

Weeping and gnashing of teeth

Jesus on the fate of the rejected

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There are several parables told by Jesus in which one group of people are welcomed into the kingdom, or rewarded for their efforts or attitudes, while another group is rejected or chastised. Rejection is sometimes associated in these stories with "weeping and gnashing of teeth".

In this paper I will be looking at some of these parables and sayings of Jesus about judgment, and asking:

1. Who are rejected?
2. Why are they rejected?
3. What happens to them?

The "weeping and gnashing of teeth" sayings

This expression occurs only seven times in the Bible: six are found in the gospel of Matthew, one in Luke. Three of them are associated with "outer darkness". Two of them, in the one story, are associated with a "fiery furnace".

1. "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown **outside, into the darkness**, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**." (Matthew 8:11-12).
2. "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**." (Matthew 13:41-42).
3. "This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**." (Matthew 13:49-50).
4. "'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. 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**.'" (Matthew 22:12-13).
5. "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**." (Matthew 24:50-51).
6. "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant **outside, into the darkness**, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**." (Matthew 25:29-30).
7. "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be **weeping there, and gnashing of teeth**, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out." (Luke 13:27-28).

Who are "rejected"?

The expression "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" is a puzzling one, and one which has engendered fear into generations of believers. It's an image associated with being "cast into outer darkness" and rejection. It's a favourite of "hell-fire and brimstone" preachers, and one which is often quoted in order to bring people into line.

This expression appears in four parables dealing with acceptance and rejection:

- The weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)
- The wedding banquet (Matt 22:1-14)
- The wicked servant (Matt 24:45-51)
- The talents (Matt 25:14-30)

Who is it that is being "cast into outer darkness" where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in these parables? On two occasions Jesus spoke about the "sons of the kingdom", or citizens of the Kingdom (the NIV has "*subjects* of the kingdom"): Matt 8:12 (a saying about the faith of a Centurion) and Matt 13:38 (the parable of the weeds). On both occasions He spoke of "weeping and gnashing of teeth". The background to the first saying was an encounter with a Roman Centurion - someone *outside* of God's chosen people Israel - and Jesus said of him "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." He then went on to say that while many would come from *outside* and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom, the "children/sons/subjects of the kingdom" would be cast into *outer* darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's evident that He is saying *outsiders* (such as this Roman centurion) would be welcomed into the kingdom while those who thought the kingdom was their "right" would be rejected. But when we look at some of the other similar sayings we see that it was not *all* Israel who would be cast out, but a particular class *within* Israel.

It was not only "Gentiles" who were "outsiders". The Pharisees and religious leaders also excluded:

- people with disabilities (the blind, the crippled, the deaf)

- those with infectious diseases such as leprosy
- people who colluded with the Romans (such as tax-collectors)
- people who didn't measure up to their standards of holiness or who rejected some of their doctrines (the term "sinners" included people who disagreed with them as well as those who were guilty of breaking the Law)
- Samaritans and Gentiles.

In fact, they took the name "Pharisees" because it meant "the separated" - they were "pure in doctrine and conduct", or so they thought.

Why are they rejected?

Many of Jesus' sayings and stories were directed against this elite class within Israel: the religious leaders, the pure, the separated, those who felt that they alone were the "true Israel". For example, after Jesus told the parable of the talents (which has a 'rejection' theme in it) Mark and Luke tell us that "the teachers of the law and the chief priests ... knew he had spoken this parable *against them*" (Mk 12:12; Lk 20:19).

In these sayings Jesus is saying that it was those who were regarded by the religious leaders as being "outsiders", those whom they rejected, that are to be made welcome in the Kingdom. On the other hand, the "insiders", the doctrinally pure, those who have separated themselves from the ones who don't measure up doctrinally or in their behaviour, are to be "cast out". As a result of being rejected there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth". This is not a weeping of remorse or sorrow, but of anger and resentment.

Jesus is telling us that God's justice turns human standards of justice on its head. The principle that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first"¹ could equally mean in this context that **"the 'insiders' shall be made 'outsiders' and the 'outsiders' shall become 'insiders'"**.

In an ironic twist the *rejecters* become the *rejected*.

¹ Matt 20:16 // Mk 10:31 // Lk 13:30

Something you may have already noticed is that when Jesus told stories or parables about the kingdom He wasn't always speaking of some future time in the Age to Come. Most of Jesus' kingdom-sayings were about attitudes we should develop in the here-and-now, and how kingdom-people should *prepare* for the Age to Come. Of course, some of His stories were about the future, such as the one in the list above where He said "this is how it will be *at the end of the age*." The context will determine whether Jesus is speaking about the hear-and-now or the age to come.

So it is that the religious purists who will be rejected "at the end of the age" will go away angrily "gnashing their teeth" with rage because **that is how they behave now**. In Stephen's day they directed their anger and rage against this faithful follower of Jesus (and his Greek name suggests that he was a Hellenistic Jew, and may have been an "outsider" of sorts – see Acts 6:1-5). Throughout history we have seen "religious" people directing their anger against other believers who don't measure up to the standards imposed by the purists. The same is evident today.

Putting this together, we see that the idea behind this expression is that those who are apart from God attack each other and try to tear each other, much like a pack of dogs fighting over a carcass. Without love there is just hatred and envy. Those who do not live by Jesus' teachings on love and grace bite and tear each other. Those who live according to God's way help others, rather than tearing them down. In these stories of Jesus we are being told that the time will come when they will be left to themselves to tear each other apart. We don't have to wait until "the end of the age" to see this principle fulfilled. Communities, denominations and churches which splinter and divide often do so because they are obsessed with their own standards of doctrinal purity or so-called holiness rather than reaching out in love to those who are in need of God's kingdom, and in the process they tear each other apart.

What happens to them?

So, what exactly is "gnashing of teeth?" The Greek word that is translated as "gnashing" is from a word that means "to bite" and describes the snarling of a wild animal as it attacks². In all of the passages where the Greek terms for gnash or gnashing are used in the New Testament or in the Septuagint **they are always used of anger, rage, pain or anguish**. They are never used of sorrow, grief, remorse or regret³.

A similar reference to gnashing of teeth occurs in Acts:

When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth (Acts 7:54).

This is the only passage in the New Testament where the term "gnash" (verb) is used apart from the common formula, "weeping (noun) and gnashing of teeth." It is a significant passage because it sheds light on the meaning of the associated term "gnashing of teeth." This verse describes an incident where the religious leaders were furious with Stephen. They were full of anger and hatred which very

² *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Joseph Henry Thayer

³ In the Hebrew Bible *charaq* ("gnashing teeth") occurs five times:

Job 16:9

God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes.

Psa 35:16

Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me.

Psa 37:12

The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them

Psa 112:10

The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.

Lam 2:16

All your enemies open their mouths wide against you; they scoff and gnash their teeth and say, "We have swallowed her up. This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it."

soon led to their violent crime of stoning him. To "gnash the teeth" as it is used in this passage has nothing to do with sorrow or regret or grief or remorse. It describes their anger and hatred. They were like angry growling animals about to devour their prey.

In the stories in Matthew the rejected are either thrown "outside, into the darkness" or into a "fiery furnace". Those who interpret this as a place of torments in hell have difficulty in explaining how a "fiery furnace" can also be a place of darkness.

The reference to the fiery furnace occurs only in the parable of the weeds. There the weeds are disposed of after harvest by being thrown into a furnace. We should not read into the interpretation of the parable that the people represented in the parable as weeds will also be thrown into a furnace. That would be to take the analogy literally.

In the story of the wedding banquet the guest who is rejected is thrown outside into the darkness. Some interpreters have pointed out that he is not thrown out of the kingdom, but only out of the wedding banquet. They say that this suggests that some people will lose the places of honour in the Age to Come, but will still be saved. In support of this they quote **1 Cor 3:10-15**

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.

¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. ¹⁴If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. ¹⁵If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

Several parables suggest that there may be "degrees of reward" in the Age to Come. For example, in the parables of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27) and the talents

(Matt 25:14-30) the servants were rewarded according to what they had achieved. In Jesus' sayings about who would sit on His right and left hands in the Kingdom of God (Matt 20:23 // Mark 10:40) He is also suggesting that there will be positions of greater honour. The Twelve are promised that they will sit on twelve thrones judging Israel (Matt 19:28 // Luke 2:30). These all suggest degrees of reward. Sayings and parables about sitting with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28) and participating in the great banquet may also suggest an "inner circle" to which a particular class are invited. There may be others who are "saved" and live "in the kingdom" but who do not enjoy this privileged status at the Master's table.

In addition to the parables listed above, there are others which also have a 'rejection' theme. Matthew has a group of three (chapter 25):

- The wise and foolish bridesmaids
- The talents
- The sheep and goats

This group of parables is introduced by a parable about a wicked servant who is cut to pieces and assigned a place with the hypocrites, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (24:51). The Gospels use the term "hypocrites" 15 times – 12 times in Matthew – and in 6 of those places they are specifically identified as the "teachers of the law and Pharisees" (and in the remaining places the same people are almost certainly being referred to).

In this grouping of parables the severity of the rejection escalates:

- The foolish bridesmaids are locked outside of the banquet and told that the groom never knew them
- The worthless servant is thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth
- The goats are sent into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

There may be a hint in some sayings that the rejected will "see" the Kingdom, although not participating in its blessings (e.g. Luke 13:28).

A comparison of the parables of the great banquet (Luke) and the wedding banquet (Matthew)

Luke 14

Jesus at a Pharisee's House (Luke's introduction)

¹One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ...

⁷When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: ⁸"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. ⁹If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹²Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Luke 14

The Parable of the Great Banquet

¹⁵When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

¹⁶Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.

¹⁷At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

¹⁸"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

Matthew 22

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

¹Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying:

²"The kingdom of heaven is like

a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.

³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

⁴"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'

⁵"But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business.

⁶The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them.

¹⁹"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

²⁰"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

²¹"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry

and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

²²" 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'

²³"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'

²⁴"I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' "

⁷The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

⁸"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come.'

⁹Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'

¹⁰So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹²'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.

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.'

¹⁴"For many are invited, but few are chosen."

“Many are called but few are chosen”

In two places in Matthew’s Gospel we read of Jesus saying these words (Matthew 20:16; 22:14). This saying appears to be contrary to the idea of God’s overflowing generosity which we see repeatedly throughout Jesus’ teachings. It appears that Jesus is saying that only a small number of people are actually chosen by God to enjoy His Kingdom and that even many of those who respond to His invitation will be rejected. This is so radically different from the rest of Jesus’ teachings that we need to look at this saying carefully in its context.

In actual fact Jesus is only recorded as saying these words on one occasion. While the King James Version (KJV) also places them at Matthew 20:16, most translations do not include it there. It seems that the KJV is based on a manuscript which incorrectly included the saying here, as the best and most ancient manuscripts omit it.

So there is only **one place** where Jesus used these words: at the end of the parable about the wedding feast (Matthew 22:14).

A dominant theme in Matthew’s Gospel is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This is highlighted in the words “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (Matthew 21:43). It is this message which is being emphasized in this parable.

The parable is in two parts. In the first part (verses 1-10) the people who are **invited** to the wedding ignore the invitation so the invitation is extended to **anyone** the king’s servants can find – good or bad – so the wedding hall is filled with guests. The message here is clearly a reference to Israel’s rejection of their Messiah, and therefore His kingdom, and the invitation going to the Gentiles instead.

The second part of the story (vv. 11-14) has a very unexpected twist. The king

notices one guest without an appropriate wedding garment, and has him bound and thrown outside. There are two unusual features of this twist.

(1) It seems strange that someone who was invited at very short notice would be criticized for not dressing appropriately; and

(2) the consequences seem overly harsh in the circumstances.

However, **this is no ordinary wedding: it is the King’s son!** It would have been a great **honour** to have been invited and it seems that everyone else had time to dress appropriately. So the harsh treatment of the one person who didn’t take the honour seriously may not have been overly harsh after all (although we must remember that Jesus often used **exaggeration** for emphasis).

The story ends then with the punchline: “For many are invited, but few are chosen” (verse 14). If *many* people were thrown out of the wedding hall and only a few allowed to stay then this saying would clearly refer to those who remained for the banquet. However, in the story *many* stay for the banquet and *only one* is rejected. If this saying referred to the fact that one person was “not chosen” because he wasn’t properly dressed then it would have been more accurate to say “*many* are invited and *most* are chosen, but a *few* will be rejected”. Obviously Jesus has something else in mind.

A parable usually has one main point, or two at the most. The closing line, the “punch line” (also called the “end-stress”), relates to this main point. In this story **the main point is that the people who were originally invited to the wedding banquet rejected this invitation and therefore others were invited in their place.** The final line takes us back to this point. Many people make the mistake of interpreting this line to mean “many are called (from the world), but few are chosen (from those who are called)”. This interpretation has no connection to the

context.

The "many" who are called, or invited, refers to the **second** group to be invited. The story makes it clear that a large number were included in this second invitation. "Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet **anyone you find.**" So the servants went out into the streets and gathered **all the people they could find**, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was **filled** with guests." On the other hand the first group appears to be relatively small: "**one** to his field, **another** to his business". So the saying is better interpreted "many are called (from the world) but few are chosen (from the world)" and there is a contrast between being *called* and being *chosen* (there is possibly even a play on words in the Greek, where the word "called" or "invited" is *kletos* and the word chosen is *eklektos*).

The word "chosen" (Greek *eklektos*) has the meaning of being "picked out". It is a great honour to be "chosen" or "hand-picked". In this story the ones who were "hand-picked" to be at the wedding banquet were those who were initially invited. From all the people in his realm the king **chose** these people to celebrate with him on this special occasion. But they treated this honour with contempt, and so they too were rejected.

The person in the second part of the story had a similar attitude. Although he came to the wedding he did not take the honour seriously of being invited to such a special occasion. He was very casual in his attitude, and in this way was similar to those earlier who casually chose to carry on with their business rather than answer the king's summons.

We could paraphrase it this way: "**It is a great privilege to be invited, and many have been invited; but it is an even greater honour to be hand-picked, and only a few have that honour – so don't take it lightly.**"

This story emphasizes the great **honour** which is offered to us when God invites us to the celebration in the kingdom of His Son. Israel suffered severely because they rejected that honour, and those who come into the church "casually" without considering what an enormous honour it is will also be treated severely. While we are saved by grace we must never take grace lightly. We have been given a wonderful privilege.

“Hell” in the Bible

The English word “hell” occurs in the King James Version 54 times (31 times in the Hebrew Bible and 23 times in the Greek New Testament), and only 14 times in the New International Version (where it appears only in the New Testament).

On the other hand, “heaven” is mentioned 606 times in the NIV (691 times in the KJV).

“Hell” is a translation of the following Hebrew and Greek words (in the KJV):

Hebrew (Old Testament)

The word “hell” in the Old Testament of the KJV is always a translation of the Hebrew *sheol*.

Sheol is translated as
grave 31 times
hell 31 times
pit 3 times

Greek (New Testament)

The word “hell” in the New Testament of the KJV is used to translate three Greek words.

hades – translated as
hell 10 times
grave 1 time
gehenna – translated as
hell 12 times
tartaroo – translated as
hell 1 time

The NIV generally translates *sheol* as “grave” or “realm of the dead”. In the NT the NIV is quite inconsistent: it translates *hades* as “the depths” (twice), “grave” (three times), leaves it untranslated as capitalised “Hades” (five times) and only once translates it as “hell” (Lk 16:23). By translating the same word *hades* in various ways the NIV put Christ in the grave, the sinners of Capernaum in the depths, and the rich man in hell.

The NIV translates *tartaroo* as “hell” (once - 2 Peter 2:4). *Tartaroo* means a pit or an abyss. The other twelve references to

“hell” in the NIV are always translations of *gehenna*.

So where is Gehenna?

Gehenna is a Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word *gehinnam*, which in turn comes from two Hebrew words: *ge hinnom*. It is a reference to the valley (*ge*) of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem⁴, where rubbish and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned. It was also a place where the dead bodies of criminals were burned⁵. It became a symbol of total destruction.

The **Hinnom Valley** of **Valley of Ben-Hinnom** (NIV, or valley of the son/children of Hinnom KJV) is mentioned thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible as an actual place where children were burned as human sacrifices to Molech.

There is no suggestion anywhere in the Bible that people burn forever in hell. The very idea of “eternal” torture for a short life of sin is contrary to the principle of the *lex talionis*⁶ that punishment or retribution is not to exceed the offence, and contrary to the character of God.

In symbolic language “death and Hades” are completely annihilated by being thrown into a Gehenna-like “lake of fire” (Rev 20:14). Note that *hades* is never called a lake of fire – on the contrary, it is destroyed by being thrown into a symbolic lake of fire.

The majority of the references to Gehenna are in Matthew’s Gospel (7/12). Mark’s three uses of the word are in a parallel record of a saying in Matthew. The one usage in Luke is a parallel of a different saying in Matthew. In total there are only four Gehenna sayings in the Gospels, and all four probably refer to the total annihilation of a criminal (after execution).

⁴ The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words

⁵ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by Joseph Henry Thayer

⁶ An “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life”. Exodus 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21

Hell in the NIV

Matthew 5:22

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca, ' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell [gehenna].

Matthew 5:29

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell [gehenna].

Matthew 5:30

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell [gehenna].

Matthew 10:28

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna].

Matthew 18:9

And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell [gehenna].

Matthew 23:15

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell [gehenna] as you are.

Matthew 23:33

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell [gehenna]?"

Mark 9:43

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell [gehenna], where the fire never goes out.

Mark 9:45

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell [gehenna].

Mark 9:47

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell [gehenna]

Luke 12:5

But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell [gehenna]. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Luke 16:23

In hell [hades], where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

James 3:6

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell [gehenna].

2 Peter 2:4

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell [tartaroo], putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment

The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

The first point to note here is that this is a **story** (a "true parable") - it is not necessarily meant to be taken *literally*.

Then we must also take note of the **context**: Jesus first addressed 3 parables to the scribes and Pharisees (15:1-3), then He spoke to His disciples (16:1), but within the hearing of the scribes and Pharisees who were still listening (16:14). The story He told His disciples was about a *rich man* who entrusted his goods to a *dishonest* manager. The next story (and the last one in this series of stories) is about a *rich man* who suffers terribly and a poor man who receives great blessings. In each of the earlier parables addressed to the scribes and Pharisees there was also a contrast between two people or objects:

- one lost sheep and ninety-nine others
- one lost coin and nine others
- a lost son and his brother

This tells us that there are meant to be **two points of comparison**: one with the scribes and Pharisees and the other with the "sinners" who had gathered around to listen to Jesus. The next story is addressed to the disciples but is *about* a rich man and his dishonest manager. Luke's next words tell us that the scribes and Pharisees "were lovers of money" (16:14), and the next story is addressed to them. So here we have two stories about the use of riches joined together with a comment that the people to whom it was addressed "loved money". The Pharisees looked upon wealth as a sign of God's blessings and looked upon poverty as a sign of God's judgment. They were rich, therefore they could argue that they must have pleased God. In doing so Jesus said they "justify themselves" (16:15). They were building a great gulf between themselves and the "sinners": they considered themselves better and more righteous and used their wealth as "proof" that they had God's favour. In the previous story He pointed out that they were mismanaging the things God had entrusted to them. Jesus is about to tell another story against their attitude to wealth.

Now, this story is clearly not a true story or meant to be taken literally. It contains some things which are impossible. For example, the rich man is in Hades while Lazarus is in a place called "Abraham's bosom"⁷ which is "far off" (v 23) and there is "a great gulf fixed" between them (v 26). Yet despite this distance and the great gulf the rich man is able to speak with Abraham. If this story is describing actual conditions then those in heaven must be able to conduct conversations with those in hell, and the dead must be able to travel from heaven to hell, because the rich man asks Abraham to "send Lazarus (to Hades) to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire" (v 24). Here is yet another unreal element: would one drop of water ease his thirst in the slightest? Jesus is using **exaggeration** to make His point.

The **main point** comes at the end ("the end-stress"). The rich man says to Abraham "if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent", to which Abraham replies "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." This connects with the main points of the earlier parables (e.g. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"). In the earlier parables the "sinners" were repenting and heaven was rejoicing. In this parable heaven is declaring that the scribes and Pharisees will not repent. The rich man's *misery* and *hopelessness* in this story is contrasted with the *celebration* and *great rejoicing* in the earlier ones.

In this story Jesus seems to be teaching things about the afterlife which completely contradicts the rest of Scripture about

⁷ It is often said that "Abraham's bosom" is a reference to *heaven*. It could equally have an eschatological meaning related to the great banquet at which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are present (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28)

what happens after death. Why does Jesus do this? We learn from Jewish historical sources (such as the first century Jewish historian Josephus) that the Pharisees, although believing in the resurrection, also believed in immortal souls, fiery torments, the righteous and wicked being separated by a great chasm, and a place called the bosom of Abraham. In speaking to them and appealing to them to see their real need to repent, Jesus used language which they would understand. He used their own understanding about the afterlife to encourage them to see the seriousness of

their position. Rather than arguing against their distorted views He uses these very ideas in an effort to persuade them to get right with God before it is too late.

Of course there is an irony here as well: a short time later a *real* Lazarus *did* rise from the dead and they still didn't repent. And then Jesus Himself rose from the dead and most did not repent. So His parable was also prophetic.

Conclusions

- The overwhelming emphasis of the Gospels is that God is loving, gracious, forgiving and generous.
- Jesus' parables, sayings and actions emphasise that He is welcoming of the rejected, disenfranchised and marginalized and invites to the kingdom of God those who were regarded by the religious leaders of the time as 'beyond the pale'.
- In some of Jesus' parables and sayings (especially in Matthew) there is a class of people who are 'rejected', in an ironic and dramatic twist where the rejecters are themselves rejected.
- If Matthew's Gospel was written by the same Matthew-Levi who was a tax-collector, then this may be the reason he had a particular interest in the fate of the rejecters.
- The fate of the rejected in the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" sayings is to be thrown "outside". They "see" the consequences of their attitudes. There is no suggestion that they are tortured eternally in hell-fire.
- The Bible says nothing about eternal torments in hell-fire. The fate of criminals was that their bodies were burned *after* they were executed, in a place known as the Valley of Hinnom, or *gehenna*. Gehenna became associated with total annihilation, especially of a criminal class. The four *gehenna*-sayings in the Gospels are references to the consequences of behaviour which could bring someone under the condemnation of a criminal court.
- In the parables and sayings which have a group or an individual who are rejected, it seems that they exist as a minority. The *majority* are saved while only a *minority* is rejected.