

Spiritual hiccups: Cast into hell

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I readily admit that readings such as today's gospel make me a bit uncomfortable. When Jesus starts talking about being "cast into hell" or how "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven," I struggle to fit this in with other images of Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, with his call to love and pray for your enemies. Perhaps, as a modern "liberal," I'm simply uncomfortable with judgment and accountability.

Perhaps... But I also think some of my discomfort arises from texts such as today's being used in an "us versus them" sort of way. Because we are so accustomed to the Bible being employed for evangelical purposes, we often forget that it was originally written for internal use only. The gospel of Luke was not handed out on the streets as might be done today by the Gideons. The vary rare copies of it (all copies had to be written out by hand) were read aloud at gatherings of churches, often house churches. And so these words are aimed almost exclusively at Christians.

I don't know that removes all the discomfort of these verses, but it does change the focus quite a bit. Nothing is being said here about believers versus non-believers. This is about how believers respond when their faith puts them in jeopardy. In this sense the words seem intended more as encouragement than as warning. They are a call to stand fast in the face of persecution, to trust in God's care for them no matter the circumstances.

And when they are persecuted, "everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." This is a most curious saying. Speaking against Jesus is not a deal breaker, but the Holy Spirit is another

matter. There is debate about just what is meant by this, perhaps something along the lines of: If in a moment of fear a disciple speaks against Jesus, that is forgiven, but if a disciple actively rejects the Spirit's efforts to strengthen and encourage them, that is not.

However, what is clear is that the only ones in any danger in this scenario are Christians. Jesus' words are addressed to believers who face persecution. And isn't it strange that we can take words addressed to us, and somehow turn them so that they speak words of condemnation against others who don't believe the same as we do.

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