

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 12 – August 28th and 31st, 2014

Romans 9:1-5

“I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit — I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen

Dear children of God who know Christ's love. Amen

How would you complete this sentence? “One of the ways people's thinking has really changed over the last fifty years is _____.” If there are 100 of you here today, you probably have at least 100 different answers. People's thinking has changed so much over the last fifty years. How about this? “One of the ways people's thinking has really changed is that they no longer believe in hell.” The statistics would seem to back that up. The latest polls show that only 31 percent of Americans see hell as “a place of physical torment where people may be sent.” That means that almost 70% of Americans no longer believe in a real place called hell.

Even churches today are noticeably silent on the teaching of hell. Fifty years ago it wasn't uncommon to hear preachers mention hell in a sermon. Today there is hardly anything more politically incorrect than to say that people without Christ go to hell. The popular thinking is that everyone goes to heaven no matter what they believe. Fifty years ago the fear of hell kept people from eating meat on Friday or breaking church rules, but today many Christian churches don't make too much mention of hell. In evangelical circles many pastors don't want to be labeled as a “fire and brimstone” preacher, and have turned to a kinder, gentler approach. And Lutherans? While many of them believe there is some sort of hell, they do not all believe it is a threat for them. Some believe hell is the troubles they go through in this life. Others that hell is a place reserved for others, criminals like Hitler, Stalin or Osama bin Laden.

The best reason we have for believing there is a hell is that the Bible says there is a hell. Jesus clearly believed and taught us that. He described hell as torment, darkness, unquenchable thirst, fire, eternal separation from God prepared for the devil and his angels. You and I confess we believe that too. But do we really believe it? I don't just mean, do we agree intellectually there's a hell? Do we act on it? Do we live as if it's true? How does it affect what you do right now? In our Second Lesson today the apostle Paul thought about people he knew and loved going to hell – and it broke his heart. This is a question we must ask ourselves:

Sermon Theme: Does Your Heart Break At the Thought of People In Hell (or going to Hell)?

- 1. Think of everything God's done for them.**
- 2. Is there anything you would give up for them?**

1. Think of everything God has done for them.

Paul says, **“I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit — I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart... for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”** There were no chapters and verse divisions when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. There was not even any punctuation. It was one continuous, uninterrupted letter. The words right before our reading are some of the most uplifting and comforting words in the whole Bible:

“Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.” Then immediately without any break or interruption, Paul says: **“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.”** The word for sorrow is the intense grief over losing a loved one. He has great sorrow, like losing a dear child. Anguish means sinking feeling. The word was used for the setting of the sun. Unceasing means it never goes away. He has a sinking feeling in his heart that never goes away. What filled Paul with great grief and unceasing anguish? He knew that so many people of his own countrymen, the Jews, were going to hell.

What makes Paul’s words remarkable is the way those same people treated him. By the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans he’d been bringing the gospel to the Jews for almost 20 years. Much of Paul’s suffering in life came from those same Jewish people. They beat him, flogged him, arrested him, stoned him, put him in prison. We could understand if Paul would have looked back over the years of suffering at the hand of the Jews and said, “Well, let them to go hell. They asked for it!” We don’t hear Paul talking that way. Now in his letter to the Romans, Paul laid bare his soul: his fellow countrymen were unbelievers; they were going to hell; and it was breaking his heart.

What made this such a tragedy to Paul was because of everything God’s love done for them. God lavished his love on Israel and made them his special people from whom the Savior of mankind would be born. Paul goes through a list: **“Theirs is the adoption as sons”**: This was a product of God’s action, not their own. God freely chose to adopt them as his special people from whom the Savior of mankind would be born. **“Theirs the divine glory”**: What other nation had seen the blazing glory of God leading them through the wilderness in cloud and fire? **“The covenants”**: the promises: “I will be your God and you will be my People.” **“The receiving of the law”**: not simply commands from God, but the truth about creation and the promise of a Savior. **“The temple worship and the promises”**: theirs was not a self-chosen worship, but was designed by God, and the worship itself pictured God’s promises to them. **“The patriarchs”**: the fathers in the faith who carried in their own bodies the seed of the Messiah. **“From them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all”**: They had the greatest privilege of all – out of all the nations of the world God made them the nation from whom the Savior would be born. Therefore, their punishment would be all the greater for rejecting him.

Do you ever feel that kind of anguish for people going to hell like Paul felt? Do you know people whom Jesus has poured out blessings on, and yet they don’t believe in him? Do you ever think: “My friend _____ (insert name) is going to hell, because he/she doesn’t believe in Jesus...My brother/sister/family member has turned their back on everything they learned about Christ, and they will spend an eternity in suffering...My coworker is going to hell, because he/she thinks they have to do good works to get to heaven.” Our families and our circle of friends are filled with people are in danger of going to hell or are going there because they are rejecting Jesus. And I won’t even start talking the seven billion people we don’t know! Do you have great sorrow and unceasing anguish for such people? I don’t mean to be nasty, but sometimes we have more anguish about our pets than we have for people going to hell. It broke Paul’s heart that so many he knew and loved rejected that love and would go to hell. Is there someone you know, someone you work with, someone you care about who is going to spend an eternity in hell? When you think of everything God’s done for them and everything he’s done for you, ask yourself, “Is there anything you would give up for them so they would believe what you do?”

2. Is there anything you’d give up for them?

Paul had thought about that: **“I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race.”** If it would work that way, Paul was willing to go to hell so his countrymen could go to heaven. That’s about as close to the love of Christ as you can get, because that’s what Jesus actually did – he went to hell so we wouldn’t have to. Paul’s going to hell, or my going to hell, isn’t going to save anybody else, no matter how much he or you or I might want it or wish it so. **“No man can redeem the life of another or save his soul from death,”** the Bible says. Paul knew **“There is one God, and one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”**

What Paul was willing to give up to save people from hell, he could not give up. In another letter he talks about what he actually did give up to save people from hell. **“I have worked harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day on the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from the Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”** People broke Paul's heart—believers when they endangered what the Holy Spirit had given them, unbelievers for everything they stood to lose. Would you or I ever say what Paul said? **“I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers.”** Would we be willing to give up everything, even our salvation, if it could save someone we love from hell? That's not possible for us to do, but what would we do to save others? What would we give up?

"Do we really believe in hell?" If we do: We will do all we can to spread the saving Gospel of Christ into a world that so critically needs him; We will pray more for the billions who are perishing in their sins. We will intensify our witnessing to friends, relatives, neighbors, and others that salvation for time and eternity can only be found in Jesus Christ. We will make missions and evangelism and winning the weak back to Christ high priorities in our personal and congregational life. We will make every sacrifice to get them into worship to hear God's word. We will prayerfully support the cause of world missions with our offerings so that missionaries can go and preach the Gospel to every creature. And we will more seriously take to heart and daily live the Great Commission of our Lord: **“Go and make disciples of all nations.”**

How could we not do everything we can? Jesus has lavished his love on each one of us. He lovingly chose us to be his own, declared us not guilty of our sins at the cross, adopted us as his own in baptism, assures us of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper and gives us the sure promise of eternal life and joy in heaven. Out of love for our Savior and for our fellow human beings, let every one of us rededicate ourselves to both the responsibility and privilege that God has placed on all Christians: to go and tell all people the story of Jesus and his love. Because, if there really is a hell, what else can we do? Amen.