



Voice Ministries

HEAVEN OR HELL!

Reading: Matthew 13: 44—52

The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. (Matthew 13: 44)

In the 1930s the comedian Sandy Powell used to open his radio show with the words, “Can you hear me, Mother?” In part this catchphrase is supposed to have originated when he dropped his script in the studio and was filling in the seconds whilst he gathered it together again, but it’s also believed that it was due in part to his mother being hard of hearing. Whatever the reason, one purpose it served was to ensure that people were listening and that they would understand what was said.

In today’s Scripture reading Jesus, having related the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price, asks the disciples whether they have understood what He has been telling them, to which they answer that they have.

Both of these parables indicate the incomparable value of the kingdom, which will encourage people to do everything in their power to possess it.

One common misinterpretation is that Jesus is represented by the pearl of great price, and that the man referred to is a seeking sinner who gives everything that he has in order to obtain salvation, turning his back on everything that he ever had to get to heaven. The problem with this interpretation is that it infers that salvation can be bought by mankind, when in fact it is only available as a gift from God through Christ. No matter what someone gives up in this life it can never purchase their passage to heaven, unless they are prepared to hand over their life to Jesus Christ. Certainly, true discipleship asks us to give up things and accept Christ, but that is not salvation but sanctification.

This interpretation also indicates that sinners are seeking Jesus, when in fact it is Jesus who seeks sinners. Sin is a natural tendency in people, whilst seeking Jesus of their own volition is not. When we appear to be seeking Jesus it’s due to the Holy Spirit working within us, drawing us towards Jesus, who seeks us to offer us salvation. Scripture says that we are dead in our sins, and a dead person is incapable of seeking anything!

I often say to people who comment, “You’re religious, it’s different for you.” or words to that effect, that I’m not religious, I’m a Christian, which is a different matter altogether. Christianity is defined as God reaching down to mankind, whilst religion is mankind attempting to reach up to God. Paul, quoting from Psalm 14, writes, ***There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God . . .*** (Romans 3:11).

I think that the truest interpretation regarding the parable of the pearl is that the merchant represents Jesus Christ, whilst the church, purchased at enormous cost by Christ, is represented by the pearl. Jesus gave His all for our salvation! It is He who seeks, and He that saves, and we who are the lost sheep until we have been returned safely to the fold.



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All this talk about being sinners and like lost sheep, and being offered the gift of salvation, begs the question 'What do we need to be saved from?' Ted Turner, the multi-millionaire founder of Turner Broadcasting, once said in a speech, "*heaven is perfect. Who wants to go to a place that is perfect? Boring, boring.*" Also in late 1989, he told Dallas Morning News that "Christianity is a religion for losers." Christ died on the cross,

but Turner said He shouldn't have bothered. "I don't want anybody dying for me. I've had a few drinks and a few girlfriends and if that's going to put me in hell, then so be it." There spoke a man who could be pretty certain of where he was going, but it's not a place that anybody should aspire to!

One of the problems that the Church faces today is that so many people who meet regularly within the walls of the local church no longer believe that Hell exists, or that if it does then it's ferocity and anguish has been over-stated in the past. Changing the appearance of Hell by describing it differently doesn't change the reality of it! I'm sure that many travel agents could describe the beauty and wonder of a holiday spent at Basra in Iraq, but it would certainly seem more like hell-on-earth when you got there!

If we cannot accept that Hell exists and that it would be a terrible place to end up, how can we accept that heaven exists and would be a wonderful place to end up? We cannot remove the passages in Scripture that we dislike simply because they don't suit us. After all, if you tore the page out of your atlas that showed Iraq it wouldn't mean that it ceased to exist! Today the majority of pulpits are silent when it comes to preaching of Hell because it's considered old-fashioned and makes people feel uncomfortable. Well, it might be uncomfortable to hear about it, but it will be a lot more uncomfortable to experience it, believe you me! The main reason that people don't want to think about, or even admit to, hell is that they want to continue with their chosen lifestyle without it being threatened in any way. Talking to them about Heaven and Hell threatens them in a way that makes them really uncomfortable.

We read in the Bible, ***But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death*** (Revelation 21:8).

Just as the Bible gives us the benefit of being warned of the dangers of Hell, so it also gives us clear direction as to how we should avoid it. The only way to avoid Hell is to understand God's will, and that understanding comes through the preaching and teaching of His word. The more that we read and seek so the more that we understand, and our knowledge is like a series of stepping stones, each one taking us closer to God and nearer to Heaven. If people are to avoid Hell then they, and that includes us, must listen to God's Word and understand it.

Amongst the many misconceptions that exist today is the belief that if you go to church then you will automatically be ensured a place in heaven. Unfortunately, just because someone goes to church, sings the songs and places money in the offertory, this is no guarantee of entry to Heaven. The only sure way is by believing in Christ and trusting Him for salvation.



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Jesus warns that, ***Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven*** (Matthew 21:7).

One thing is for certain, and that is that nobody should learn about the reality of Hell by going there, because then it will be too late to do anything about it. The Church needs to be acting as a matter of urgency, warning people of the dangers of Hell and telling them of the hope that is found in Christ, and in Christ alone.

Amen

(Sermon preached by Rev'd Colin Gordon-Farleigh, at St John's Presbyterian Church, Runcorn, May 4th 2008)