

As Christians, we are called to hear and believe all that is taught in the Bible, the “whole counsel of God,” as St. Paul refers to it in the book of Acts. One of the tasks Christ gives me as your pastor is to preach this whole counsel to you, even the parts I might not want to preach or you might not want to hear. To help in this, we have the lectionary, the schedule of readings for each Sunday and festival of the Church Year, so that all the main points get covered once a year.

Two weeks ago it was Pentecost, and we heard of the Holy Spirit being poured out and thousands coming to the faith, something so wonderful that we can barely believe it. Last week was Holy Trinity, and we heard about the mystery of God and His workings, something so incredible we can hardly believe it. This week, the first Sunday after Trinity, we hear about something so terrible, so tragic, that we can hardly believe it. We hear about the teaching of condemnation and hell. We can hardly believe it; we might not want to believe it. But it is true, given to us by God Himself, and so we dare not avoid it or ignore it.

From the parable Jesus teaches in our Gospel reading, and other places in Scripture as well, we’ll address three questions. What is hell like? Who goes to hell? And how can we avoid hell? Again, we might not want to hear about this, but it is our Lord’s word, and He gives us all His words for good.

So what is hell like? Jesus describes several elements of it in the parable. One of most commonly thought of are the flames and physical torment. In hell, the rich man calls out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.”

Being burned is an extremely painful sensation, as all the nerves in the burned area go off together. On earth, that pain eventually stops, as the nerves themselves get destroyed by the heat. But in hell, it never stops. And as we hear, it’s so bad that even a drop of water on the tongue, which would be meaningless on earth, is desperately desired. But that drop never comes.

The torment goes far beyond physical pain and suffering. Hell is also loneliness. Notice that the rich man doesn’t speak of anyone else there. Of course, he’s not the only person in hell. Jesus states clearly that the path to destruction is one walked by many – more than those walking the path to life.

Yet for all those people in hell, none of them are a comfort to this man, nor could they be. The man doesn’t want his brothers to come to this place, not only so they would avoid this torment, but because it wouldn’t make anything any better. Sometimes unbelievers mock the idea of hell and say something along the lines of “at least all my friends will be there.” In hell, though, there are no friends, because friendship is a gift of God, and in hell all the gifts of God are removed.

That God’s gifts are taken away is seen in the answer to the man’s cry. He calls out to Abraham (who in this parable is representing God) for mercy. We likewise call out to God for mercy all the time,

such as in the Kyrie at the beginning of every service: “Lord, have mercy upon us.” Here on earth, those who cry out in faith for God to have mercy are heard by God. And in love, God answers those cries, even if we can’t see how.

But in hell, the cries for mercy go unanswered. This is because those cries are made apart from faith. There is no faith in hell, nor any other gift of God, such as His love or His mercy. Again, what makes hell hell isn’t really what is there, such as the flames, but rather what isn’t there, namely the good gifts of God. Everything that makes life good, such as love, peace, joy, and hope, comes from God, and in hell, it’s all gone.

In addition to the physical agony and the total absence of God’s good gifts, there’s a third element this parable teaches about hell. Abraham tells the rich man, “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.” Those in hell will remember life on earth. They will remember the good things that were given to them by the God who they rejected, which will no doubt make their absence that much more miserable.

But worse still than this is that, in remembering their lives, they’ll remember that it didn’t have to be this way. They didn’t have to go to hell. They could’ve avoided all this endless torment and misery. That knowledge, that guilt, is something that will haunt those in hell for all eternity.

This then would lead us to our next question: who is it who goes to hell? This is clearly stated by Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Mark, where He says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” It is a lack of faith that leads to the rich man being condemned to hell.

Faith is what connects us to the forgiveness won for us by Jesus on the cross. Every single person is a sinner, both by nature and also by action. And the wages of sin is death, both physical and eternal. But the blood of Jesus paid the price for every sin, and faith is the gift put into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that credits that payment to our account, so to speak.

Those who do not have living faith do not have the forgiveness Jesus has won for them, and are therefore still in their sins and the condemnation those sins have earned for them.

This familiar verse from Mark also points out something that we often miss or pass over, but which the parable speaks to as well. When Abraham addresses the rich man, what does he call him? “Child.” He’s no stranger, no Gentile, but a child of Abraham. In keeping with the old covenant God had established, the rich man would’ve been circumcised at eight days old and at that point become a member of the covenant, a child of Abraham.

Furthermore, it appears as well that the condemned man had been taught the basics of the faith at some point. When he’s in hell, he’s not confused about where he is, or who Abraham is, or any of that. He knows all this. He can’t claim ignorance, which would’ve been a valid excuse anyway.

To put this into our context, it’s like the rich man was baptized and confirmed in the Missouri Synod. But nevertheless, he’s in hell. How does that work? Didn’t circumcision enter the child into

the covenant people of God? Doesn't Baptism – which replaced circumcision – save? It does. God has given His unbreakable promise that it does.

But the thing is, just like the covenant of circumcision, a person can reject his Baptismal faith, refuse to live in it, let it wither and die. That's why Jesus says in Mark 16 that those who believe AND are baptized shall be saved. He doesn't say "believe OR are baptized." It's not one or the other, but both. And Jesus says "believe" – present tense, an ongoing reality – not "believed" or "used to believe." As the second half of that verse states, unbelief condemns, regardless of whether or not a person has been baptized, or whether or not the person ever believed in the past.

The rich man would have been included in the covenant of circumcision as a baby, taught from Moses and the prophets as he grew up, but then through what was likely a slow, gradual process, he replaced the commands and promises of God with the riches and pleasures of this world. If faith isn't there, then a person is dead in his trespasses and sins, and is bound for hell.

So then, how do we avoid hell? The simple answer is, of course, repent and believe in Jesus. We need to unpack what that all means, but before we do, there are a few things to keep in mind. Remember that God doesn't want anyone to go to hell. He desires that all people be saved, that no one enter into eternal torment. That's why He came and died on the cross, to suffer the wrath of hell for each and every person, so that we don't have to. So if you hear the words of Scripture and are frightened and think, "I don't want to go to hell," then take courage, because God doesn't want you to go to hell either!

Out of love, our Lord freely gives those good gifts that keep us from entering into condemnation. As stated before, He is the one who gave Himself as the sacrifice for all our sins. And He is also the one who gives the gifts that let us receive the forgiveness, life, and salvation that came from His sacrifice.

He is the one who brings us to repentance, which, as the rich man in the parable points out, keeps one from entering into torment. It is a gift when God convicts us of our sins, bring us guilt and shame over them, and leads us to ask for his forgiveness. He also gives us the gift of faith, faith which trusts that He did die for that sin and for all sin, that He loves us and desires to forgive our sins, that His arms are open wide to those who would return to Him, no matter how often or how far they've fallen.

Faith in God is of course joined to love of God; you can't have one without the other. Because those who believe in God love God, they desire to live lives that are pleasing to Him. They seek to keep His word, because they trust that what He declares in it is true, and what is best for them. Repentance and faith lead Christians to put away their old sins, to strive to avoid temptation, and to make right where they have done wrong.

We aren't earning forgiveness or life or salvation by doing these things – our salvation is totally by God's grace through faith. Nor does it mean that those with faith live perfect lives. It's rather that a living faith desires to do what honors God and blesses our neighbor, confessing when we fall and striving by God's strength to do better.

Finally, then, how do we sustain this faith? Remember, faith is a living thing. It's not a one-and-done moment, a decision that's made or a hoop that's jumped through and then forgotten. No, faith is a daily reality. And in the parable, Jesus tells us how faith is kept alive. In response to the rich man's request for Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." Moses and the Prophets are what we would call the Old Testament.

Abraham is directing them – and us – to God's word. It is the hearing of God's word that brings to repentance and sustains saving faith. When the rich man says that's not enough, that some special sign or miracle needs to happen to get his brothers to repent, Abraham again points to the word: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

Jesus teaches in this parable that it is hearing His word that sustains the faith first given through the word, either the word joined to water in Holy Baptism or the word preached and taught. Elsewhere, Jesus states it even more directly: "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."

This is a hearing of God's word that doesn't just see it as just head knowledge, like a subject in school, but as the revelation of the Lord God Almighty spoken to those He loves. It is also an ongoing hearing. When Abraham says, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets," that could just as correctly be translated, "If they are not hearing Moses and the prophets." It's a present, ongoing action. It's something we should strive to do daily. As we hear our Lord speak to us, He works to conform us to Himself, to sanctify us and make us reflect Him to the world.

The word of God is one of the greatest gifts we're given in this life, for through it God gives Himself to us. Because He loves us and desires us to love Him in return, He'll never force it upon us. We have the terrible ability to take God and His gifts for granted, or to push Him away and seek after the things of this world. But as the rich man realized, by the time the consequences of those actions are made perfectly clear, it's too late.

Therefore, as God says in His word, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near."

In the name of Jesus, amen.