

## The pain of hell

### Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 CEV *Parables of the kingdom*

Jesus told them another story:

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed in a field. Although it's the smallest of all seeds, it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree. Birds even come and nest on its branches.

Jesus also said:

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast into three big batches of flour. Finally, all the dough rises.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when someone finds a treasure hidden in a field and buries it again. A person like that is happy and goes and sells everything in order to buy that field.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a shop owner is looking for fine pearls. After finding a very valuable one, the owner goes and sells everything in order to buy that pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a net is thrown into a lake and catches all kinds of fish. When the net is full, it's dragged to the shore, and the fishermen sit down to separate the fish. They keep the good ones, but throw the bad ones away. That's how it'll be at the end of time. Angels will come and separate the evil people from the ones who've done right. Then those evil people will be thrown into a flaming furnace, where they'll cry and grit their teeth in pain.

Jesus asked his disciples if they understood all these things. They said, "Yes, we do."

So he told them, "Every student of the Scriptures who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like someone who brings out new and old treasures from the storeroom."

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Dear friend, my Dad's cousin was a master story-teller. Most of his stories were funny. He punctuated them with the statement, "Hell, we laughed!" followed by his own mighty and infectious belly-laugh.

But hell is no laughing matter.

You could say our world is having a hell of a time right now. 2020 has been a hell of a year. Some of us have been experiencing hell on earth. And we're not laughing.

What do you make of hell?

I found this definition: Hell is a place regarded in various religions as a spiritual realm of evil and suffering, often traditionally depicted as a place of perpetual fire beneath the earth where the wicked are punished after death.

What does the Bible say about Hell?

If you go to Bible-gateway and search for 'Hell' in the NIV, you'll discover the word is used 13 times and all of them in the New Testament.

But if you do to same search in the King James Version 'Hell' is used 54 times, 31 in the Old Testament and 23 in the New Testament. This difference is mainly due to different ways of translating the Hebrew word, 'Sheol'.

Take Psalm 139:8 as an example -

KJV If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed **in hell**, behold, thou art there.

RSV If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed **in Sheol**, thou art there!

NIV If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed **in the depths**, you are there.

CEV If I were to climb up to the highest heavens, you would be there.

If I were to dig down to the **world of the dead** you would also be there.

NLT If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to **the grave**,<sup>[a]</sup> you are there. (<sup>[a]</sup> Sheol)

What does Jesus say about Hell?

Last week we heard him say, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they'll gather from his kingdom everyone who does wrong or causes others to sin. Then he'll throw them into a flaming furnace, where people will cry and grit their teeth in pain."

This week Jesus expresses the same idea in the parable of the Net - "evil people will be thrown into a flaming furnace, where they'll cry and grit their teeth in pain."

As hot as hell, we say. Hot and painful.

As we consider this parable notice how the net emphasises the universal nature of the kingdom of heaven. The net catches, encompasses, and drags in everything in its path. Good and bad alike are dragged up onto the shore to be sorted. The sorting, bad from good, which takes place on the shore Jesus says is like what happens at the end of time, the conclusion of time, when angels will separate evil people from good people. We often refer to this as the final judgment.

For the rest of this address I'm learning heavily on Robert Farrar Capon and his book on the parables of Jesus, ***Kingdom, Grace, Judgment.***, to help us think this through.

Capon points out, it's the fishermen who determine what's good and bad in their net and it's Jesus who determines the criteria for judging on the last day. Jesus is the judge. Not you or me or the church. Capon says, "Everyone who comes before the Judge has already been reconciled by the dying and rising of the Judge." Does that sound right? Did Jesus die and rise for all?

Capon also points out, "But note well that nobody goes to hell because he had a rotten track record in the world - anymore than anyone goes to heaven because he had a good one."

And he says, "Both heaven and hell are populated entirely and only by forgiven sinners. Hell is just a courtesy for those who insist they want no part in forgiveness."

Now think about these words of Capon, "Jesus didn't shy away from sinners, so why should the church? And don't tell me the church welcomes sinners. I know better. It welcomes only sinners who repent and then never seriously need forgiveness again. ... For the church to act as if it dare not have any dealings with sinners is as much a betrayal of its mission as it would be for a hospital to turn away sick people. ... Sinners are the church's business, for God's sake. ... We are supposed to represent a Lord who came not to judge the world but save it."

I chose the theme, "The pain of hell." Hell is a place of pain for those who refuse God's forgiveness and grace because they're convinced they didn't need it. They think their 'stuff' doesn't stink. Hell is also a place of pain for Jesus. Can you imagine the pain of having his suffering, death, and resurrection rejected by those who thought they could save themselves?

Hell is a hot topic. I believe our understanding of hell is often informed by our desire for justice. We want sinners to be punished and love the idea of eternal punishment for the really bad ones. But when Jesus does the sorting he sees no one who is outside of the reach of God's love. He sees no one he didn't die for. He died so all people could spend eternity celebrating in the kingdom of heaven.

Sometimes I wonder whether we're more baffled by judgment or grace.