

The Necessity of the Gospel¹

By Greg Witherow

It may come as a surprise to many, but Christ spoke of Hell more than all the Biblical authors combined². And Christ was neither tepid nor gentle in his descriptions of the pains of Hell or in his predictions of the doom awaiting lost souls. But reading such dire warnings seems out of step with the God of mercy and love we hear so much about today³. Doesn't the typical Catholic regard Hell as only a remote possibility? Or should the presumption be that the faithful Mass attendee is safe? And what of non-Christians? Should the warning of Hell be announced and articulated? Or should we have the expectation that the mercy of God will win out in the end, regardless of whether one has made a profession of faith and an act of repentance? With eternal fate in the balance, it would be good to have answers to these questions. To do so we must turn to the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the words of Christ himself. We are then obligated to measure our own thinking to evaluate whether we have fallen short.

The Magisterium

To begin with, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) clearly asserts the existence of Hell, its eternity and its pain. Section 1035 states the following (emphasis mine),

“The teaching of the Church **affirms the existence of Hell and its eternity**. **Immediately** after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into Hell, where they suffer the punishments of Hell, **‘eternal fire’**”.

Likewise, the CCC teaches that belief and conversion are necessary. Otherwise Christ will be our Judge and not our Savior. Section 1034 states the following,

“Jesus often speaks of ‘Gehenna’, of ‘unquenchable fire’ reserved for those who at the end of their lives **refuse to believe and be converted**, where both soul and body can be lost. Jesus solemnly proclaims that he ‘will send his angels, and they will gather ... all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire’, and that **he will pronounce the condemnation**: ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!’”

¹ The word Gospel means “good news”. What is the good news? Christ has provided a way to make us righteous in order that we may stand in God’s presence, saving us from God’s holy and righteous wrath.

² Of the 13 times the word Hell is found in the Revised Standard Version, 11 of those utterances come from Christ. And there are many other gospel passages where Christ speaks of the place of final torment without calling it by name.

³ By all means we need to hear about the mercy and love of God in our parishes! Because it is true! Nor can we hear too much of it. But God has other attributes that we mustn’t ignore. He is also a holy and righteous God. We cannot unwittingly grow cavalier, thinking we cannot fall from his mercies. As Hebrews 10:29-31 states, “How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God**”.

The Church prays that all will repent; imploring God to give them the grace necessary for such an act; again asserting repentance is a necessary act. The CCC section 1037 states,

“...In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want ‘any to perish, **but all⁴ to come to repentance**”

And finally in CCC Section 1058,

“The Church prays that no one should be lost: ‘Lord, let me never be parted from you’. If it is true that **no one can save himself**, it is also true that **God ‘desires all men to be saved’** (1 Timothy 2:4), **and that for him ‘all things are possible’** (Matthew 19:26).

Section 1058 tells us a number of things. First, the Church prays for all men that they might be saved⁵. Second, the Church prays she will never depart from Christ (let me never be departed from you). Third, it is impossible for men to save themselves. Fourth, God does desire the salvation of all men⁶. And finally, while it is impossible for man to save himself, God has made it possible for all mankind. We see the second sentence of 1058 demonstrated in Matthew 19:26 (used to buttress section 1058) starting in verse 23,

“And Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished, saying, “**Who then can be saved?**” But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “**With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible**”

Christ gives an analogy of entering heaven (a camel going through the eye of a needle) that implies impossibility. Faced with such impossibility, the disciples **rightly conclude** no one can save himself. With implicit anxiety, the disciples ask if **anybody** can be saved⁷. But Christ assures the disciples that while man cannot save himself, God can.

In summary, the Catechism teaches that Hell exists as an eternal fire. Those who “refuse to believe and be converted” and die in a state of mortal sin will be cast into Hell forever. But God does not find pleasure in lost souls, desiring all to be saved. The Church prays that all will come to repentance. But as no one can truly repent, God must provide grace.

⁴ In praying “for all to come to repentance” means we are praying for the conversion of all mankind. We are praying for the Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witness, Protestants or any other religion or non-believer to come to Christ. It is the desire and will of Christ that all people be Catholic, acknowledging his Lordship, his Church, his sacraments, his scripture and his Gospel. There is only one Lord, one faith and one baptism. There are not many Lords, many faiths and many baptisms.

⁵ 1 Timothy 2:1 states, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications and thanksgivings be made for all men”

⁶ 1 Timothy 2:4 states, “[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”

⁷ Some are tempted to change the question to “can all men be saved?” rather than the actual “who then can be saved?” in order to promote the hope of universal salvation. But “cut-n-paste” exegesis lifts scripture out of its literal context; a technique condemned in the CCC sections 112 and 116.

Christ Speaks Of Hell

Christ spoke much about Hell in the gospels⁸. The better part of wisdom says we must take his instructions as accurate warnings to whether one is on the road to doom. In Matthew 23:1-37 Christ evokes seven “woes” against the Pharisees. Christ states,

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for **you neither enter yourselves**, nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, **you make him twice as much a child of Hell as yourselves**.”

The Pharisees believed in the God of Abraham and they were zealous for the faith. They evangelized. They fasted. They kept all the feast days. They memorized scripture. They prayed to God a great deal. Externally speaking, these traits would have made them outstanding Christians. Oh to be Catholics of such great zeal! **And yet** they and their converts were children of Hell. But how can this be? We begin to see in verse 23,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, **and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith**; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

In being zealous for the law, the Pharisees missed the main point; justice, mercy and faith – the traits of Jesus Christ. And they did not have the traits of Jesus Christ because they did not have faith in Jesus Christ, proving we can be religious and yet devoid of faith⁹. To be a Christian is to embrace Christ and bear his image. The Pharisees did neither, rejecting Jesus as the Son and therefore God as their Father. John 8:42-44 states,

“Jesus said to them, **“If God were your Father, you would love me**, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You [the Pharisees] are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.”

Christ is the hinge on which our salvation swings. And the door of heaven slammed shut on the Pharisees and their converts because they would not love the Son. In John 3:36 Christ states, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; **he who does not obey the Son shall not see life**, but the **wrath of God rests upon him**. Later in 14:6 Christ states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; **no one comes to the Father, but by me**.”

But in rejecting Christ they failed to love the Lord God with all their heart, soul and mind. And by neglecting justice and mercy they failed to love their neighbor.

“And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

⁸ Only a few of the many passages where Christ speaks of Hell will be used in this essay.

⁹ The Pharisees had the old testament church and the old testament “sacraments”, but rejected the gospel.

The Necessity of the Gospel

We are called to be Christians. But faith is the **hard way** and Christ proposes few find it.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, **that leads to destruction**, and those who enter by it **are many**. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, **that leads to life**, and those who find it **are few**.” (Matthew 7:13, 14)

We avoid self-delusion by following the teaching of the Church, having faith in Christ (nourished by the sacraments) **and** obeying his commands, avoiding shock on The Day.

The teaching of the Church: “know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, **the pillar and bulwark of the truth**” (1 Timothy 3:15)

Faith in Christ (with the sacraments): “**Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved**, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16)

Obedience to Christ: “Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, **but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven**. On that day **many will say to me**, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'” (Matthew 7:21) Here, Christ’s condemnation comes as a shock.

We also must lead others to Christ. This fulfills the command to love our neighbor as ourselves and it also reflects God’s desire to save all men, even if they prove obstinate. Despite such resistance, the Church is called to carry out the Great Commission of Christ.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! **How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!**” (Matthew 23:37)

“Go therefore and **make disciples of ALL nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them** to observe **ALL that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:19, 20)

Conclusion

The message of the Church is not damnation but salvation and hope. But without the merits of Christ applied to our soul an eternal Hell awaits us - it is not a hypothetical fiction. Does merely having perfect Mass attendance save our souls? The Pharisees teach us No. Should the warnings of Hell be announced and articulated? Christ thought so. And what of non-Christians? They need Christ too as “**no one** comes to the Father but by me”. Can God reach those the Church has not? Mercifully yes, “in ways known to himself.”¹⁰ Yet they remain in a “**gravely deficient situation**”¹¹. We need the Church, we need the sacraments, we need the Gospel. We must believe. Believe in what? Jesus Christ. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” – John 3:16.

¹⁰ Dominus Iesus paragraph 21. God’s mercy is not restricted if the Church fails to faithfully evangelize.

¹¹ Ibid 22. Cases of “invincible ignorance” are explained in my essay The Necessity of the Catholic Church.