

Hell is not a Happy Place

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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There is a curious myth seems to have grown up among some in the New Church that life in hell may not be all that bad. The thinking is that since the Lord wants us to be happy, He allows us to go to hell if we have a hellish attitude because He knows that we would not be happy in heaven. Therefore we must be “as happy as we can be” in hell.

And there’s some truth to this idea, but it’s also a very dangerous one - sort of like saying that since a person is addicted to heroin he can not be happy living a normal life, but he can be relatively happy as long as he is feeding his addiction. Of course, since heroin is not good for you it’s not legal, therefore getting it is always a struggle and often involves a person in dangerous and hurtful relationships with others. So it is in hell, where bad behaviour is neither healthy nor useful, and where the expression of the evil loves that every evil spirit longs to express brings constant pain and frustration.

This is the main point I’d like to convey this morning: that although the Lord does not cast anyone into hell, although He does permit us to go to hell if we insist on it, and although it is true that we are “as happy as we can be” in hell, still hell is not a happy place, and we had all better be doing everything we possibly can to avoid going there.

Once, speaking of children, Jesus said, “And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.” Then, continuing on, He said,

“And if your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’”

This makes the case pretty clearly, but as often happens when the Lord wants to drive a point home, He repeats Himself with other illustrations, saying,

“And if your foot makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life lame, than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched – where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’

“And if your eye makes you sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the hell of fire – where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9:42-48)

Now this is pretty ghastly stuff - not calculated to inform us that in hell we will be “as happy as we can be,” though that is still true. The reference, by the way, to “the worm that does not die...” is from the very last verse of Isaiah, in the Old Testament, where the Lord contrasts the lot of those who honour Him with that of those who “transgress” against Him, referring to the latter as “corpses,” which is entirely in keeping with the images of hell throughout the Word.

You see, the word, hell, and the whole concept behind it in the New Testament, is taken

mainly from the descriptions of a specific place in Jerusalem. This was the garbage pit of the city, actually called Gehenna, or the Valley of Hinnom, in Greek. It was where, among other things, the dead bodies of animals, or of human sacrifices, or of executed criminals would be thrown, and where fires were kept smoldering and burning in order to aid the decomposition process. Of course the fires weren't hot enough to make a clean, sterile job of it even though "brimstone" or sulphur was added, so naturally the place bred worms and other organisms of decay which, combined with the sulphur must have made the place smell incredibly bad.

There are two other words, one in the Old Testament and one in the New, often translated as "hell." The first is "sheol," a Hebrew word meaning "the nether world," or "the unseen place," and this refers to the very primitive idea of an underworld that actually lay beneath the foundations of the earth – in contrast to the heavens, which were the worlds above the earth, somewhere in or beyond the sky. The second is "hades," the Greek equivalent of the same thing, clearly describing a place of torment or imprisonment. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that if you look up "heaven" in a big Bible concordance you will find almost 7 columns of references over two pages of fine print, but there is only a half column on hell. So the Lord does emphasise the blessings of an orderly life, and only uses the imagery of hell for contrast.

For example, in one place, Matthew 23, He refers to the scribes and Pharisees over and over again as hypocrites, and says, "You serpents, brood of vipers! *How can you escape the condemnation of hell?*" But in Psalm 139 the omnipotence and omnipresence of God is emphasized when David asks "Where can I go from Your spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; *if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there!*" So the Lord never stops working to lead and teach us His ways, but we certainly have the freedom to reject Him, to reject His love, and to reject His wisdom.

The images of hell are indeed frightening. But now, surely, it must be clear to the careful reader that they are just that – images. In fact, just like the images and metaphors of heaven which we noted a few weeks ago, these are images and metaphors *not to be taken literally but as corresponding to the spiritual states represented by them*. In other words, if heaven is not really a man sowing seeds, or a lump of leaven, or a treasure hidden in a field, or a merchant seeking pearls, or a marriage feast, or a householder hiring labourers at different times of the day, but is likened to these things, so hell is not a garbage pit, but compared to heaven it is like one. Hell is *like* a garbage pit, a stinking, smelly, burning dump. It is *like* a grave or an underworld or an unseen state.

So now, let's consider what these things suggest, or mean. How, for example, does the Lord use the image of a stinking, sulphurous fire to describe the torments of hell? Well, think about it! Have you ever been in a heated argument? Have you ever been "on fire" with anger, "seething" with jealousy or rage? Have you ever experienced a "burning" selfish or worldly desire that seemed to "consume" all your energy and thought? Well, if so you have experienced the fires of hell, and you know it's not pleasant (see HH #570-571).

And what about the worms that are mentioned in the references to hell? Have you ever had a "gnawing" feeling of resentment arising, perhaps, from comparison of your own situation to that of others? Have you ever had some thought or opinion or belief "eat away" at you until you just felt "rotten" and – what's the opposite of composed? – de-composed? Actually worms represent the falsities or misunderstandings that destroy the flesh and fabric of life, the fallacies and misconcep-

tions that eat away at all that is good (see AC #8484).

What, then, about the “weeping” and “gnashing of teeth” that is associated with hell especially for contrast in the parables about heaven? Again, think of the image: weeping is caused by sadness, and sadness is caused by conflict. The gnashing or grinding of teeth without any food represents the clashing and grinding of ideas, particularly self-serving ideas – reasonings, arguments without any substance, quarrelling and aggressive, unhealthy competition (see HH #575).

Now the question is, if you are a person filled with hateful passion, if you are a person eaten up by fallacies and misconceptions, if you are a negative and argumentative person, or if, in the image of the serpent or viper, you are a cunning and deceptive person, are you really happy? Or are you in hell? In fact the question is, “How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” Of course you can't because it's in you; it's part of you; it goes where-ever you go. Thus as we read in Psalm 9:17, “The wicked (and all the nations that forget God) shall be turned into hell.” Literally. Their minds are turned that way, and they become little hells.

Of course the Lord never throws anyone into hell: He doesn't have to! Hell is a state or condition that exists as a result of human choices, free choices around natural and worldly issues. In reality, the Lord by the power and influence of His love and wisdom *protects* us from hell as much as possible from the day we are born not only until the day we die but to eternity, and the only reason we suffer the torments of hell is because we remove ourselves from that protective sphere.

There are several passages in the doctrines of the New Church that enlighten us about this protective sphere. Among other things they show that truth by itself cannot fully protect us from the influences of hell because truth can be argued, and when selfish or evil motives are active then every truth *will* be argued until it can be twisted to serve these motives. But the Lord is good, and He is present within all good. So if we are receptive of what is good, and from that good seek what is true, *then* the Lord can protect us from evil and so from hell. But if we remove ourselves from the sphere of good we remove ourselves from the Lord's protecting influence, and then we become vulnerable to every sort of anxiety, every pain, every deception, every torment that is part and parcel of a life without real goodness, life without real order.

And so, you see, the torments of hell are both inward and at the same time outward, in that evil spirits torment each other! Every one seeks to take advantage of the other, and is allowed to do so precisely to the extent that the victim has removed himself (or herself) from what is good, that is, ultimately, God. What then is the purpose of the torments of hell? The only purpose is to maintain some sort of order.

Think, for example, of your headaches, backaches, upset stomachs and so on, not to mention signs of more serious illness: these are not given to punish you but to regulate your life. They are warnings to take notice of what you are doing and make some changes, some corrections. The use of pain is to help restore order. So in hell you are not going to be tormented in retribution or “back payment” for things you did wrong while here on earth; if you go to hell you will go there because that is your life style, that is your choice, that is a reflection of who you are. You will have removed yourself from the protecting sphere of what is loving and good, obviously including the self-regulating influence of your own conscience. Therefore your life will have to be regulated from without, and the torments will be the consequences of your own continuing resistance to good, your

continuing efforts to serve yourself at the expense of others. True, you will get some pleasure out of tormenting others, but your own torments will keep you restrained within certain limits (see AC 1311, 1857 & 8223).

Odd as it may seem, then, hell is actually a permission of the Divine mercy. People go to hell because they want to – or rather because they do not have the mind or mentality of heaven. They go there not because of one sin or another (or an accumulation of them) committed on earth but because their whole attitude is one of confirmed selfishness. Furthermore, hell *is* eternal, for no one enters that state until he or she has become confirmed in it. And the reason there is no possibility of change is that a person in hell has not the least inclination to change!

But this point needs a little explanation. Some people have the idea that when people get to the spiritual world and are finally instructed by angels – who of course teach most wisely – they will (however gradually) see the light, reform, and find their way to paradise. But the fallacy of this thinking can be seen in the world's educational systems: better educated people are not necessarily better people! Sometimes they are the worst people, for they simply use the knowledge they gain to promote their own evil agendas. Not only that but we all tend to believe what we choose to believe, and that choice is a matter of attitude or will.

Of course the will is not truly free once it is confirmed in evil, because everyone's selfish ambition conflicts with other people's selfish ambition. But once confirmed the attitude sticks no matter how compelling the logic against it. Still, it is important that we understand the Lord's compassion. We are not going to be doomed forever just because we make a few (even big) mistakes! The confirmation process is made up of hundreds of thousands of choices, hundreds of thousands of opportunities to start fresh and correct the things that are wrong. Only, by the same token, we must be careful not to think that we can put off changes again and again knowing that, well, there's always tomorrow! Each day's living adds to the state of confirmation, builds the inertia, and makes change that much more difficult. Practice makes perfect.

The purpose of the teaching on hell is not only to frighten us out of it or away from it – though that is a legitimate use for some, and for all of us in certain situations. The purpose of the teaching on hell is to help us expose and understand the hellish states that are within us, so that we can recognize them for what they are, and acknowledge them and deal with them before it's too late.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you" (Luke 17:21). Sadly, so is the kingdom of hell! Our job in this world is to sort the two out and choose one or the other. How do we do this? How do we recognize and distinguish these tendencies, these influences? Well, hell manifests itself in the fires of selfish passion, the consuming worms of falsity, the weeping of sadness over frustrated, selfish ambitions, the gnashing conflict of worldly ideas, and so on. All we really have to do is look inside ourselves – honestly and fearlessly in light of the Word, and take note. Let's face it, evil isn't pretty, and it certainly isn't fun. The images the Lord gives about it must be taken very seriously indeed. But again, let's not think that the horrors of hell are going to be imposed on us – or on anybody, for that matter! They are implicit in the life we lead exactly to the extent that this life is in any way removed or withdrawn from the goods and truths of heaven.

Fortunately for all of us these goods and truths are available – through the Word – any time we seek them, for the Lord never gives up on us; He is always with us urgently appealing to us in

His love and pity. Furthermore He does not regard the past or the future except in so far as this affects us in the present. Rather He looks on the heart and if the heart is sincere (as demonstrated in sincere effort to think and do the right thing) His support will be tangible, and more powerful than any force of hell. Let us therefore turn to Him – and not away from Him – so that He can do His work with us, and keep us in the sphere of His protection... forever.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 139: 1-12
Children's talk on the Lord's omnipresence

Mark 9:42-48
Heaven & Hell #545 & DP 101: portions