

## "A Most Controversial Truth"

Matthew 13:47-50

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What is the most controversial truth taught in the Bible? I don't think it involves homosexuality or any sexual issues. Nor is it the Bible's declaration that God is the creator of everything that exists. I'm convinced the most controversial truth is what Jesus said in **John 14:6 "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

Jesus being the "only way" to the Father clearly implies any other religion or philosophy is a wrong way, a way that leads not to salvation or eternal life, but to eternal death or hell. Other religions don't like that implication.

For example, one Hindu leader says, "A religion that condemns all others to eternal hell is selfish, exclusionist, and promotes hatred." When one church said it was praying for non-Christian neighbors to come to faith in Jesus, a newspaper editorial said, "These conversion efforts are reminiscent of the Middle Ages when the church burned at the stake anyone who refused to convert."

Now, that does seem like a strange reaction. Praying for people, or even efforts to persuade them, to embrace a different religion is not exactly like burning them at the stake. Christianity has always been a universal religion that offers salvation to all people, no matter what their ethnic or religious background.

Yet there are some uncomfortable questions that might enter many of our minds: Does it make sense that Christianity would be the *only* true religion? Are people out there who don't believe, or maybe have never even heard of Jesus really going to hell? I don't think we will fully answer these questions today, but we are going to look at a parable Jesus tells which gives us His perspective on this very important topic. Our text is Matthew 13:47-50. As we explore God's Word today, let's pause and pray He would help us understand what these words and what they mean in our lives.

This is often called "the Parable of the Net," but I refer to it as "the Parable of Catching Fish." **Matthew 13:47 Again, the kingdom of heaven**

**is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind.** Fishing with a net is not legal in Minnesota, at least in most situations. However, in the first century it was the best way to catch fish. **Matthew 13:48 When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.** Good and bad has nothing to do with the moral character of the fish but rather refers to the fact some fish were big enough to eat while others were not, or some fish were ceremonially clean or Kosher, while others were not. Or maybe simply that some fish were worth keeping, while others were not. In fact, "bad" fish literally means "worthless."

Okay, Jesus tells a simple story. What does it mean? Jesus tells us in the next two verses. **Matthew 13:49,50 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

This story is similar to the parable of the weeds that we explored a couple of weeks ago. There it is the weeds, or verse 41, NIV, "all who do evil" that are thrown into a fiery furnace. Now a furnace is probably not a place where you want to put bad fish, imagine the smell.

Yet the text doesn't say the fish are thrown into the fiery furnace, but that those who are "evil" will be. I think it is pretty clear what Jesus means, though we may not like what He means.

Now, there are a couple of questions about this passage that are good to address. First, should we take Jesus' description of hell literally? In other words, is hell really like a fiery furnace?

Thirty plus years ago it was reported by TBN and some other Christian media, that scientists in Siberia had drilled through the earth's crust and found hell. The report said they had put microphone down there and heard people screaming. The fact some Christians were gullible enough to believe a story like that is a topic for another day. Months later, a couple of fellows in

Finland confessed the whole thing was a hoax. They had made up the story just to see how many people would believe something so bizarre.

Now, I am reasonably certain hell is not located beneath the earth's surface. It is not really "down there." Hell is part of another realm and dimension. As people who inhabit this world, it is very difficult for us to imagine what hell is like.

But that doesn't mean it is not real. The fact Jesus often describes hell as a fiery place where there are things like "weeping and gnashing of teeth" indicates there is almost certainly a connection between those words and the reality. Hell is at root a total separation from God. That is the essence of what it is. But that doesn't mean it cannot be a fiery place. We should keep in mind that if Jesus' description of hell is figurative or symbolic, which it may be, then the reality is likely much more horrible than a fiery furnace.

Second, who are evil and the righteous of whom Jesus speaks in verse 49? Are the evil people individuals like Adolph Hitler, serial killers, and the leaders of Iran? Or are evil people all those who fall in the lower 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of moral behavior? In other words, the 2400 best behaved people in Chisholm would be the righteous, and the 2400 worst behaved would be the evil. Or does only the bottom 20% end up in hell?

This is obviously an important question. Jesus does not provide an answer for us in this text, but as we read the rest of the New Testament, the answer becomes clear. The righteous are those who have been declared righteous and made righteous by Jesus Christ, and the evil are those who don't have that standing.

Romans chapter 3 teaches us that all human beings are sinners. By nature, we are lovers of self, rather than lovers of God. So. When it comes right down to it, we are all actually more like Adolph Hitler than we are like Jesus Christ. Each of us, even though we may seem like a nice person, is, in our own way, in rebellion against God.

But Jesus paid the penalty for our sin when He died on the cross. And God graciously gives those who turn to Him the righteousness of Jesus. When you become a Christian, your failing score is erased and is replaced by Jesus' perfect score.

That perfect score truly becomes your own. It doesn't matter what you have done or how many times you have done it. You may have even committed a terrible crime, but by God's amazing grace you are considered righteous because of Jesus. This may seem too good to be true, but it is what the Bible teaches.

The evil are those who have not embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord. Others may think of them as nice people, even very nice people, but because they don't have righteousness of Jesus Christ, their greed, lust, and pride put them in the category of evil. The bottom line is summed up well in **John 3:36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.** The righteous are those trusting in Jesus. They look forward to eternal life, eternal joy, in heaven. The evil, are those who refuse to trust in Jesus, and they have a terrible future ahead.

Now, I realize what I have just said seems very basic and obvious to some and seems quite shocking and repulsive to others. I think this is what Jesus clearly teaches in this passage. If you don't think so, I would be glad to listen to your explanation. This parable contains a hard message, and frankly I would be happy if you could show me that I'm wrong. But I don't think I am.

I believe the Bible teaches a solemn and terrible truth about the reality of hell. This is truth with which we all need to come to grips. It is especially important that we be able to give some type of explanation to our friends and family members about what the Bible says on this very difficult subject. Whether or not they are asking them out loud, most people have questions about hell. And for many it is a reason they hesitate to embrace Bible Christianity. I want to mention four things we should keep in mind as we talk to people about this difficult topic.

**#1** We need to acknowledge the reality of hell. I have a book written 40 years ago titled, "Whatever Happened to Hell?" The author notes that many folks in our society don't believe in hell, but his main point is that even in churches, hell is a topic few want to talk about. As I preach sermon, as you talk to people you know, we usually focus on God's love, and tell how purpose, joy and hope are

found in Jesus. We talk about the salvation that comes by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

That's good. But we seldom specify from what exactly we are being saved. Yes, our salvation includes being rescued from guilt, emptiness, bondage to sin, and the evil one. Yet it also involves being saved from hell. That is really an important part of the Christian gospel, yet we are sometimes strangely silent on the topic.

You may remember a time when things were a bit different. Maybe you grew up in a church where the pastor would paint a vivid picture of hell that was intended to scare people into making some type of profession of faith in Jesus. Maybe he would even turn up the thermostat so that by the time he got to the end of the sermon and asked who wanted to escape the flames of hell, you were feeling the heat because it was 85 degrees in the room.

That is not what we need today. Many of those preachers overemphasized God's judgement and thus distorted the Biblical message and obscured the gospel. But, if we allow the pendulum to swing so that instead of focusing on the reality of God's wrath, we say nothing about it, we too are guilty of distorting the truth taught in God's Word. When someone asks us if we really believe there is such a place as hell, we ought to say, "Yes, I do. I believe it is real."

#2 As we say that, we need to make it clear that we did not invent hell. Some folks claim hell is just something made up by conservative Christians to scare people into embracing their religion. But the idea of hell, and the idea that those who reject Jesus Christ are destined to suffer there is not something that some TV preacher or a Chisholm Baptist pastor made up.

For about 2000 years, almost all Christians, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, have believed in hell. Why? Not because there is scientific evidence that proves hell exists, and not really because of any philosophical argument that can be made. Rather, the reason Christians have always believed in the reality of God's judgement is because *it is clearly taught in the Bible*, especially in the New Testament. The one person who

speaks most frequently and explicitly on the subject is Jesus Himself.

Listen to some of the things He said, just in Matthew's gospel. **Matthew 5:22** But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. **Matthew 5:29** If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. **Matthew 10:28** And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. **Matthew 23:33** You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? **Matthew 25:41** "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.'

Friends, people may accuse us of being narrow-minded, promoting intolerance and other worse things because of our belief that salvation from hell comes only through faith in Jesus. If that happens, we can remind them we are just seeking to be faithful to what the Bible says and what the Lord Jesus taught. Since we are not creating religion, we don't have the option to pick and choose what parts of Jesus' teaching we want to accept and what parts we want to throw out.

Now, I am aware some folks who consider themselves Christians reject the idea. They are either Universalists who believe God will eventually save everyone, or they think God will accept people of every religion and only a small fraction of human beings, the Hitlers and Stalins of the world will actually end up in hell.

Now, this is America. Anyone is free to believe that, if he/she chooses. But they *should not pretend* this is *what the Bible teaches*. Someone who claims to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, yet denies everything Jesus taught about hell, is really not being faithful to the Lord. Hell is not our idea, it is God's. We need to communicate that to people we know.

#3 We need to help people see that they need to be rescued from hell by Jesus Christ. Surveys find that about 60% of Americans believe in hell. That

is a pretty high number. However, a survey done by the Minneapolis Star & Tribune a few years ago found that only 15% of Minnesotans said they knew someone who was a sure bet to end up there, and only 3% felt that they themselves deserved that fate.

In other words, most folks accept hell as a reality but just don't see it as a danger. Now, some of those who don't worry about hell are people Jesus calls "the righteous," those trusting in Jesus as Savior and Lord. They indeed have nothing to fear.

But I am afraid some of the folks who are confident hell is not for them *are mistaken*. They think they are good fish, when they are really bad ones. They consider themselves righteous, but the Lord considers them wicked. Most of us know folks like that. They don't think they need Christianity because they think they are just as good as people who go to church. But that isn't the issue. How do we help people understand someone can only be truly righteous through Jesus Christ?

Maybe this illustration will help. In many classes in high school 90% and up is an "A," 80% and up is a "B," 70% is a "C," 60% is a "D," and below 60% is an "F." Many folks think that is how God grades our lives. If they are living a pretty good life, not embezzling money, giving money to the food shelf, showing up to church on Christmas Eve, they are doing okay. They are maybe getting a "B" or even a "C-," but certainly a passing grade.

But that is not the issue. Even if we were able to obey God 99% of the time, it would not be enough. The only way we can pass, the only way we can be considered righteous, the only way to *not deserve* hell, is if God, in His grace, replaces our failing score with Jesus' perfect score.

The theological way to describe this is to be justified, to be treated, "just as if I had never sinned" by receiving the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. When that happens, we are good fish, and instead of eternal hell, we are ready for heaven. We need to help people see that it is not through what we do, but only through *what Jesus has done* that we can escape God's eternal wrath.

#4 We should always emphasize God's love. Though His wrath is a reality we cannot ignore, we must remember that Christianity is gospel, good news. We must always remind ourselves and others that God offers to forgive and save from hell *anyone* who turns to Jesus Christ. Never allow the terrible reality of God's wrath to obscure the wonder of God's love for us.

Listen to **1 John 4:9,10 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins.** When you talk to a friend or family member about hell, whenever you think about the horrible reality yourself, make sure you also remember the amazing love of God for us in Jesus.

Friends, my closing question today is: Which one are you? Are you a good fish or a bad fish? Are you someone who has been made righteous by Jesus Christ and who looks forward to eternal life with the triune God, or are you someone in danger of experiencing God's wrath in hell? Friends, if you are not trusting in the Lord Jesus to save you from hell, I urge you to turn to Him today. If you are not sure what it means to trust in Jesus Christ or not sure whether you are doing that, make sure you chat with me or someone really soon.

Friends, the mere possibility of hell is sufficient reason for anyone to carefully consider the claim that Jesus Christ provides salvation from that hell.

Friends, if you are a believer in Jesus and know that He has saved you from God's wrath, I encourage you to just thank Him for that today. A few years ago, someone told me she would not be able to be at church that next Sunday and was sorry she would not hear the sermon. That was before the days of our livestream.

I said, "That's okay, my topic is hell and it's not the type of sermon that is very encouraging." She responded, "Oh hearing about how I don't have to go there *is very encouraging to me.*" Indeed, realizing how Jesus has rescued us is a wonderful thought, and it should cause us to frequently express our gratitude to Him.

No, hell is not a pleasant topic. It is not one about which I enjoy preaching. But it is an important topic. If I am to be faithful in proclaiming God's Word to you, it is a topic I cannot ignore. May the reality of hell cause each of us to cling to Jesus Christ, the one who rescues us from its terror, and may our hearts be filled with gratitude and joy as we ponder His amazing, saving grace.