

## Sin, Hell & God

Our text for today's sermon is a portion of the Gospel Lesson. From Mark chapter 9, I ask you to listen again to verses 43-48:

*<sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> 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. <sup>47</sup> 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, <sup>48</sup> where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

"What's your sermon gonna be about this Sunday, pastor?" From time to time people ask me that question during the week. Over the years I have developed a set answer. When people ask me what my sermon's gonna be about I tell them, "My sermon's about SIN...SIN & GOD. I have found that this response does two things. First of all it gives a true answer to the question. Every sermon...every good Lutheran sermon is about Sin and God, more specifically it is about sin and grace (our sin, God's grace), it is a preaching of the 'law' and a preaching of the 'gospel.' That's how we're taught to preach. The second thing this response does is it gives the impression that I've got things all figured out, all prepared in advance. It works to hide the fact that I may not even know what my sermon is going to be about until quite late in the week.

Today when I tell you the sermon IS about sin and God, it's literally true. Actually it is about:

### **Sin, Hell & God The Serious Nature of Sin The Dreadful Reality of Hell The Gracious Forgiveness of God**

#### **The Serious Nature of Sin**

Jesus used some pretty graphic illustrations to teach his disciples and us about the serious nature of sin. Cut off your hand? Cut off your foot? Pluck out your eye? Is that what he's saying? Self-mutilation is better than sinning? Note carefully what Jesus says. "If your hand...if your foot...if your eye *causes* you to sin." Can your hand or your foot or your eye *cause* you to sin? No! Just two chapters earlier, Mark 7:21-23, Jesus exposes the real cause of sin. <sup>21</sup> *For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,* <sup>22</sup> *greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.* <sup>23</sup> *All these evils come from inside...*" The cause of sin is your heart and your mind...it's the sinful nature you were born with that always wants to disobey God. And that's just what sin is: disobedience to God...disobedience of God's commands, disobedience of God's will.

Do we still have any notion of what 'sin' is in today's society? Well, according to a recent Ellison Research survey we do. These pollsters found that 87 percent of adults in the U.S. believe in sin which is defined as "something that is always considered wrong, especially from a religious or moral perspective." Topping the list are adultery and racism. But other sins no longer draw a majority condemnation. Premarital sexual activity? Only 45 percent of the people surveyed call it a sin. The same is true with telling a "white lie" or fudging the numbers on your tax return.

In truth, sin is saying something, doing something, or even thinking something contrary to God's holy will. Sin infects you at birth and it affects you every day of your life. And sin is serious. If your hands or feet or eyes really were the cause of evil you shouldn't hesitate to part with them since living a handicapped life in this world isn't nearly as frightful as spending an eternity in hell. Jesus is telling you and me that sin can lead to hell.

## **The Dreadful Reality of Hell**

Does hell still exist? In a noteworthy study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a study that sampled the opinions of over 35,000 people, the survey found that 74 percent of Americans say they think there is a heaven...while just 59 percent think there is a hell. 59 percent! If only 59 percent of Americans believe in hell, that means 41 percent of your friends and relatives and acquaintances across this country, 4 out of every 10 Americans, DO NOT believe in the existence of hell.

According to the study, the highest percentage of people who believe in hell is found in the state of Mississippi (82 percent), and lowest in New Hampshire and Vermont (37 percent). "Mississippi, one of the poorest states, one of the states with the poorest educational systems, that's where people believe in hell. It's the poor, uneducated people, they're the only ones who still believe in hell. By implication the intelligent people, the well-educated people, the people who are financially well off, they don't believe in hell...and neither should you." You know who's the happiest to hear this news don't you? It's the devil. Satan would like nothing better than to have everybody in the whole world think, "There is no such place as hell. I don't have a thing to worry about when I die."

But Jesus believed in hell. Jesus believed in hell and he spoke about hell, and he warned about hell...a literal place of eternal torment, "*where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*" The number one response you're going to hear when you talk about hell is the question, "How could God be a God of love and not only create a place like hell but actually send people there?" Well, it wasn't God's love that created hell, it was his justice, his holiness, his sense of right and wrong that caused him to create hell. Hell is not a place intended for humans, it was created for the devil and his angels.

Yet hell is an easy place for human beings to enter. Years ago as I was going through my deceased father-in-law's papers, I came across a little tract that was published with the title, "What You Need To Do To Get Into Hell." Curiously I opened it up only to find that it was blank on the inside. Most people don't have to change anything in their life in order to get to hell when they die. They just need to keep going on as they are...oblivious to the existence of sin, oblivious to the serious nature of their sin and completely ignoring God and his word.

Make no mistake about it, the Bible is clear that hell is a dreadful place of eternal torment. Just listen to what we know about the torments of hell. Hell is a place of eternal, aching separation from God and from loved ones. Hell is a place of eternal association with the wicked. The devil is there along with all his minions. Forget the cartoons about partying in hell. Far from it, there is no fun in hell, no laughter, no jokes, no delights, no thrills, no happiness of any kind. It is called the place of eternal darkness. There is unspeakable sorrow in hell, everywhere, along with bitter, biting, burning remorse, and unsatisfied cravings, despair and hopelessness. Hell is a place of unquenchable flames. The fire, the painful burning never ceases. It's not like the condemned are burned up quickly and are gone, annihilated. Just the opposite is true. The duration of torment is eternal. It never ceases. The condemned don't even have the hope of dying for an end to suffering. Hell is filled with the sound of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Now I have just enumerated many of the torments of hell, hell is a place of many torments. But none of these compare with the greatest torment of all in hell. The greatest torment of all in hell is the realization that NO ONE HAS TO GO THERE.

## **The Gracious Forgiveness of God**

Even though every human being born on this earth, every one of us, justly deserved God's temporal and eternal punishment, the grace of God found a fire escape, a way to turn your life around. God's grace has taken you from being one of the millions headed to hell and changed you into a person with a room already reserved for you in heaven. He accomplished this through the life and death of His own Son, Jesus.

Jesus lived the life of sinlessness that you could never achieve. And then, he paid the punishment, the death penalty, that you deserved for your sins. Then the Holy Spirit worked faith in your heart through the means of grace. Now, through that very faith in Jesus as your Savior, you receive the gracious forgiveness of God. Through faith in Jesus your sins are washed away and you are clothed in Christ's perfection. Through faith in Jesus, death is not the beginning of an eternity in hell, death has become the portal through which you pass into eternal joy and bliss and gladness in the presence of God and in the presence of all those who have died in the faith.

God tells us clearly, *"...As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."* (Ezekiel 33:11). And in 2 Peter 3:9 *"The Lord is...patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."* The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2, *"God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."* It is not God's will and it is not God's fault that many will end up in hell. He wants ALL to be saved. But his justice, his righteousness and holiness require condemnation of those who do not believe in Jesus, those who reject Jesus and his message of salvation. In the end there are but two types of people in this world...those who look to God in faith and say, "Your will be done," and those to whom God says, "Your will be done. Have it as you will." When you get to heaven you will have only God to thank. Those who reside in hell have only themselves to blame.

Here's where you can make a difference. Those without faith in Jesus are really lost...right now. It's not that they will be lost someday, the fact is that they are lost today and the wrath of God already dwells on them. John 3:17-18 *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

If, as today's Gospel reading tells us, God is pleased when you give a cup of water to someone in his name, out of love for him, think how he will view your attempt to bring the gospel, the simple message of salvation through faith in Christ to someone who needs to know. And think of the difference that simple message can make in a person's life, not only now, but throughout all eternity.

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father,

Help us to always remember and never forget the serious nature of sin and the dreadful reality of hell from which you have saved us. Help us to always remember and never forget that the lost are truly lost. Strengthen us and give us courage to witness your love and forgiveness to all those who need the gift of faith and the freedom from sin, death, and hell that only you are able to give.

We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus. Amen.