

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 89

Halifax, 6 September 2009

Q. 89 What shall be done to the wicked at the day of judgement?

A. At the day of judgement, the wicked shall be set on Christ's left hand, and, upon clear evidence, and full conviction of their own consciences, shall have the fearful but just sentence of condemnation pronounced against them; and thereupon shall be cast out from the favourable presence of God, and the glorious fellowship with Christ, His saints, and all His holy angels, into hell, to be punished with unspeakable torments, both of body and soul, with the devil and His angels forever.

Introduction:

In previous sermons, we have already seen what happens on the day of judgement.

- Christ returns from heaven,
- Christ summons the whole world before Him,
 - both the dead and the living, to be judged;
 - calling the wicked from their graves and uniting their body and spirit.
- Christ judges them,
 - separating the righteous from the wicked,
 - and giving to each their final sentence of blessing or of condemnation.

Today our subject is focused on what happens to the **wicked** on the day of judgement.

- We will see that their punishment is very severe.
- We will see that on the day of judgement, everyone will recognise the justice of this punishment.
- And then we will look the benefits that come from accepting this doctrine even though we may yet find it hard to see the justice of it.

For our Scripture reading, I have selected Matthew 25.

- READ Matthew 25.

As you can see, in Matthew 25, Jesus makes a very sharp distinction between what will happen to the righteous and what will happen to the unrighteous on the judgement.

- He tells two parables that illustrate the difference...three if you count the one at the end of chapter 24...
 - And then He gives an actual description of the difference at the end of chapter 25.

- Jesus wants us to know that His judgement is a very distinguishing judgement!
 - He wants us to know that there is very radical difference that will be made on the last day.
 - This is a characteristic of His teaching all the way through the gospels...
 - It is a characteristic of the epistles and of Revelation...
 - It is a characteristic of the Psalms...
 - It is a characteristic of writings of Moses and of all the prophets.

- It never ceases to amaze me how some people want to say that the destruction of the ungodly is distinctively an Old Testament theme.
 - They claim that in the New Testament, it is all about forgiveness and mercy.
 - The statement is simply not true...
 - The Old Testament has a greater focus, perhaps, on “in this life judgement” than the New Testament,
 - but the eternal nature both of God’s mercy and condemnation is brought to a much sharper focus in the New Testament...
 - In the manifestation of Jesus Christ, both the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the unrighteous are opened up like never before.
 - It is only by selective reading and biased interpretation of the New Testament that anyone could ever come to the conclusion that there is less emphasis on judgement in the NT.
 - I will readily admit that it is hard for us to *accept* the Lord’s teaching about the severity of His judgement.
 - but no one who reads Matthew 25...
 - or for that matter the rest of the New Testament...
 - can deny it.

TRANS> I want you to see first of all that...

I. The punishment of the wicked is shown to be very severe.

A. First, see that it involves a severe loss.

1. There is the permanent and complete loss of communion with God.

a. This is clearly seen in our text:

1) In the parable of the Ten Virgins,

- the horror of the five virgins that were unprepared is that they are shut out from the great wedding feast...

- The door is closed and they knock and they plead,
 - “Lord, Lord, open to us,”
 - but He answers without any ambiguity,
 - “Assuredly I say to you, I do not know you.”

- 2) And in the parable of the talents,
 - He commands that the unprofitable servant be cast into the outer darkness—away from the presence of the Lord.

- 3) And in the description of the judgement, the Lord commands those on the left hand,
 - v. 41: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire...”

- b. It will be a terrible thing to have seen His glory and His beauty revealed on that last day and then to be sent away from Him!
 - 1) Many know the heartbreak of rejection in this wicked world in which we now live—
 - rejection by a parent, rejection by children, rejection by a spouse or a partner...
 - It is a very painful thing to experience...
 - It is terrible...

 - 2) But how much worse will it be for those who see the incredible beauty and glory of the Lord—
 - when they see Him who is the fairest of ten thousand...
 - the one who is so desirable and so wonderful and so true and so pure and so good...
 - and then are cast away from Him... forever!
 - cast away finally and completely with no possibility of return—of ever seeing Him again.

 - I tell you, there will be weeping such as has never been heard!
 - Men think themselves smart for rejecting Him now, but when that day comes,
 - they will mourn as they have never mourned before at their loss.
 - For all eternity, they will agonise at what might have been if only...

- forever they will be cut off from Him who is the source of all glory and beauty!
2. Indeed, to be cut off from the Lord will be to be cut off from all that is glorious and beautiful...
- a. You see, all the glory and beauty in this earth is from Him...
 - Every good and perfect gift is from Him...
 - Even whatever goodness is found in people is the remnants of the goodness that they have as those made in His image...
 - whatever beauty, whatever kindness, whatever love—
 - It is all from Him.
 - b. And wicked men have spent their entire life denying the connection between God and all these good things...
 - Even though deep down, they know better, they have denied the that all these things come from God...
 - and on the day of judgement they will be cut off from Him and all the goodness that comes from Him forever... forever!
 - How they will weep for their losses in that day!
 - Yes, even from themselves, all goodness will depart and they will be left as they are—vile and corrupt.
 - They will be cut off from those that are redeemed and from the holy angels,
 - and forced to spend eternity with those from whom all goodness and beauty has departed...
 - forced to spend eternity cut off from the truth and goodness and beauty.
 - As it says at the end of Matthew 24,
 - The Lord will appoint him his portion with the hypocrites and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...
 - Whatever pain we have borne from losses in this world will not compare with the loss of those in that day who all their life refused to repent and come to Jesus Christ for salvation.

TRANS> But there will be more than deprivation as our text also shows...

- Yes, final punishment involves a severe loss... that is the truth...
 - but

- B. Second, see that it involves a severe torment.
- Yes, there is a torture—a deliberate infliction of pain and misery upon the wicked.
 - The language of the catechism is that they will be cast into hell:
 - **“to be punished with unspeakable torments, both of body and soul, with the devil and His angels forever.”**
1. In Matthew 25:30, Jesus describes the effect that His punishment will have on the wicked—
 - He says that “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
 - This is a favourite description of His to describe the agony of those upon whom His judgement falls.
 - In fact, Matthew records six different times that He uses this language...
 - You see that it is the language at the end of Matthew 24...
 - “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
 - This is very obviously a description of great suffering...
 - A person gnashes their teeth when they endure agony that is unbearable.
 - Their face is twisted up and their teeth are clinched and there is an outcry.
 - It is inconceivable to think of a place that is full of persons in such agony forever and ever.
 - It is hard to believe that there could be such a place!
 - It is hard to believe that this is how our gracious Lord describes the place to which He will send the wicked...
 - This is not a sentence that man could inflict!
 - This is the sentence of our holy Saviour and Lord.
 2. And I want you to see that He describes it as that which lasts forever.
 - a. In verse 41, He calls it “everlasting fire”,
 - Matt 25:41: "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:
 - And in 25:46, He calls it “everlasting punishment”:
 - Matt 25:46: "And these will go away into everlasting punishment”
 - b. In our perverted judgement, we want to soften this.
 - It is just inconceivable to us to think of such extreme agony going on forever and having no end...

- There are many who have put forth the argument that everlasting does not really mean everlasting here...
 - But if we want to be honest with God's word, that argument cannot stand.
 - An honest look at God's word will show us that the word *everlasting* (αιωνιον in the original) means *everlasting*.
- 1) First, look right here in verse 46...
- The same word that is used to describe the duration of punishment is used to describe the duration of life...
 - It says:
 - Matt 25:46: "And these will go away into **everlasting** punishment, but the righteous into **eternal** life."
 - I am not sure why the translators used two different words here,
 - but in the original,
 - the word translated *everlasting* and the word translated *eternal* are the very same form of the word αιωνιον.
- 2) Secondly, look at how the word αιωνιον is used in 2 Cor 4:17-18.
- It is contrasted with what is only temporary...
 - That Apostle Paul says,
 - 2 Cor 4:17-18: For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.
- 3) Thirdly, I want you see how the everlasting fire spoken of Matthew 25:41 is described in Revelation 20:10.
- In Matthew 25:41, the fire into which the wicked will be cast is called "the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels..."
 - And in Revelation 20:10, we are told in what sense this fire is everlasting:
 - It says:
 - Rev. 20:10: "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet *are*. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."
 - It is called everlasting because it is a fire that torments day and night forever and ever...
 - There is no way to soften this language.

- If we want what we believe to be based on the scripture,
- we must accept what it says about this.

TRANS> So you see that the severity of God's judgement is clearly taught by our Lord in the Scripture.

- The more a society becomes hardened in their sin,
 - the more it begins to scoff and mock at the very idea of such judgement.
 - Where there ought to be terror and fear, there is scorn and ridicule.
 - Such persons ought to be greatly pitied.
- This has become very common in our society...
 - Measuring by our own perverted human standard,
 - we speak brazenly of how unjust it would be for a Creator to inflict His servants with everlasting torments...
 - But our arrogant judgement will not change the fact,
 - nor will our perverted sense of justice stand up in the great day when God's sentence is declared.
- Sadly, many in the Christian church have also allowed their own perverted sense of justice to twist the plain teaching of scripture...
 - I will be the first to admit that soon after I became a Christian, I gave serious attention to the argument that Hell might not be eternal...
 - It seems so severe—I found it hard to believe...
 - But it did not take long to see that all the arguments that men have brought forward are not an honest exegesis of scripture,
 - but rather a twisting and perverting of scripture.
 - This doctrine is a very effective test of one's orthodoxy...
 - As soon as a person starts to rely upon their own judgement rather than submitting to God's word,
 - the doctrine of eternal punishment will be one of the first things to go.
 - Almost every cult rejects the doctrine of endless punishment...
 - If they do not believe in annihilationism (the doctrine that the wicked will cease to exist),
 - they teach some form of universalism—that eventually everyone will be brought to salvation.
 - But it is not just in the cults and the schematics...

- I would be surprised if you could find one liberal or neo-orthodox minister that believes in the doctrine of endless punishment!
 - And what is even sadder,
 - there are more and more who call themselves evangelical who are denying the clear teaching of our Lord about this.
 - Even men like John Stot, otherwise a faithful expounder of God’s word, have questioned this doctrine.
 - You will find many in the emergent church movement who reject it...
 - and even if they do not reject it completely,
 - they do not give it the same emphasis that the Scriptures give it...
 - They downplay it as unimportant—
 - What our Lord emphasises they consider to be unimportant!
- They are allowing their own judgement and the judgement of the world to control what they believe instead of submitting to the plain teaching of scripture.
 - But we must not rely on our own judgement in this matter.
 - We are fallen creatures and God has given us His word to enlighten us.
 - It is not safe to set up our own judgement over scripture.
- Indeed, I want you to see secondly that...

II. On the great Day of Judgement, everyone will see the justice of God’s sentence.

- In our perverted judgement, we ask,
 - “How could a good God deliberately inflict His creatures with pain forever and ever?”
 - That is our question in our fallen darkened condition—
- But on the day of judgement, the question will change.
 - Then the question will be,
 - “How could a good God **not** sentence such rebellious creatures as we are with everlasting torment?”
 - That is what God’s judgement is all about...
 - It will wake us up to what is right.

- It will cause us to see everything without our perverted sense of right and wrong...
- It will be a whole different perspective!

A. Our perspective will change because Jesus will appear in His glory on that day.

1. In verse 31, He describes His coming like this:

- Matt 25:31: When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.
- a. We can only learn what it means for Him to come in His glory from scripture.
 - In John 12:41, Jesus speaks about the time when Isaiah saw *His* glory (the glory of Jesus Christ).
 - We have a record of that in Isaiah 6 where Isaiah says,
 - Isa 6:1-4: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

TRANS> That was a revelation of the glory of Christ.

b. But I am especially interested to show you the effect that this revelation had upon Isaiah.

- 1) Isaiah has a reputation of being one of the holiest prophets who ever lived.
 - He was a very godly man who preached from a true sense of God's majesty and glory...
- 2) But what happened to this godly man when he was given a full revelation of the glory of Christ?
 - He said:
 - Isa 6:5: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."
 - He thought he was finished!
 - He thought he would be torn to pieces because of his wickedness and sin!
 - This is a man known for his godliness—a sincere man!
- 3) And indeed, the Lord did not tell him that he was clean...

- He sent forth a seraphim with a live coal to touch to those unclean lips that they might be purified...
 - This godly man is not told that he has no iniquity, but rather:
 - Isa 6:7: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged."
- c. Now if we had time, I could show you many other examples of those who saw the glory of God and how they responded...
- 1) of Israel at Mount Sinai—of we have a comment in Hebrews 12:21:
 - Heb 12:21 “And so terrifying was the sight *that* Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling."”
 - 2) And of the godly Daniel who says:
 - Da 8:17 So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face
 - 3) And of the godly Apostle John who walked with the Lord on earth and served him faithfully into old age, who, upon seeing Him in His glory in Revelation says:
 - Rev 1:17: And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead.”
2. Now I want you to understand that these men were godly men, and even in these visions, they did not yet see the full glory of Jesus Christ!
- But how their perspective changed when they saw something of His glory!
 - We are blinded by the fall such that even the most godly among us crawl around in the darkness until the day that Jesus is revealed.
 - From our present perspective,
 - everlasting punishment seems unjust—it seems overly severe...
 - but when we see the glory of the one against whom we have sinned!
 - When we see His beauty, His perfection, His purity, His justice, His goodness, His wonderful holiness...
 - we will see things in a very different way.
 - Now the question is,
 - “How could a good God inflict men with eternal torment for their sin?”
 - Then it will be,
 - “How can a God who is this good do anything else but afflict men with everlasting pain night and day forever and ever?”

TRANS> That will be our response to Him when we see His glory.

- But scripture also shows us something else.

B. We are also shown that on the day of Judgement, the Lord will expose our particular sin...

- In other words, it won't just be a general sense of our uncleanness before His glory,
 - but He will also expose our particular sins particularly.

1. He is presented here as bringing conviction upon the wicked...

- In the parable of the talents, He destroys the excuses of the servant who did not serve his Lord...
 - This fellow was full of excuses and self-justification for his failure to serve...
 - But Jesus says to him,
 - Matt 25:26-27: 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.'
- This is example of what will happen to all the arguments and excuses that men now make for their refusal to serve the Lord.
 - All of those excuses will be turned over and the wicked, perverted heart will be fully exposed in the light of our Lord's glory...
 - The light that men have been trying to suppress and avoid will shine in full intensity on that day, and all the secrets of their hearts will be revealed.
- Paul talks about this in Romans 2 when he speaks about how every person has a sense of right and wrong—
 - how that even those who do not know the written law show the work of the law written in their hearts when they accuse and excuse others...
 - They say, "this is right and that is wrong."
 - And in Rom 2:16,
 - Paul speaks of the "the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ."
 - All the evasions and all the suppression of what they honestly knew about God but would not admit will be exposed.

2. You see also in Matthew 25 how our Lord exposes the sin of those who did not love His people...
 - Matt 25:41-44: "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'"
 - And you see how He then makes the connection between how we treat His people this world as being one and the same with how we treat Him
 - Matt 25:45: Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'
3. Learn from this that on the Day of Judgement,
 - the LORD will convict sinners of their sin...
 - He will expose the true wickedness and perversity of each person.
 - That is what judgement is and what judgement does...
 - It brings things into a proper perspective.
 - It convinces men of their guilt...

TRANS> This combination of seeing the glory of Christ and of having sin exposed will leave no one in question of the justice of God's sentence upon the wicked!

- After He is finished, no one will suppose that the Lord He has been too severe!
 - We will see things from the perspective of truth!
 - We will see that it is entirely our fault that we did not know Him or serve Him as we should have.
 - We will no longer think of ourselves as victims of any wrongdoing or injustice on His part.
 - Our perversion will be seen, our wickedness will be appalling to us, our excuses will melt, our deliberate suppression of His truth will be exposed,
 - and we will marvel that He bore with us so long in this world without judging us sooner...
 - and we will marvel even more that any of us should be saved.
 - But you will say to me,
 - "But I cannot see this now. To me, it still seems overly severe that God should sentence His creatures to spend eternity in torment."
 - What can I do with this doctrine of endless punishment that seems so unjust?

- And I will tell you what to do with it.
 - Our Lord has revealed this to us because it is good for us to know.
 - So it is for you, dear Christian, to accept that it is true and to try to bring your heart to delight in it...
 - Not that you are to delight in the everlasting suffering that will come to those who are not rescued by Jesus Christ...
 - but that you are to delight in the glorious God who is so glorious and holy that when you see Him,
 - such suffering will no longer seem unjust to you... not at all!

III. Just consider with me some of the benefits that come from accepting this doctrine of endless punishment.

- A. First, it is beneficial to accept the doctrine of endless punishment because it motivates you to be sure that you are prepared for His coming.
1. I will grant that this is not the highest motive for serving God, but it is frequently presented to us as a proper and healthy motive all the same...
 - John the Baptist came forth calling his hearers to flee from the wrath to come.
 - In Matthew 25:13, Jesus tells His disciples to “Watch” because “you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man comes.”
 - And the whole purpose of the parable of the ten virgins is that you need to be sure that you are ready.
 - That is what he means by watching.
 2. And of course there is only way to be ready for Him!
 - You must believe on the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins!
 - This is not a God that any sinful human being can stand before unless we have been cleansed by Him.
 - That is what baptism represents—the washing away of our sins.
 - And I say, it is not the waters of baptism that can do that!
 - It is the Saviour Jesus Christ, the only true Son of God, who came down from heaven to save His people from their sins.
 - You must look at that sin that is going to destroy you and come to the Lord Jesus and cast yourself before Him and plead with Him to cleanse you from it...
 - He came to procure for all His elect a righteousness that is acceptable to God...

- And to do that, He had to live for us and then He had to bear the full weight of the curse for us...
- And now He promises that if we will come to Him, we will be saved...
 - Instead of everlasting punishment we will be given everlasting life.

B. Second, it is beneficial to accept the doctrine of endless punishment because it makes you more earnest to seek the salvation of others.

1. How could you know that your friends and relatives—even your enemies—are headed for everlasting destruction if they are outside of Christ and remain indifferent!

- I don't see how you can.
 - How can a father who believes this be indifferent about commanding his children to keep the way of the Lord?
 - How can a mother who believes this be indifferent about praying for her child to know Him?
- I don't mean that everyone has to become a preacher,
 - but everyone needs to become earnest about prayer for others, about warning them, about urging them to hear God's word preached, about persuading them to turn to the Saviour.
 - and every believer needs to live in such a way that they bear witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ by their life.

2. The Apostle Paul felt that he was a debtor to all men...

- He had received the treasure of eternal life that many of them did not have...
 - He felt that even as his Saviour had given Himself for him, he must give himself for others.

C. Third, it is beneficial to accept the doctrine of endless punishment because it humbles you and helps you to realise that you are still quite blind.

1. The very fact that when we face the reality of endless punishment—it does not seem fair to us—teaches us how far we have to go.

- It teaches us that we still don't really understand the glory of God...
- It teaches us that we still don't really understand our sin.
- That however deeply we may have been humbled, we are still a long way for truly grasping the true nature of our glorious God and His salvation.

2. I do not mean that you need to go around with your heads hung low, trying to feign some humility that you don't yet have...
 - But I mean that you need to yearn for God to show you His glory!
 - To realise that you have only just begun to understand His beauty and His perfections and His holiness!
 - and to know that He delights in showing you His glory step by step, day by day, in this world until the great day of His appearing.
 - And therefore to seek Him with all diligence...
 - to cry out to Him to show you His glory...
 - to seek Him in His word...
 - to ask Him to show you if there is any wicked way in you...
 - to try to grow in the truth and to delight in the truth.
 - and to look with hope to the day of His appearing when you will see His glory—
 - When the Son of man comes in His glory and all His holy angels with Him!

D. Fourth, it is beneficial to accept the doctrine of endless punishment because it makes you more grateful to your saviour who bore this punishment for you!

1. You need to understand the punishment that is due to everyone of us as sinners so that you will understand what your Lord endured for you on the cross.
 - As I have told you before,
 - The curse that He brings upon the unbeliever in the day of judgement will be no different than the curse He bore for you when He went to the cross.
 - I know that He did not suffer forever and ever—
 - but the intensity of His suffering is not measured by the length of it, but by the person who did the suffering!
 - It was the very Son of God who went to the cross for us!
 - I mentioned before that cults and liberal Christians very often deny eternal punishment,
 - so it is no surprise that they also deny the deity of Jesus Christ.
 - You see, the same perverted human reasoning that would tell us that we do not deserve to suffer forever also tells us that we do not need a divine Saviour to die for us!
 - The value of the cross is not found in the length of time that Jesus suffered,

- but in that the eternal Son of God was the person who suffered!

2. How thankful we should be to Him!

- His suffering for us was not one grain less than the suffering that we would have endured for all eternity.
- He has borne it all—for us.

So my dear brothers and sisters,

- Do not run away from the teaching of God's word about eternal punishment.
 - It is not an obscure or unclear doctrine that is difficult to understand.
 - It is only that it is difficult to accept.
- But it is not for us to censure the word of God, for it is the school of the Holy Spirit and He will not give us anything that will be harmful for us.
 - Take what He says, believe it, accept it, let it challenge you and sanctify you.
 - It will not harm you, it will only do you good if you are His dear child.