

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 85 – REVELATION 20 - HELL AND THE SUPER RIGHTEOUS

Last time we looked at the subject of hell.

- ◆ We saw that hell is reserved for those foolish enough to reject the gift of salvation offered to them by the righteous judge, Jesus Christ.
- ◆ Although the odds are stacked in favour of them accepting God's invitation to join Him in heaven, there appears to be some recalcitrants who reject the invitation.
- ◆ The decision comes back to one of relationship, heaven is to be in communion with God, and hell is to be cut off from God.
- ◆ Hopefully, none will be foolish enough to bring God's judgment on themselves.

However, based on the reception Jesus Christ received at His first coming, there may be a couple of groups who may be reluctant to accept God's gift of grace.

- ◆ A common misconception of hell is that, heaven is the reward for being good, and hell the punishment for being bad.
- ◆ However according to Jesus' teachings, this concept is turned on its head.
- ◆ Instead He taught, "heaven is for sinners, and hell is for "good" people.
- ◆ ***Mark 2:16-18 When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."***
- ◆ The simple exercise of looking at those who accepted Jesus and who rejected Him at His first coming is a good indication of this principle.
- ◆ Jesus' good news of grace and salvation was primarily welcome by sinners such as prostitutes, tax collectors, and social outcasts.
- ◆ In contrast, his sternest criticism and warnings were directed at the "super righteous" of His time, the Jewish religious leaders (Luke 1:52-53; 4:18).
- ◆ It was almost exclusively to this super righteous church-going group of the time that Jesus' teachings and parables on the subject of hell were addressed.
- ◆ The classic tale on this subject is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the temple to pray.
- ◆ ***Luke 18: 9-14 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."***
- ◆ What riles this super righteous group so much is their perceived injustice in the equation.
- ◆ "Here I am fasting twice in the week, tithing my income, going to church each week for the last 50 years and these no-good bums come along and get the same reward as me?"
- ◆ "The tax collector gets let off the hook despite his self-confessed long list of sins!"
- ◆ "The prodigal son gets a free pass despite bringing shame and scandal on the family!" (Luke 15:11-31).
- ◆ "The workers in the vineyard get the same pay for a half-hour's work as I've received for a full day!" (Matthew 20:1-16).
- ◆ The problem with grace for the super righteous is according to their calculations it is just so unfair.
- ◆ "These bums don't deserve the same reward after all I've done for God."
- ◆ However the lord of the vineyard sees right through their self-righteous attitude and cuts straight to the point by asking, "***Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?***" (Matthew 20:15).

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- ◆ “Why are you unhappy that I am merciful and want to include the dregs of society in my heavenly party?”
- ◆ In reality, the super righteous wants to revive a book that no longer exists, the book of deeds.
- ◆ They preferred the old system of rules, regulations, and score keeping.
- ◆ And it's to those who refuse to extend mercy that Jesus directs his sternest judgment (Matthew 7:1-5).
- ◆ “If you want to live by those rules, and reject the gift of grace offered through my blood, then there is only one fate that awaits you.”
- ◆ Repent of this attitude of superiority, recognise you are no better than these bums otherwise you will find yourself on the rubbish dump outside the city where the worms do not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:48).

There is a second group who may be reluctant to accept the grace of God and they are those who enjoyed the privileged life at the expense of others.

- ◆ We read back in Revelation 18:9-13 about the kings of the earth and the merchants of the earth mourning over the fall of Babylon as they saw their power, wealth and privilege vanishing with her.
- ◆ These are the “beautiful people” used to being on the covers of glossy magazines who no longer could conduct business as usual by exploiting “**human beings sold as slaves**” (**Revelation 18:13**).
- ◆ This was the attitude of the rich man who found himself in torment in hades while Lazarus rested in Abraham's bosom.
- ◆ In response to the stunned rich man's question as to why he was in this unexpected position when he was so used to living in the lap of luxury, we read Abraham's response.
- ◆ **Luke 16:25-26 “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.’²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’**
- ◆ Each day the rich man drove past Lazarus covered in sores at his gate and didn't lift a finger when he had the resources to do something about it.
- ◆ Wealth and privilege had so distorted his thinking; there remained no milk of human kindness in him.
- ◆ “If only he would apply himself as much as I do, he would not be in this self-inflicted position!”
- ◆ Yet despite the fact Jesus had crossed this great chasm between God and humanity on his behalf, it appears this rich man refused to acknowledge this gift and take advantage of it.

And it appears being super righteous was not the only problem the religious leaders had in Jesus' time as they too enjoyed a privileged life.

- ◆ So they had two strikes against them, being both self-righteous and privileged.
- ◆ Jesus took them to task about this privileged existence as well.
- ◆ **Luke 16: 13-15 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”¹⁴ The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵ He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.**
- ◆ Two chapters later in Luke 18 Jesus makes this comment after asking a wealthy ruler to sell all he has and give to the poor.
- ◆ **Luke 18:24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”**
- ◆ However this does not mean they are doomed as Jesus shows in His response to the disciples' question, “Who then can be saved?”
- ◆ **Luke 18:27 “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”**
- ◆ Also the indication of Jesus' statement in Matthew 21 is although they are more reluctant to accept God's gift of grace, there is hope for them although it may take a little more time to persuade them.

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- ◆ **Matthew 21:31** *Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.*
- ◆ The point is Jesus has thrown out the book of deeds and replaced it with the book of life.
- ◆ Jesus has cancelled everyone's record and nailed them to the cross (Colossians 2:13-15).
- ◆ The door of salvation is flung wide open to all, Jews, Gentiles, prodigal sons, tax collectors, Pharisees, punk rockers, you name it...everyone is invited to the party.
- ◆ Everyone that is, except those who want to hang on to the old arrangements.
- ◆ There is no place in heaven for those who think they are morally, spiritually or intellectually superior to others and thereby contradict the very nature of Jesus Christ who ***"made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:7-8).***
- ◆ Only those who recognise their own need for God's love, forgiveness and acceptance and are willing to extend this same love, forgiveness and acceptance to others will inhabit heaven (Matthew 6:14-15).
- ◆ Those who want to wilfully hang onto the power, privilege and wealth they enjoyed in their old life will be excluded.
- ◆ God will give them what they have chosen, to live in the godless and inhuman loneliness of hell, life without God.
- ◆ If darkness is what one loves, darkness is what one gets (John 3:19).

Entry into heaven or hell is not a simple calculation to adding up the score to see who will go up and who will go down.

- ◆ Jesus' message of "heaven is for sinners, and hell is for 'good' people" carries both a warning and promise.
- ◆ It is a warning for so called "good" people to be careful not to become smug or superior to those they consider less righteous or less privileged than themselves.
- ◆ On the other hand, it is a promise to sinners they can be forgiven, loved and accepted by God, because Jesus has forgiven their sins and stands ready to welcome them into heaven.
- ◆ The good news of the gospel is, both those who considered themselves insiders with God and those who considered themselves outsiders with God receive an invitation to the party.
- ◆ In the parable of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22 both the insiders and outsiders were invited.
- ◆ **Matthew 22:8-10** *"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹ So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'¹⁰ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.*
- ◆ No one is excluded without first of all being included.
- ◆ However there is the unhappy situation of the man who refused to put on the wedding clothes provided by the king.
- ◆ **Matthew 22:12** *He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless.*
- ◆ The wedding clothes are representative of being clothed with Christ's grace and righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27).
- ◆ Thinking you can get in on your own merit is a recipe for disaster.
- ◆ **Matthew 22:13** *"Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*
- ◆ Repentance has to be sincere; no one is going to slide into the kingdom through playacting. Jesus, the righteous judge searches the minds and hearts of man (Revelation 2:23).
- ◆ The good news is no one needs to be excluded. God through Christ has made provision for all.
- ◆ **John 3:16-17** *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*
- ◆ The coming judgment need only be feared by those unwilling to let go of the privileged position they enjoyed in their past life and refuse the gift of grace being offered to them.

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- ◆ For everyone else, God's administration of justice tempered with grace is a great blessing for all.
- ◆ The good news is at the end of this period of judgment, the terrible and repetitive history of man's disastrous foray into deciding for himself to be their own god by rejecting His Creator finally comes to an end.
- ◆ There is now only life in the new heavens and the new earth where there is no wickedness or evil of any kind.
- ◆ We will look at this subject next time.