

The Journey to the Cross, Part 4

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[0 : 00] So Mark chapter 9 at verse 42. And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

If your hand causes you to sin, 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.

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.

And if your eye causes you to sin, 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 where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other.

[1 : 14] Hard words from Jesus. The words that he wants us to hear. Let's begin by thinking about listening to warning signs. Imagine a teacher sitting down with a pupil saying you need to have focus in class and doing your studies or you will fail.

Or imagine visiting the doctor and he sits you down and says, well, you need to cut down on these fatty foods and high sugar for the sake of your heart. Or a parent, an anxious parent saying to their child, they don't take drugs because they can kill.

Now these are all different in one sense, but very similar in another. These are all warnings that come from reliable guides and they're all spoken out of concern for a person's future.

And especially when we think in family terms, they're words spoken out of deep love. Now as we begin, it's important that we hear Jesus teaching on hell in these same terms.

We need to hear what Jesus says about hell because in society, hell is regarded by many as comical, as a fun place. You've maybe seen the buses going around the city center saying that your mortgage experience can be hell or heaven.

[2 : 40] You're really diminishing both. Or cynically, you'll find people who imagine that hell is an invention of the church so that the church could control society and try and curb bad behavior.

And so we struggle as a society to know what to do with hell. And in church, sometimes it's the same thing. It feels to us as one of those jagged edges that we like to smooth over.

Sometimes we're anxious about the offense of the gospel, and so it's something that we'd rather push to one side. It's not for polite conversation.

But we need to hear Jesus as a reliable and a loving guide who wants to warn about reality, who wants to teach us why recovering the doctrine of hell is important for us as a church, and to see why it matters so much.

So let's begin with this. Why do we need the truth about hell? We need it because Jesus teaches about it. To be faithful to the Bible and to be faithful to Jesus as teacher, this isn't a topic we can take off the table.

[3 : 55] Because when you look at the teaching of Jesus and you look at the whole Bible, we realize that Jesus talks about hell more than anybody else in the whole Bible.

In fact, more than he speaks about heaven, he speaks words of warning about hell. And so that leaves us a question. Is Jesus angry?

Is he controlling? Is he vindictive? Is he mean? Is he unfit to listen to? And it's where we need to recognize who Jesus is.

We need to go to the gospel. The same Jesus who warns about hell, it is Jesus who says, I am the good shepherd, and I will lay down my life for my sheep.

Who says, greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends, and he does exactly that. He is the one who gives teaching about the good Samaritan, encouraging us to love whoever is in front of us who needs mercy and help, and he demonstrates that in his life. [5 : 04] He gives us the golden rule that societies all around the world have appreciated due to others as you would have them do to you. When you read the gospels, you encounter the compassion, the love and the mercy of Jesus on page after page after page, you find him weeping, weeping at the tomb of Lazarus.

You find him weeping over the city of Jerusalem, which refuses to repent and trust in Jesus. Jesus is not an angry man. Jesus is the most loving man who has ever met, who has ever lived.

The context here, where we find ourselves in Mark chapter nine, Jesus is beginning to teach and prepare his disciples for his journey to the cross. And what's the cross all about?

Jesus is going to suffer and die in love and so that rebel sinners like us might be forgiven. That he will endure hell on the cross to save us from hell, to give us the invitation to trust in him and enjoy the glory of heaven instead.

So we need to recognize that this is the loving Lord Jesus who's speaking about hell. So why does he speak so graphically? Let's just remind ourselves of verse 47 and 48 to see the graphic language that Jesus uses.

[6 : 28] If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

I'm not a smoker, but I've seen the pictures that the health boards now put on cigarette packets. Why are they doing that? They're issuing a warning to somebody.

If you smoke these cigarettes, this picture of your lungs may be your reality. A dramatic way to try and encourage someone towards a different habit.

Jesus uses this graphic language so that we will take hell seriously. That as he teaches about hell in the gospels, we discover a place of conscious, eternal torment.

A place where God's active punishment is failed for all eternity. It's a place of absolute horror.

[7 : 45] And so Jesus uses this graphic imagery in order to wake us up and in order to change our priorities. Sometimes we can become so fixed on the now that we forget about what comes next.

What happens when we die? And Jesus is reminding us of these two eternal realities. He's exposing the danger to show us the need of rescue.

And of course, Jesus comes to be the rescuer. He is the real savior to the greatest problem that all of us face. And so Jesus teaches about hell for that reason.

J.I. Packer, the biblical scholar, says this, which I find really helpful. The purpose of the Bible teaching about hell is to make us appreciate, thankfully embrace, and rationally prefer the grace of Christ that saves us from hell.

It is really a mercy to mankind that God in Scripture is as explicit about hell. We cannot say we have not been warned.

[9 : 02] And indeed, here we've been warned by the loving Lord Jesus. So we need the teaching of hell because Jesus teaches about hell. We also need it because the reality of hell teaches us that sin is serious.

Now we're in the middle of Jesus teaching his disciples from verse 33 onwards. And really what he's been saying to them is that there are three disasters for church mission that can happen within a Christian community.

One is when you start fighting over rank and greatness. One is where there is rivalry and them and us attitudes. And we thought about those last week. But the third disaster is when even within the church there's a lack of holiness and people get casual about sin.

And so Jesus issues this start warning to his own people in the first instance. Let's look at what he says to them. In verse 42 he says, If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. So here's what he's saying. Here's the warning. Your sin might make someone else turn from Jesus. And he's saying that's a dreadful offense to be avoided at all costs.

[10 : 26] How can that happen? Well perhaps there's a younger Christian watching an older Christian fall into sin or be guilty of hypocrisy. Perhaps it's lack of care for someone's weaker conscience.

And somebody is led astray and somebody is led to walk away from Jesus. And so he issues a warning about our sin having consequences for others. Does a similar thing in verse 50. He talks about salt. Salt intended to preserve and to add flavor. Salt is good but if it loses its saltiness how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other.

So he's saying to the church that our sin if we start fighting amongst ourselves if we start comparing and competing if we get casual about sin if we don't have peace our sin as a church as a community might stop others from ever wanting anything to do with the Lord Jesus.

We can be guilty of being unsalty. We don't preserve we don't add flavor we can be judgmental and hypocritical and mean-spirited and harsh not living like Jesus in such a way that somebody might look at the church and say well why in the world would we bother listening to what they have to say because they seem miserable and unpleasant and I want nothing to do with them.

[11:53] So there's a warning two ways our sin individually can cause others to fall away our sin as a community can cause others to never look at Jesus in the first place.

And then in that middle section from verse 43 to 48 he talks about the personal effect of sin and he calls us to radical obedience. Let's read verse 43.

If your hand causes you to sin cut it off it's better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell where the fire never goes out. So again Jesus is saying there are two eternal destinies that there's no middle ground that is in verse 43 life further on talked about the kingdom of God that is the reality of heaven with God that is perfection to look forward to an eternity marked by love and joy and fellowship and community or there is hell that is unending punishment for our willful sin and rebellion and what Jesus is saying that we should do anything that it takes to ensure that we find a way to life.

If our hand causes us to sin cut it off. Maybe we know the story. That was then turned into a movie in about 127 hours a climber called Aaron Ralston who was canyoning or bouldering in Utah and his arm got trapped and he couldn't get it out and he spent five days there in the blazing heat until he realized the only way he was going to get out of this alive was by cutting off his own arm and he had to make that choice literally sawing off his arm in order to stay alive.

Jesus is saying cut off in our lives whatever would cause us to dishonor God whatever would cause us to walk from God whatever would cause us to look at things that are impure and unworthy of God like a surgeon amputating an arm or a leg in order to save a life.

[14:14] Hell is serious and sin is serious. I think sometimes we struggle with the reality of hell because we fail in the first place to take the holiness of God seriously and we think about sin the way perhaps we think about a parking ticket or a speeding thing.

Everybody does it it's no big deal. We fail to take the seriousness of sin seriously and Jesus is looking to correct our thinking by giving us these stark images and stark warnings.

one of the things that he wants to encourage in us is a healthy fear of sin it should sometimes to have a healthy fear and sin is something we are to be afraid of.

perhaps you saw the story in the news this week of the man in the Czech Republic who kept a couple of lions as household pets.

He used to walk them down the street and he fed them they were in the house and garden with him it only became public knowledge because one of those lions mauled him to death.

[15:22] there are some things that we don't mess around with and we need to have a healthy fear of. One of the images that God gives to Cain actually in Genesis chapter 4 is of sin as being like a lion.

He tells Cain to watch out as sin is like a lion crouching at your door it seeks to destroy you and Cain is invited to seek to master sin as the old Puritan John Owen said be killing sin or it will be killing you.

Jesus shows us sin is serious. The cross of Jesus shows that sin is serious. What's happening on the cross as Jesus dies?

Jesus is facing the curse he goes under the curse of God for disobedience not because Jesus has done anything wrong he is sinless and perfect but he does that in the place of his people.

We find Jesus crying out my God my God why have you forsaken me? Jesus is cut off and abandoned at the cross because God the holy God can have nothing to do with sin and Jesus has become the sin bearer of the world there on the cross.

[16 : 44] that's not all we see at the cross the cross also shows us the love of God because Jesus is willing to go there. The father is willing to send Jesus to stand in our place to take our punishment in order to give us forgiveness in order to save us from our sin and to save us from hell.

Jesus goes to the place of hell and punishment for us. We need hell to remind us that sin is serious. We also need hell because it reminds us that sharing the gospel is urgent. I think one of the most convicting things that I've read and a number of occasions I read it again a couple of weeks ago a quote from the magician Penn Jillette there's the magician jewel Penn and teller Penn Jillette he's not a Christian he said this in an interview once how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that there is a heaven and hell but not to tell them because of social awkwardness sometimes we forget just how urgent the gospel is and I find that quote really convicting I wonder if you're a Christian here today do you identify with this missionary who was speaking this week saying why is it that I am willing to share my life with another person but I often hesitate to share my God with that person being honest there are many things that can get in the way of sharing the gospel whether it's fear whether it's questions of is this the right time whether it's a sense of politeness or social awkwardness that cause us to say nothing and when we do that what's happening we are lessening that sense that this is a life and death situation that our gospel message has a life and death urgency attached to it we know as Christians that we're called to be marked by love and care but if our care only extends to the physical and never extends to the spiritual and the eternal then our love is out of balance that it's not enough just to care for people's bodily needs we also need to care for their souls to care for their salvation and again Jesus is teaching his disciples and he's teaching his church about hell in order to soften and melt our hearts and to get us to that place where we would love others more than our maybe our reputation or our sense of dis-ease about having those conversations that he's reminding us about hell to give us a sense of urgency to replace a sense of apathy sometimes we can be so concerned will I have the right answers what if the conversation goes in this direction we get really nervous so we don't even begin rather than trusting Jesus to send the spirit to help us and trusting that even in the mess even if we don't get things right God can still work and God can still be on it Jesus teaches us about hell to shape our priorities and to shape our prayers for ourselves that we would beg for a sense of urgency and to have soft hearts but also that we would be looking for opportunity to love our friends and our city more by talking about the gospel that we would be willing not just to share our lives with others not just to meet physical needs but we would also be willing to share our God with our family and our friends and to seek to meet people's spiritual needs I find this a profoundly convicting and challenging section but I don't want us to go away from here feeling motivated by a sense of guilt I've done really badly and I know I should do better because that's where maybe our hearts instinctively go and I'm certainly not speaking as somebody who who's got this sorted and somebody who finds it easy to have those kind of conversations but Jesus is saying here's our goal our goal is first of all to care for people to see the urgency of sharing the gospel but ultimately as Christians we want to delight in Jesus so much that it would be our instinct it would be our greatest joy to share Jesus with others where sharing Jesus would complete our own joy of our salvation the one last thing to say about the importance of hell is that hell perhaps surprisingly helps us appreciate

[21 : 44] God's love one of the things about Christianity is that it is a rescue religion we don't say do better and try harder our message is that as people we are spiritually dead and we need a resurrection we need help from outside of us and Jesus teaching on sin and hell reveals the danger clearly to us and that left to ourselves our default destination for eternity would be hell that we need a rescuer or universally we stand condemned we have failed to love God with our heart and soul and mind and strength and we failed to love our neighbor as ourselves all of the time but hell also explains to us Jesus journey to the cross Jesus goes to the cross in order to defeat the powers of evil and darkness by absorbing them into himself and by facing the punishment for our sin

Jesus on the cross tastes hell in concentrated form in those three hours of darkness as he carries the sin of the world as our loving substitute and when we realize why Jesus goes to the cross it helps us to understand more of the love of God I listened to a lecture this week from Tim Keller addressing seminary students and he said the doctrine of hell is a doorway into the love of God precisely for that reason it shows that depth it shows the extent of God's redeeming love and also it stops our hearts from growing cold to God when we realize what he has lovingly saved us from Charles Dickens novel a tale of two cities climaxes with

Charles Darnay one of the main characters in a prison cell during the French Revolution awaiting his execution the following morning well into the prison comes his friend Sidney Carton and he drugs Darnay he takes his clothes he has another friend drag Darnay out of the prison and off to freedom and Sidney Carton stands in the place of his friend and goes to the executioner's block the following morning in a wonderful moment of self-giving love and it's a small picture of Jesus love for us in the gospel and Jesus sacrifice that is intended to melt and to warm our hearts as we see Jesus becoming our substitute going to the place of death to rescue us from eternal condemnation from a living death we see Jesus become cursed so we might be blessed so let's hear this loving warning from

Jesus this loving and reliable guide to look on the cross as God's loving response to our death sentence and to trust him as Lord and Savior you