately translated as “the grave”; Tartarus is used a single time and it refers to a Greek concept having to do with a place of darkness that is below the dead.



When Jesus speaks about a place of torment here (and elsewhere in the Gospels), he uses the word “Gehenna”. Gehenna is a place – a valley near Jerusalem that was once the site of human sacrifice. Hundreds of years before Jesus, God’s people committed the abomination of offering their children to the fire god, Molech (II Chronicles 28:3). In Jesus’ own day, the place had become the town dump, and it was full of smoldering refuse as any kind of filth – including human remains – was burned. There was so much death and disease in this place that the worms would never run out of food; there was so much garbage being added day after day that the fires would not go out.

When Jesus used the word “Gehenna”, he surely intended to communicate the idea of a place that was evil, painful, and, well, one of sheer torment.

So what is it, Church, that provokes the Lord of Life, the One who was always so quick to talk about the proclamation of “the Kingdom”, to call to mind the most disgusting place in Jerusalem when talking to his followers?

Well, let’s remember where we’ve been. Last week, Jesus set forward a practice of discipleship that is built around the concepts of welcome and embrace and tolerance – particularly welcome, embrace, and tolerance for those who are at the greatest risk of being marginalized or disempowered. Do you remember? He called a child into their midst and talked about welcoming and assisting the weak, the vulnerable, the accused, the left out.

Now this is huge, Beloved, and I hope that you can hear it. Although the concept of eternal torment was big in my introduction to theology, Jesus himself doesn't bring it up...until when? Until he perceives amongst his followers a temptation to abuse the vulnerable, neglect the weak, or reject the stranger.

In fact, Jesus says, if you do something like abusing the vulnerable, neglecting the weak, or rejecting the stranger, it would be better for you to disappear forever than to face the consequences of that.

Listen to me: Jesus doesn't promise Hell to people who don't believe the right stuff about him! He warns of Gehenna as the logical destination for those who would sacrifice children or ignore the suffering of the vulnerable.

And look at the scale that's involved: if you so much as cause someone to stumble; if you place a small stone in their path that might bring them to disorientation or distress, it would be better for you if a "millstone" was tied to your neck.



In Jesus' day there were two kinds of grinding stones. The first, perhaps more common, was a hand-held stone that women would use to pulverize grain into flour. The second was much larger and required the strength of an animal to turn on a spoke. Guess which word Jesus used?



In other words, if you cause even some small offense to one of these whom Jesus calls "these little ones" – if you were to place a stumbling block in their path – then it would be better for you to have a giant millstone tied around your neck as you are sent to swim with the fishes.

Then Jesus launches into one of the most gruesome and confusing teachings of all, wherein he talks about self-dismemberment as a strategy for discipleship. There is a common thread in many of the Bible's teachings that has come to be known as the "better than" proverb. In fact, we sang one such

proverb last week: “better is one day in your house than thousands elsewhere...” Here, Jesus makes use of the familiar “better than” form but infuses it with a dose of hyperbole and exaggeration for emphasis. It is better, he says, for one to have a millstone tied around the neck, or to cut off one’s own hand or foot, or to pluck out one’s own eye, than it is to possess an entire body but to be consigned to Gehenna, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

Does Jesus intend for people to take him literally here? Well, no. And yes.

No, I do not think that Jesus is lifting up self-mutilation as a healthy spiritual practice. As a child, I tried a variation of the literal interpretation of these verses. I’d smack my brother until he cried, and then he’d call on my grandmother or my mom, and I’d say, “No, of course, I didn’t hit Tommy.” The adult would say, “Well, why is he crying? How did he get that bruise?” And I would hold out my arm and say as innocently as I could, “I didn’t hit him. My hand did.”

Here’s what I think that Jesus means when he gets into all that business about millstones and mutilation: I think he’s asking us if we are willing to consider the weak, the vulnerable, the “outsider” as being of greater importance than those other things that we hold dear. Are you so attached to something that might be cause for distress for someone else that it will wind up leading you straight into Hell?

Jesus has preached about “the kingdom”. Here, he talks about entering “life” twice and the “kingdom” once. I take that to mean that he is focused on the Divine intention for our existence and our willingness to accept less than that intention because we are so in love with something that is other than God’s will.



How does this look in real life? Well, I spent last evening weeping in the rain with thousands of other people at the vigil in memory of those who were gunned down while they were at worship in Squirrel Hill. Let's talk about that.

Can we see in this passage that refers at least obliquely to child sacrifice a call to at least engage in conversations that will lead us to talk about and search for ways to reduce the gun violence that leads to the deaths of far too many children of God every blessed year?

If Jesus were preaching today, might he say, "If your unwillingness to even talk about your interpretation of the Second Amendment causes you to stumble, then rip it up"? Look, I'm not saying you shouldn't go hunting or shoot skeet, but we have to find a way to figure out how to deal with this. We have to be open to conversation, and I don't think that giving more guns to more people is the way that Jesus would solve this problem.

And you might hate me for saying this, but I can't help myself, sisters and brothers. Jesus has just finished a teaching in which he lifts up a child and says the word "welcome" four times in a single sentence. Then he talks about the fact that anyone who interferes with the progress of one of these "little ones" would be better off dead. How does that square with the ways that so many in our world today are demonizing refugees and immigrants or those of a different faith; people who are looking for ways to exclude foreigners or anyone who isn't "just like us"?

Please hear me, Church: I am not arguing for or against any particular side of any issue. I am trying to point out the ways in which the call of the Gospel is a call to live for and toward the other; a call to accept responsibility for the welfare of another.

O. Henry was an American writer of short stories known for their surprise endings. He tells the story of a little girl being raised

by her father after her mother died. Every day, dad would come home from work and put his feet up; every day his daughter would come in and ask her father to play with her, to read to her, or to spend some time together in any fashion. Every day, he would reply that he was too tired, too busy, too weary – he asked for “peace”, and he sent her outside to play in the streets of the city. The more he did this, the more she became a creature of the streets: hardened, embittered, and tarnished. She died. When she arrived at the gates of judgment, St. Peter said to Jesus, “Master, here is a woman who is no good. I suppose she’s headed for Hell?” Jesus looked at Peter and replied quickly, “No, of course not. Let her in.” And then Jesus’ eyes grew fierce and he told St. Peter, “But now go and look for a man who refused to play with his little girl, and instead sent her to the streets. Send *that one* to Hell.”

I think that the storyteller is on to something here – that the walk of faith is not about avoiding Hell, but embracing life according to the Kingdom that Christ proclaimed. What are we doing to create a world wherein “the little ones” are given the best opportunity to embrace the fullness of life as God intended it to be?



I think that’s what Jesus means by his closing comments about salt and fire. It’s a summary to the teaching that we have heard these past three weeks. As one writer says, “disciples whose lives are not characterized by lowly service nor by openness to Christians who are different nor by care for those who are young in the faith nor by rigorous self-discipline are like flavorless salt. They have lost the sharpness which sets them apart from their environment and which constitutes their usefulness...Christians... are to be harder on themselves than on others”<sup>2</sup> – those whom they welcome and assist in the process of discovering life in the Kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Lamar Williamson Jr., *Interpretation Commentary on Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 172

I think this is a hard word for us to hear, my friends, because we have a lot of attitudes and privileges and ideas and, well, *stuff* that we enjoy. May we not enjoy them so much that we risk losing everything. Thanks be to God who gives us the opportunity to walk alongside the master in paths of humility and openness. Amen.