

# Degrees of Punishment

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One of the most clearly taught lessons in the Bible is the fact that all people will be judged at the end of time. We think, for example, about what the Lord himself said in John 5:28-29, ***“Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”*** We think of what Paul said in Romans 14:12, ***“So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.”*** And then in 2 Corinthians 5:10, ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*** Over and over again, the Bible teaches that we will be judged at the end of time and that our eternal destiny depends on what we have done during our rather brief time on this earth.

Several weeks ago, one of our members asked that we study an interesting question that often comes up when we discuss the judgment, and the question is: For those who are lost, are there degrees of punishment in hell? We studied a slightly wider aspect of this question roughly five years ago, but this morning I would like for us to look very specifically at what the Bible teaches on the possibility of varying degrees of punishment in eternity. And it is an important question. In fact, as we study, I hope you will notice that it is not just the question itself, but as we study, I believe we will learn quite a bit along the way – something about the grace of God, something about the mercy of God, something about God’s sense of justice, something about the importance of those of us who are saved reaching out with the good news – so many other lessons go along with this.

As I worked through the question from this good Christian sister, I struggled a little bit with how to organize our study this morning. We obviously could approach this from purely a topical point of view (six reasons for this or that, or whatever, pretty much a made-up outline). There wasn’t really one passage that answered the question in a comprehensive way so that we could stick with one passage, as we normally like to do.

So this is what I want us to do this morning: I want us to take four of the main passages that address this issue and spend at least a little time on each one as we try to answer this question: Are there varying degrees of punishment in hell?

I. And the first of the four main passages I'd like for us to consider this morning is found in Matthew 11 – **MATTHEW 11:20-24** (p. 1519).

And really, by way of background, as you're on your way to Matthew 11, you might want to notice a verse very quickly in Matthew 10. The Lord has just sent the disciples out to teach and preach, and in Matthew 10:15, right after Jesus tells the disciples to shake the dust off their feet when they are rejected, the Lord says (in Matthew 10:15), ***"Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable in the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city."*** And then, the Lord seems to go into much greater detail in the next chapter. In Matthew 11, the Lord seems to apply this concept. He just mentions it in Matthew 10:15, but he comes back and hits it again. Notice, please, Matthew 11:20-24,

***<sup>20</sup> Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. <sup>21</sup> "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup> Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. <sup>23</sup> And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. <sup>24</sup> Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."***

And so we find here that the Lord refers to three cities on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. These were places where the Lord spent a lot of time, places where he had performed many miracles. He had spent roughly three years in this general area. Huge crowds continually came out to hear the Lord teach and preach. The feeding of the 5,000 took place here. Several of the apostles came from this area. And so the idea is: The people in this area had every possible opportunity to hear the truth and repent. In fact, of all the people in the entire world, these people were the most privileged. They had personally heard Jesus preach. They had personally seen so many amazing things. They were eye-witnesses, and yet in this passage here in Matthew 11, these people were in the process of rejecting everything they had seen and heard. And so concerning Chorazin, the Lord says, ***"...it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you."*** Perhaps some of you will remember Jezebel – perhaps the most wicked woman in the Bible – Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Tyre. That tells us something about Tyre. Tyre was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, a very wicked place. Jesus says, though, that it would be better for Tyre than for Chorazin in the Day of Judgment.

In verse 23, the Lord says that it would be worse for Capernaum than for Sodom. And again, we also know something about Sodom. Sodom and Gomorrah were two of the cities destroyed during the days of Abraham and Lot, destroyed primarily over the sin of homosexuality, destroyed with fire and burning sulfur from heaven. Jesus said, though, that those who heard him preach personally and rejected it would be worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah on the Day of Judgment. And so it seems fairly clear, therefore, that these varying degrees of punishment will be based at least partly on the opportunities that people had to hear the gospel message.

And I would emphasize here: Any difference in punishment is NOT due to any particular sin being worse. We have no reference to that here. Unlike in our own legal system, Chorazin was not being punished for doing something worse than Sodom; instead, Chorazin was going to get it worse because they had a much greater opportunity. So, just to be clear here at the beginning, we are not talking about one sin being any worse than another. At this point we need to realize that sin separates us from God – any sin can separate us from God.

The difference here is that Chorazin heard the Lord personally. Chorazin had the greater opportunity to repent.

Well, as we apply this passage, I would point out what this means. If I understand this correctly, this means that those of us living here in the United States are living in one of the most dangerous places on the face of this earth. Here in the US, we can purchase a Bible just about anywhere. You can even get a Bible at Wal-mart. We have it on our phones, we have it on the Internet, we have copies of the Bible in just about every hotel room here in this nation. The Lord's church is active in all 50 states. In other words, there is no excuse for not knowing about the Lord.

Sodom, and Gomorrah, and Tyre, and Sidon, were all living in open rebellion to the word of God. They will be punished. However, Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum will have it even worse in eternity, because they got to see the Lord in person and hear his words for themselves. So again, the severity of sin is not necessarily what leads to a greater punishment. Instead, what leads to greater punishment is when someone has greater information from God but chooses to reject it. Very interesting at this point! Sin causes all people to be lost, but some will apparently have a greater degree of suffering in the life to come if they had a greater opportunity to hear about God in this life. And I believe this is a theme we will see throughout our study this morning.

**II. Let's move over to a second passage on this subject, and the passage is found in Luke 12 as Jesus tells a parable about an unfaithful servant – LUKE 12:47-48 (p. 1626).**

Jesus is trying to get across to the disciples how important it is to always be ready for the Lord's return. He starts talking about a master who goes out of town and leaves his servants in charge while he is gone. I don't know if teachers still do this, but when I was a kid I remember sometimes the teacher would say, "I need to run down to the office for something. You guys be good and do your work quietly until I get back." Well, we didn't know when she was coming back. And that's the picture the Lord paints for us here in Luke 12. When Jesus leaves, he'll be leaving for an unknown length of time. And the picture involves a slave or a servant. Notice, please Luke 12:47-48,

***<sup>47</sup> And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, <sup>48</sup> but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.***

One slave, therefore, is crystal clear as to what he needs to be doing. If he does not do it, he will receive "**many lashes**," the beating will be severe. On the other hand there is another slave who did not know the master's will (for whatever reason, he never got the message as to exactly what he was supposed to do), and the Lord says that this second slave will still be punished, but that he will receive but a "**few**" lashes. To us, that does not seem very fair, that someone would be punished when they never knew the law in the first place. But then again, isn't that the way our own legal system works, in a sense? I cannot murder someone and then claim that I didn't know it was wrong. Imagine me going 90 MPH down Acewood Boulevard. When I am pulled over, can I claim ignorance of the law? I can claim that, I guess, but there is still some punishment coming. So again, it seems that our knowledge of God's law will be taken into account on the Judgment Day. Ignorance will not move anyone over into the reward category, but if we are lost, having explicit knowledge about God and his word will bring a much greater condemnation. We are, after all, talking about degrees of punishment.

Now at this point I should let you know that I have known several to make an interesting argument: Since we will not be punished as severely for things we do not know about, then it would be much better to be as ignorant as possible! And so in a sense (according to this way of thinking, at least), it would be much safer to never attend a Bible class, to never read the Bible, to never listen to a sermon. The problem with this, though, is that God seems to take into account how much knowledge we COULD HAVE GAINED. So again, consider our situation here this morning: We are in a room surrounded by Bibles – it is already too late for us! We don't have any excuses. Out of the more than 7 billion people on this earth, we (of all people) will want to be completely prepared for the Judgment Day. We are in the Chorazin/Bethsaida/Capernaum category!

Here is another problem with this argument: Consider a remote island completely cut off from all outside civilization. If all people are saved in their ignorance, and if we go preach to them, and if only half of them obey the gospel, then we have effectively CAUSED the other half to be lost, by telling them the GOOD NEWS. Does that make sense? If they are saved in their ignorance, then we have effectively turned the good news into bad news. If they are saved in their ignorance then we have condemned them by telling them the good news. That makes no sense. In reality, people are lost – not because they don't hear the gospel, but because they have sinned. We might look at it this way: If someone dies in a fire, did they die because of the fire or did they die because the fire department wasn't there? Clearly, they died because of the fire. Yes, the fire department might have saved them, but in the absence of the fire department, that doesn't mean that fire is powerless. In the same way, people are lost when they sin. Yes, the gospel has the power to save, but if they never hear the gospel, that doesn't mean that sin doesn't cause us to be lost. People are lost in sin. That's why we need to bring people the gospel. We are the fire department in this picture. We are the lifeguard who throws the ring. If I hear the gospel and sin anyway, if I reject the saving message, that simply means that my suffering will be so much worse, because I will have eternity to remember how close I was to salvation.

Going back to the parable, the slave with no knowledge was punished (he was not saved), but he was beaten with fewer stripes than the slave who knew what he needed to do and refused to do it.

- III. At this time, let us move on to a third major passage on this subject – it comes in **HEBREWS 10** – the writer of Hebrews is trying to convince his readers that they should not turn back to Judaism, but that they should hold on to Christianity. About 20 or 30 years after the Christian faith began, the Roman government declared Christianity to be illegal. Judaism was still legal. So, some of the Christians, then, said, "Forget this! Let's go back!" The writer of Hebrews, though, is saying, "No! Hang in there! Jesus is better!"

The passage comes in Hebrews 10:23-31,

*<sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; <sup>24</sup> and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. <sup>26</sup> For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup> but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. <sup>29</sup> How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? <sup>30</sup> For we know Him who said,*

***“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” <sup>31</sup> It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.***

Remember: This passage was written to Christians, Christians who were in the process of slipping. The writer of Hebrews, then, has to tell them to hold on. Don't let go! Encourage one another! Do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together! Don't keep on skipping church (as we might say today)! And the reason is: When we miss meeting together as a church on a regular basis, it puts us in danger. In fact, as the author says, if we go on sinning willfully even after we know better, there is nothing else that God can do. If we know better and do it anyway, that's it. We have Jesus, and if we give up on Jesus, there is nothing left, nothing but fire, nothing but God's judgment. And we learn here that God's judgment on those who used to be Christians will be merciless, ***“without mercy.”*** We think the Old Testament is severe (and it is), but we haven't seen anything like God's wrath toward a Christian who turns away from the Christian faith. It is truly a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. A Christian who skips church and goes on sinning will receive a ***“much severer punishment.”*** And tying that into our lesson this morning, the reason for this ***“much severer punishment”*** is not because our sins are any worse, but because we know better. As Christians, we know better. And so, if we turn away from God now, God's judgment will be ***“without mercy.”*** The author compares it to treating Jesus like road kill. Isn't that what he says in verse 29? If we know Jesus but go back to sin anyway, we have trampled underfoot the Son of God. It's hard for us to even imagine how angry God must be over that. Can you imagine giving up your only son for the sins of the world, to die the most horrible death possible, and then to have people step all over him like cars driving over some dead animal? I can't even imagine that. I can't even imagine what I might do in that situation. But here, we are told what God will do. Truly, ***“The Lord will judge His people.”*** If we know better but go on sinning anyway, the punishment will be ***“much more severe.”***

**IV. At this time, let's move over to the fourth and final passage in brief series of passages, and this one is found in 2 PETER 2 (p. 1902).**

We have looked at this passage a number of times over the past few years, a passage addressing false teachers who at one time were faithful Christians. Notice, please, 2 Peter 2:20-22. Of these false teachers, Peter says this,

***<sup>20</sup> For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. <sup>21</sup> For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. <sup>22</sup> It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.”***

The lesson here is: Those who become Christians and then turn back to the world (according to Peter) will end up being worse off than they were even before obeying the gospel. So once again, we are not talking about the sin itself, but we are talking about a person's knowledge. A Christian who turns back to the world will be worse off in eternity than someone who never knew the way of righteousness, precisely because now they have known the way of righteousness.

Several years ago, I told you that when I was very young, I imagined hell being like a giant elevator shaft, only the shaft was completely full of elevator cars. There were huge flames down there under the bottom, and the

really bad people were way down there, but those who were just barely lost were up closer to the top – really, really uncomfortable, but it was nowhere near as bad as it was near the bottom. Of course I have matured in my thinking through the years, and I have come to realize that the severity of punishment is not necessarily due to the severity of the sin, but rather, that the severity of punishment is tied to how much a person knows. And the punishment itself is not hotter flames or being closer to the fire, but the extra punishment is KNOWING – knowing what might have been, knowing how close we were to salvation, knowing that we had it but gave it up.

I want us to try to imagine being lost forever, in torment, alone, and realizing that in your lifetime you had actually met the Lord face to face, but had rejected his message. Imagine being lost, knowing that you had seen the Lord feed the 5,000. Imagine being lost, in hell for eternity, and imagine looking back and being able to remember the look on the Lord's face as he preached the Sermon on the Mount. Knowing that we were right there would just add to the horror and pain of being lost forever. In the same way, for those of us living today, imagine having been a faithful member of the Lord's church, but having turned away from it. Imagine suffering for eternity, knowing that you had been in this building, surrounded by Bibles. Imagine being lost, knowing that we had heard dozens upon dozens of classes and sermons but had turned away from the truth. Truly, the agony of eternal torment would be multiplied many times over.

### **Conclusion:**

As we bring our thoughts on this subject to an end, I would like to thank our good sister for asking the question, and I'd also like to point out the real lesson this morning, and the lesson is: Hell is real; in fact, we have learned from the scriptures this morning that many people are heading in that direction. It is quite easy to go there. The Lord himself had much more to say about hell than he did about heaven. And this is where we get back to the Lord's warning from today's scripture reading in Matthew 7:13-14, ***"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it."*** In this passage, Jesus is not saying that the way to hell is wide because that is where God wants us to go; instead, the way is broad because there are so many people heading in that direction. The gate to heaven is narrow, but not because God wants only a few people to go through it. God did not make the gate narrow to keep people out. Right now, from where I am standing, I can see several doors here in this building. The front door is wider than the closet door. Why? Because more people go through the front door!

I've told you before that one of my favorite professors in college had a theory. He always lamented how college kids wouldn't use the sidewalks – they would make their own paths across fields or whatever. So he had a suggestion: If it were up to him, whenever they built a new building on campus, he wouldn't install any sidewalks anywhere around that building for an entire year. Then, at the end of that year, he would simply pave those paths that were worn in the dirt. A very wise man! And I believe that is what the Lord is saying in Matthew 7. The way to heaven is narrow, not because God made the way narrow, but because there are so few people headed in that direction.

This morning, then, we have a warning: The more opportunities we have had to learn about God and his love, the more agonizing our eternity will be if we reject the good news. This morning, then, we would invite you to join us on the narrow path. Do not leave today without making sure that you are heading in the right direction. Some of you are listening to this message online (more than 1,000 of you ever week). We would invite you to explore our website while you are here. The good news is that heaven is open to every person. No one needs to be lost. I owed a debt I could not pay, but Jesus paid a debt he did not owe. The Day of

Judgment is getting closer every day, and tomorrow, if we live that long, we will be closer to it than we are today, and if we are lost, the severity of our punishment will depend on what we do right now.

If you are a Christian and you need the prayers of this church right now, let us know. Write it down and bring your concern to me right away. If you have any questions about the Lord's plan of salvation, let us know. The Bible teaches that we must believe in Jesus, we must turn away from sin, we must publicly confess our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and then we must allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to step through that narrow gate that leads to life, we would invite you to let us know about your decision right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)