

8.23.20 Heaven & Hell Are Gated Communities
The Gospel of Matthew 16.13-20, Revelation 21.22-27
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As I prepared for preaching about today's theme, Heaven and Hell are Gated Communities, I was seeking an intelligent, profound, and mature way to introduce such an important and serious theological subject, and I remembered a video clip I saw some years ago dealing with the subject of gated communities.

(We showed a 2:30 Veggie Tale clip of a song, The Gated Community.)

The Veggie Tales song, The Gated Community, reveals, in a humorous and exaggerated way, a potential downside of gated communities - those inside them may not be concerned for the needs of those outside them who are not welcome or invited. The church has to be on guard against becoming like the gated community in the video – a place where we bask in all that we have and enjoy, *“what a lovely bunch we are!”* while not being as concerned about those who are “outside the gates” and not a part of our community. There are at least two kinds of gated communities – one you'd like to be inside of because of all the benefits and privileges, *“they're the place you want to be.”* Then there are gated communities that you don't want to be inside of and would like to get out of any way you can.

Gated communities are exclusive – some of our people live in one and some of us may have vacationed in a gated community. Usually there is a gate that bars you from driving straight in and an attendant who checks to make sure you have some form of identification that demonstrates you belong and have rightful access to all that lies beyond the gate – a lovely place to stay, beautiful landscaping, the beach. We've been guests at a few places that are almost like heaven on earth in terms of the beauty. But we only had access to it for a very short time. If we went now, we wouldn't be admitted.

On the opposite end of attractive gated communities for the well-off, there are gated communities called jails or prisons. The United States has more people in these gated communities than any other nation on the face of the earth. As of June 2020, the United States had the highest number of incarcerated individuals

worldwide, with **more than 2.12 million people** in prison. The U.S. was followed by China, Brazil, the Russian Federation, and India. While the United States represents about **4.4 %** of the world's population, it houses around **22 %** of the world's prisoners. Clearly there is something seriously wrong in our nation. Prisons and jails are gated communities intended to keep people in, to prevent them from leaving, and behind those gates, life can be frightening, depressing, and severely limiting. They are not a place people want to be and those who are in them are separated from those they love, from freedom, and from opportunities most of us enjoy and take for granted every day.

The Bible describes heaven and hell as places that have gates to either welcome people in or to keep them from leaving. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew followed by a few words of John's vision of heaven in Revelation.

Matthew 16:13-20, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*

And they said, *"Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

He said to them, *"But who do you say that I am?"*

Simon Peter answered, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

And Jesus answered him, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and **the gates of Hades** will not prevail against it. I will give you **the keys of the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah."

Revelation 21:22-27, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. **Its gates will never be shut** by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will

enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

Some people do not want to believe or accept that there might be a hell, that there might be a place where people are separated from God and all that is good, true, and beautiful. There are those who think that a good and loving God wouldn't allow anyone to go to hell. Some resist the idea because we have loved ones or friends who do not share our beliefs and we are concerned about their eternal future. It may be because we don't believe the descriptions of hell in the Bible to be literally true. However, the Bible speaks many times about the fact that after we die we all are going to be accountable for the life we have lived and for some people the consequences of how life has been lived will be unpleasant to say the least. The Bible describes both Heaven and Hell as gated communities. There is access to both but there is also a boundary. Let's talk about hell first and then move on to the good news about heaven.

The notion that the realm of the dead had one or more gates controlling movement into and out of it is a very ancient one that appears in the Hebrew Bible in **Isaiah 38:10**, “I said in the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to **the gates of Sheol** for the rest of my years,” and in the New Testament in **Matthew 16:18**. “Gehenna” is the word most commonly used in the New Testament for the place where sinners will be after death. In **Matthew 5:22** Jesus says, *“But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘**You fool,**’ you will be liable to the **hell (Gehenna) of fire.**”*

In another passage Hades is presented as a place of torment where we don't want to be. **Luke 16:19-26** (NIV), “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. **At his gate** was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when

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the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. **In hell (*hades*) where he was in torment**, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, *'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'* "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, **between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.**"

The torment and agony of hell in this story is that one can see the goodness and blessing of being with Abraham and the angels, but one cannot cross over to enter the place of blessing. "Hell" is the English word used to translate the Hebrew terms "Sheol;" and "Gehenna" as well as the Greek term "Hades." In Christian tradition it is usually associated with the notion of eternal punishment, especially by fire. The book of Revelation describes a lake that burns with fire and brimstone in which the wicked will be eternally punished (Revelation 19:20; 20:14-15; 21:8). The bad news is hell is a place where individuals are separated from God and all that is good, true, and beautiful because of their sin, wickedness, or evil done in this life (Revelation 21:7-8) or because of their lack of empathy, compassion, and loving kindness especially to the poorest and neediest in our midst. That's what we heard in today's middle scripture from Matthew 25:31-46 about the judgment of the nations where Jesus says that how a person treats the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, those in need of clothes, the sick and those in prison will determine whether they hear the words (Matthew 25:34), *"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;"* or (Matthew 25:41b, 45,-46), *"You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

So, how about some good news? In **Revelation 1:18** the risen Christ says that he has *'the keys of Death and Hades.'* This implies that Christ can unlock and lock the gates of Hades, that he has power over life and death. The saying in Matthew 16:18 about the gates of hell not prevailing against the church means that the powers of death and other God-opposing forces will not triumph over the church – the beloved community of believers in Jesus the Christ. It also means the church is not to be like a gated community, the church is not to have a fortress mentality where we stay safely within our walls and take care of ourselves. The church is to be an unstoppable force in the world doing God's will. The church, in Jesus' terms can go to hell... and knock down the gates.

What can we say about heaven from the Bible? Briefly, in heaven we will give our worship and receive God's comfort. We will hunger and thirst no more – no one will be starving and all will be satisfied. Jesus, the Lamb will be our Shepherd. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Not only will heaven be a place where there will be no more tears from mourning, grief, suffering and persecution, but we will see people who have preceded us in the faith and that is very comforting as well.

John's vision of heaven includes the most precious stones and metals being used for construction materials both because they are beautiful and because compared with Almighty God, Jesus Christ and the eternal worth of people they are worthless in comparison. Heaven will be more beautiful than we can imagine, but it will not be exclusive in the same way a gated community is on earth where one needs money or membership to get in. Author Mitch Albom wrote a best-selling book, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. In an interview (with Barbara Walters) he said, *"There's one thing I would say about heaven. **If you believe that there's a heaven, your life here on Earth is different.** You may believe that you're gonna see your loved ones again. So the grief that you had after they're gone isn't as strong. You may believe that you'll have to answer for your actions. So the way you behave here on Earth is changed."* While Albom didn't try to write a Biblical view of heaven, he is correct that **if we believe there's a heaven our life here on earth will be different in every way.** Every

week in worship, on our own each day perhaps, many of us pray the Lord's Prayer that declares, *"Our Father, who art in **heaven**, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in **heaven**."*

The Lord's Prayer affirms our belief in heaven and opens and closes by focusing on God. **The more we focus on God in heaven, the more inspired we are to live God's way on earth.**

This side of heaven and hell it is important to remember that no one is beyond redemption and that our Creator's desire is for everyone to have a personal relationship with the Lord that leads to heaven. **2 Peter 3:9**, *"The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."* **God doesn't want anyone to go to or be in hell.** According to Jesus in **Matthew 16:18**, the gates of hell that cannot prevail against the church that goes into all the world bringing salvation, hope, help, healing, compassion, service, and justice in the name of Jesus. That is what we are called to do. **In Matthew, the gates of hell are portrayed as closed** to keep people in, but the church's job is to bust open those gates to redeem people out of hellish situations of sin, abuse, oppression, poverty, corruption, addiction, meaninglessness, and emptiness.

In Revelation, John says the gates of heaven are always open which symbolizes the Lord's desire that everyone would enter into an eternal relationship with God that begins now and extends into heaven. We can't possibly know all there is to know about heaven – John is attempting to describe the indescribable. There are questions that we cannot fully answer, such as, who will get into heaven? What about people who never had the opportunity to know Jesus either because they lived before he did or lived in a place where they never heard about Christ? We must trust that God who is just and loving, holy and merciful will do what is right for each individual.

I don't claim to know all there is to know about heaven, but I do know this – if you want to go there, then believe that (John 3:16 NKJV), *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* Jesus is the Son of God who died on the

cross for the sins of the world including your own. Believe that he wants you to live as he taught his followers to live – as his loving, humble, honest, generous, compassionate, serving people. Share with others this life changing good news. Trust Jesus completely. If you get to the gates of heaven and someone asks you why you should be allowed to enter, don't talk about your achievements, service, generosity, or what a good moral person you were or all the good you did - say you trusted Christ and humbly sought to love him and live for him every day.

Heaven is a place where God's children from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages will be worshiping God and the Lamb on the throne and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes - and that's the place we want to be.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. When you think of gated communities is your first thought of positive ones like a lovely place to live or heaven, or of negative ones like a prison or hell? What associations do you have with "gated communities?"

2. People have various responses to the idea of there being a heaven or hell. What are your thoughts? Do you think they are both real? Just one? How have you reached your decision?

3. Why do you think some people have difficulty believing in hell, but hope that heaven is real? Do you believe there are eternal consequences for the decisions and choices we make and how we live our lives on this earth? What difference does our answer to this question make in how we live our lives?

4. In the sermon there are multiple references to passages where Jesus refers to judgment, hell, and eternal consequences including Matthew 5:22, 25:31-46, and Luke 16:19-26. How do you feel about these scriptures?

5. What do you think about the idea Jesus expresses in Matthew 16:13-20 that the task of the church is to go to hell and break down the gates and deliver people and set them free?

6. What excites you most about heaven? Have you put your trust in Christ and accepted him as your Lord and Savior and are you seeking to live daily to

honor and glorify him so that you may enter heaven when it is your time to give an account of your life to God?