

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 18:1-35

To learn the biblical doctrine of hell, and the way forgiveness shapes our interactions with other people.

From the Mouths of Babes

I love to learn about almost anything. Ever since my junior year of high school when a philosophy teacher broke down some of my barriers and I discovered the joy of learning, I have always been interested in learning how to do new things. I read voraciously, I watch how-to Youtube videos, and I am constantly asking



questions to people who are even somewhat experts in their fields. I have discovered, however, that there is another source that I learn more from than perhaps anywhere else: my kids. Every night, while tucking my three little girls in for bed, we pray together and I am always amazed at the things they observe, hold on to, and pray for. They teach me a perspective of life that I sorely need. That, apparently, we all need.

In Matthew 18, Jesus qualifies once again how one is to enter the kingdom of heaven: “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). He issues a follow-up warning that should be read with tremendous caution due to the force of what He says: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6). To be childlike does not mean to act with humility. Children rarely act humble. However, children live their lives with the

unquestioning acknowledgement that they are fully dependent on someone else to care for them, and *that* is how we are to live our lives in relation to God. Unless we accept the fact that we are not in control of our life and cannot save ourselves, we will never enter heaven. It is only by God's grace that salvation comes.

Inevitable and Accountable

One of the most difficult things to grasp for skeptics of Christianity is the idea that people are born with sin, a plague outside of their own control, and yet they are still responsible for it. This is an aspect of the faith that is often attributed to the Apostle Paul, and Paul does affirm this reality (Rom. 9:19-21). However, in Matthew chapter 18, Jesus affirms this as well. He prescribes a woe to the world for its stumbling blocks and then says, "For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!" It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come. Why? Because of the sin nature in humanity. But notice, the one through whom those stumbling blocks comes will be accountable.

Perhaps it seems unfair, but imbedded in this reality is a truth that is very important for Christians to understand. Regardless of both circumstances and opinions, there is such thing as an objective right and objective wrongs. What do I mean by that? I mean that God has decided what is righteous and what is unrighteous, and those things do not change from person to person or circumstance to circumstance. Good intentions are meaningless when it comes to morality. For example, murder is wrong (Ex. 20:12). There is no circumstance in which this is not true. Even if we are compelled by sin to imperfection, it does not erase the wrongness of it nor the penalty it incurs. This is all the more reason why the Gospel is such good news. It provides the payment for such inevitable sin, and places the accountability onto Jesus, not ourselves.

That Hideous Doctrine

There are a lot of difficult realities that the Word of God presents to us, but none more challenging than the doctrine of hell. Many Christians would likely agree with C.S. Lewis who said, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity" (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 94). Yet, as difficult as it may be, it is a reality that Jesus does teach about unashamedly. In verses 8 and 9, Jesus warns of us that which causes us to sin, and concludes that it would be better to remove those things from our lives in the present than go to hell. But, what is hell? There are two words that are used in the Gospels to describe the place of hell, and an additional descriptor in other parts of the New Testament. Both are words that had a historical meaning, and they are used to illustrate the reality of hell.

GEHENNA

Gehenna was a literal, physical location in the ancient world, in the Valley of Hinnom. A place historically where child sacrifice and idolatry occurred and often spoken against in the Old Testament (2 Kgs. 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; Jer. 7:32). It was essentially a garbage dump during Jesus' earthly ministry, and served as a great illustration to a deeper spiritual reality (a teaching tactic often employed by the Lord). People would have envisioned this place of judgment as a horrific fate, knowing what Gehenna was.

Gehenna was referenced 12 times in the New Testament. It is the place of judgment for those who wrongfully treat their brothers in Matthew 5:22. It is the place where someone is cast to who does not cut out the sin in their life in Matthew 5:29-30. It is seen as a worse fate than even death itself in Matthew 10:28, and a place for the Pharisees and their converts in Matthew 23:15, 33. It is also the source that sets the iniquity of the tongue on fire in James 3:6.

HADES

Hades is the Greek word for the place of the dead, and is used to translated the Hebrew word “Sheol” in the Septuagint (LXX). It is used 11 times in New Testament, and once again, in similar fashion. Often it is connected with death and a place of judgment against the wicked and unrepentant (Matt. 11:23; Matt. 16:18; Lk. 16:23; 1 Cor. 15:55, quoting Hos. 13:14; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13–14).

FIRE IMAGERY

There are also descriptions of a place of judgment that are simply described as, “eternal fire” or, “fiery judgment.” Hebrews 10:26-27 says, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES” (quoting Is. 26:11). Both 2 Peter 3:7 and Jude 7 envisage a fire that is being reserved for the final judgment.

OTHER FEATURES

Other minor terms mentioned only occasionally, mostly in Matthew, include: darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. All three are bleak and present the idea of regret, despair, and suffering.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

First, what do we make of this? Throughout the years, people have tried to talk around the reality of hell, attempting to separate hell from these terms. An honest and simple look at the texts at large, however, paints a pretty clear picture: there is a real place of suffering called hell and it is reserved for the unrepentant and unbeliever. Is there literal fire? It’s very unlikely. What is likely is that it is much worse. All of these terms and descriptors are used to illustrate the horror one experiences in hell, but to approach it literally actually creates contradictions. How can it be a place of both fire and darkness? Second, Hell should also not be used as a scare tactic. You don’t get scared into heaven, and even the Bible affirms this (Lk. 16:19-31). Finally, Hell should never be disconnected from the goodness of God. Hell is not an unfair destination, because God’s goodness and mercy has provided a way to overcome it through His Son Jesus Christ.

Handling Bad Business

The next section deals without how believers are to deal with relational sin. Jesus says, “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” Some translations render this as, “If your brother sins *against you*.” This is a text that has drawn a lot of attention. Some of the early manuscripts include the verbiage that personalizes this type of sin, but some of the earliest manuscripts (Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus) do not. It is actually quite irrelevant, because the idea of brotherly reproof is one that the Jews were already familiar with and practiced (Lev. 19:17-18). The Apostle Paul draws this out as well in Galatians 6:1. The course of action is fairly intuitive. Go to him, and if he does not repent, bring someone else to mediate. If that doesn’t work, enlist pastoral oversight. If, at that point, the person is still unwilling to repent, they are to be as a, “Gentile or tax collector.” It means they are not included in the sacred gatherings intended for believers, but they are not to be fully ignored either. Instead, they need to hear the Gospel.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 18:1-6. In your own words, summarize this passage. Who is Jesus talking to? Who all is present in this passage?
2. Read Matthew 18:7-9. What does Jesus warn against? Does Jesus mean a person should literally cut a hand or eye out to keep from sinning, or is this a figure of speech to emphasize an “any means necessary” approach to warring against sin?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 18:10-11. Once again, what is at stake here? What is Jesus warning against?
2. Read Matthew 18:12-14. What should our heart be towards the lost? What is God's heart towards the lost? What does this parable mean?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 18:15-18. In your own words, write out the biblical, step-by-step process to confronting sin in another believer's life. How are they to be treated if they do not repent? Why is this necessary (Hint: read Deut. 19:15).
2. Read Matthew 18:19-20. What does Jesus mean by this? What does this say about the need for unity among believers?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 18:21-22. How many times should a believer forgive someone? In your opinion, is this a literal number or hyperbole?
2. Read Matthew 18:23-35. In your own words, summarize this parable. How does this connect to the previous two verses? How should forgiveness from God direct our forgiveness towards others?

Week 22 Discussion: Patience Is a Virtue

In Matthew 18, Jesus speaks on the topic of confronting sin and then forgiving others. The two are intricately tied together. To deal with sin from a biblical worldview includes the eventual forgiveness of it. Jesus ends this chapter with a parable about how God's forgiveness should direct the way we forgive others. Talk as a group about the challenges of this, and the patience required for other people to do this well.

1. Icebreaker: In what area of your life do you struggle with patience? Give some specific examples.
2. Have you ever had to confront someone you were close to with their sin? Was it difficult? How did it turn out? Was anyone else involved?
3. Have you ever forgiven someone for something they did, only for them to do it again? How did you handle it? How many times does Jesus say we should forgive them?
4. Are forgiveness and reconciliation the same thing? Why or why not? Is it possible to forgive and not reconcile? Are there instances when that is actually ideal?
5. Why does remembering our own faults and failures make it easier to have patience with others?
6. How does this topic of confronting sin and forgiving others tie into the commandment to, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

Takeaways:

1. Hell is a literal place that is described in a variety of ways, all of which describe suffering, and is the final destination for those who reject Jesus.
2. God's forgiveness of our own sin should shape the way we interact with and forgive others.

PRAYER REQUESTS: