

Hell: The Great Recession

Dr. David Mills

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Malcolm B. Yarnell III, Director
The Center for Theological Research
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Fort Worth, Texas

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Luke 16:19–31

Our economy suffers now from significant downturn. In fact, Citigroup laid off 53,000 employees the other day.¹ This qualifies as one of the largest layoffs in American economic history. The U.S. automakers are experiencing difficulties. If they go bankrupt, some estimate the unemployment rate will surpass 10%. Last week the stock market experienced a 900-point trade swing. It was down more than 400 points and up by 500 points in one day. That represents about 1 trillion dollars in trade volume. These are serious and difficult economic times.

As we watch the economy lurch as it has, one wonders if there is a relationship between the economy and Southern Baptist baptisms. I did some initial research and I found something rather interesting. From 1907 through 1976 Southern Baptists followed almost every recession with an increase in baptisms. In fact, during most of the years of the Great Depression, Southern Baptist baptisms were up.² We need to perform more research on this issue, but the pattern is clear—Southern Baptists followed years of recession with an increase in evangelism and baptisms.

Perhaps something happened in the hearts and minds of preachers, staff, and Southern Baptist laypeople, as they experienced difficult economic times that ignited them for an advance in evangelism. The Lord blessed Southern Baptist efforts in those years with an increase in baptisms. This pattern held true from 1907 through 1976. With each recession since then, however, this pattern has not held true. Since 1976, Southern Baptists have not followed each recession with an increase in baptisms, but a decline. Right now, churches are submitting their annual church profiles and sometime in March the nation will know—we will know—how we have done in evangelism in this difficult economic year. I expect that unlike our twentieth century forefathers, we may not see that difficult economic times are accompanied by advances in baptisms.

When Jesus thought of economic issues, he thought of eternity. One example of that is found in Luke 16. Here, Jesus tells a story that is rather consistent with the theology and the emphasis of the Gospel of Luke. One of the themes in the Gospel of Luke is reversal. There is reversal here on this earth. In Luke 16:15, Jesus said, “That which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” The values of this world are not the values of our God or His kingdom. He often taught that in the afterlife there shall be a reversal. In Luke 13:30, he said there are the “first who will be last and last who will be first.” And the story in Luke 16 beginning in verse 19—a story he told to the Pharisees—is where he communicates a great reversal, or may I suggest, “The Great Recession.” The economy and economic issues often turned Jesus’ thoughts towards eternity, and that is what happened in this text.

¹David Enrich, “Pandit Girds Citi for Tough Times,” *The Wall Street Journal* (19 November 2008); <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122692854954533161.html> (Accessed 19 November 2008).

²Basic data obtained through the information systems department of LifeWay Christian Resources. “SBC Baptisms: Selected Years” (Nashville, 2008).

The Great Reversals of Hell

As we read this story, I want you to notice the reversals that take place. To begin with, in verses 19 through 23a, there is a reversal of status:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes.³

There is a reversal of status here. In this world, this rich man fared sumptuously or flamboyantly every day. He was up; Lazarus was down. In the afterlife, however, this rich man was down and Lazarus was up. This man's status experienced a great reversal, or a great recession, in hell.

In addition, the text continues with a reversal of the senses and the purpose of the senses. Jesus goes on in verse 23 to say,

And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And then he cried and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in these flames." But Abraham said, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented."

God has given mankind the senses for, among other purposes, pleasure in this life. For instance, the ability to taste may seem somewhat unnecessary, but are we not glad God gave it to us? In part, God intended the senses to be a vehicle of pleasure. We are supposed to be able to see beautiful things and give God glory for His beautiful work. We are to hear things—we are to see—we are to taste and touch and feel in this life in order to draw us closer to God and to give Him glory. But in hell, this man's senses reversed, reverting only to pain. Whereas on this earth his senses were a vehicle for pleasure as he drank the finest drink and ate gourmet food and experienced all he could with his sensory perception, in hell this man's senses became a vehicle of torment. There is a great reversal there of his senses.

Further, in verses 24 through 26, there is a reversal of his authority. He cries out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame." In verse 25 Abraham essentially says, "No." He refuses to comply with the rich man's request. He says, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us." This man made a request that Lazarus would become his servant and leave Abraham's side, find water, and drop a few drops on his tongue that he might be cooled in the torment of flames. This man was accustomed in his life to giving orders and servants obeying him. Servants were at his beck and

³New Kings James Version translation used throughout this sermon.

call. They did whatever he pleased. No one refused his requests; but in hell, his earthly authority is meaningless. No one complies with his wishes. There is a reversal of his authority.

Finally, there is a great reversal of his concern.

Then he said, “I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.” Abraham said to him, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” But he said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:27–31).

In this life, this man was concerned about his investments. He was concerned about his possessions. He was concerned about his wealth. But in hell, he possesses a concern for the souls of his brothers. By the way, let us be clear that this man did not get to hell because he was wealthy. Luke is the evangelist to the rich. You find rich people coming to Christ in Luke, like Zacchaeus. The reason that this particular rich man went to hell is indicated in verse 30: “No, father Abraham; if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Repentance is another Lukan theme. This man went to hell because he—as he also assumed regarding his brothers—did not repent. Lack of repentance is this man’s particular problem. He was never condemned for being rich. Suffice it to say, the rich man went from being concerned about his possessions to being concerned about repentance and his family.

Mere Metaphor or Actual Vision of Hell?

Hell is a place of startling reversal. It is the “Great Recession.” Now there are some who would object and say, “Now, we must not get too excited about basing our doctrine of hell or building a portrait of hell on this passage.” They caution, “You cannot press the details too far, for this is a parable.”⁴ I have always found the argument that this passage is a parable unsatisfactory. Parables come from the ordinary life of Jesus and His hearers. For example, “A sower went out to sow.” That was an ordinary reality in the life of Jesus and His hearers. Again, “An enemy has thrown tares in a field of wheat.” That was an ordinary reality in the life of Jesus and His hearers. Further, a man goes fishing with a large drag net and brings in good fish and bad. That was an ordinary reality in the life of Jesus and His hearers. The usefulness of a parable involves Jesus using His hearers’ prior knowledge and connecting that prior knowledge with some new theological truth about the Kingdom of God. Jesus used the ordinary experiences of His hearers’ lives to explain the kingdom. In Luke 16:19–31, however, Jesus does not use an ordinary experience in the lives of His hearers. His hearers were not capable of peering into hell. They had never witnessed scenes of rich people in hell or poor people in heaven. They did not have the ability to see into eternity. Consequently, I am not convinced that Luke 16:19–31 is a parable.⁵

⁴For example, in an otherwise helpful work, Craig Blomberg asserts this. Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 206–07.

⁵For a more detailed discussion of this pericope’s status as a parable, please consult Paige Patterson, “Hell—A Post-Modern Dilemma” (Sermon Series on The Last Days, Southwestern Seminary Chapel, 3 April 2007); http://www.swbts.edu/events/Patterson/patterson_chapelsp07.cfm (Accessed 7 December 2008).

For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that Luke 16:19–31 is a parable. If this is a parable, then the story represents a common event in the life of Jesus. You see, again, Jesus took his parables from the life that he had witnessed. Millard Erickson uses this passage to discuss the nature of humanity and the state of humanity in the afterlife. He comments, “Some have thought that this is not a parable but the record of an actual event, since it would be unique among parables in naming one of the characters within the story.”⁶ G. Campbell Morgan even suggests that Jesus actually witnessed the events of this story.⁷ If this is a parable, it represents real life, and Jesus used an ordinary life event from His life to make a point about the afterlife. Even if this story is a parable, its parabolic nature does not undermine the literal, actual nature of the story. Its parabolic nature, coming from Jesus’ own eyewitness experience, actually strengthens the literalness of it.

Let me address those commentators who insist that we must not use the details of this text to construct a portrait of hell. To say such is to assume that Jesus and the author of this gospel Luke are naïve about the effect of the story upon their hearers. Can you imagine Jesus preaching this story lacking awareness of how it would affect His hearers? Can you imagine Jesus failing to anticipate that His hearers would pay attention to the horrific details of the story? They had never had the veil of this life pulled back to where they could penetrate and look into eternity. Jesus described hell in horrifying detail to His hearers. Are we supposed to believe that He did not intend for them to pay attention to the details? I can imagine a timid commentator approaching Jesus and saying, “Jesus, you know you told that story, but you put too much detail in it. Now, the crowd out there is building a portrait of hell on it.” Jesus scratches his head and says, “Well, I did not expect them to do that.” Can you imagine that? I refuse to believe that Jesus was that naïve about His hearer’s response to His stories. It is better to assume that Jesus preached this detailed story of hell precisely because He wanted them to factor this into their doctrine and descriptions of hell.

On the Essence of Hell

In Luke 16, Jesus preaches on a great reversal in hell. Hell is a place of startling reversal, and several reversals surface in this text in this way that bear immediately on our ministries. First, we need to reverse how we view hell’s essence. I read a story of Angel Martinez, a great Mexican American Southern Baptist evangelist who was eating at the home of a Christian man. Angel was reputed to carry jalapeño peppers in his pocket. He came to the table of this brother and placed a jalapeño pepper on his plate. The friend said, “Brother Martinez, I would like to try one of the jalapeño peppers. Would you mind?” The man placed one in his mouth and the pepper gave him a considerable burn. The acid covered mouth, tongue, and lips. When he extinguished the burning acid, he returned to the table, and said, “Brother Martinez, I knew that you were a hell-fire preacher, but I didn’t know you carried samples with you in your pocket.”

Do you remember your first encounter with a jalapeño pepper? Do you remember how the acid got all into your mouth, onto your tongue, and onto your lips? Once the mouth is on fire, many have an inconvenient itch in their eyes. Some rub their eyes with hands covered in pepper juice. Imagine that you were not able to rid yourself of the acid that was burning your mouth, lips, and tongue. Can you imagine having to live with the pain of that acid on your lips and

⁶Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 545.

⁷G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1943), 222.

tongue? What would be your mental state right now? How many prayers for mercy would you have offered to God? That is, I believe, a token of what the rich man is experiencing in Luke 16. In verses 24, 25, and 28, Luke uses the Greek verb *odunao* and the Greek noun *basanos*, which have been translated as “torment,” to describe this man’s pain. Make no mistake about it: Jesus emphasized the pain of hell.

Most of the biblical information we have about hell comes from Jesus. The notion, nature, and reality of hell come from the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. The Gospels describe hell as a place of darkness on three occasions. They describe hell as a place of wailing and gnashing (or grinding) of teeth on at seven occasions. They refer to hell as eternal or everlasting on five occasions. The Gospels refer to hell as fire, the most common description, on twelve occasions.⁸ Darkness, eternity, wailing, gnashing of teeth, and fire mean, at the least, “pain.” These terms may mean more than pain, but they certainly do not mean less. In other words, when Jesus preached on hell, He emphasized its pain. Jesus knew nothing of manipulation or bullying people from the pulpit. The Manifestation of Divine Love preached on hell.

The essence of hell surfaces several questions about hell. One question is, “Is hell literal?” Usually, when people ask if hell is “literal,” they mean to ask if hell is physical or material. To answer that question, we must think of major biblical events. Think of creation. When God created humankind, did He create them as merely spiritual beings, or did He create them as material and physical beings? He created them as both spiritual and material or physical. When Christ came to earth in the incarnation, did He come spiritually or did He come physically with a material body? He came as both. He came spiritually and physically. When the Father raised Jesus from the dead, did He raise only His spirit, or did He raise His body, too? The resurrection of Jesus consisted of the physical resurrection of the body of Jesus. Were the appearances of Jesus following His resurrection limited to the spiritual, or did Jesus appear physically in a material body? The answer is “Both,” because Jesus in his unitary humanity has both spirit and body. These biblical events consisted of both spirit and body, and if that be the case, why would we posit a hard dichotomy between spirit and body in the afterlife? Biblical events manifest God’s bias in favor of the spirit and the body together, and the afterlife is no exception.

Just as convincing as these biblical doctrines are some directly relevant passages in Scripture. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus instructs His disciples in evangelism. There, He states, “Do not fear those who can kill the body only, but fear Him who is able to destroy *both soul and body in hell*” (emphasis added). What does this text reveal about Jesus’ mind concerning the essence of hell? Did Jesus imagine hell as a place limited to spiritual judgment, or did He imagine hell as a place of judgment of both soul and spirit? This text reveals that Jesus considered hell as the judgment of both spirit and body.

John 5:27–29 reveals more of Jesus’ vision of the afterlife in relationship to judgment. In this passage, Jesus addresses two resurrections: the resurrection of the righteous to reward and life, on one hand, and on the other hand, the resurrection of the wicked to condemnation. He said, “The hour is coming in which all who are in graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation” (emphasis added). Jesus foretells of His judging the whole world. He said that it shall involve resurrection of all persons from graves. The righteous shall come

⁸For “darkness” see Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30. For “wailing and gnashing of teeth” see Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28. For “eternal” or “everlasting” see Matt 18:8; 25:41, 46; Mark 3:29. For “fire” or “flame” see Matt 5:22; 13:42, 50; 18:8,9; 25:41; Mark 9:43–48.

from their graves and the evil shall come from their graves to judgment. What else is in a grave except the material remains of a physical body?

I could cite other biblical passages that point to the spiritual and physical elements of the afterlife—none of the least of which is Philippians 2:9–11, which teaches “every *knee* shall bow and every tongue shall confess”—that underscore the spiritual and physical nature of the afterlife, but these sufficiently prove that the afterlife, including hell, involves both spirit and body. Biblical events and specific Bible verses prove that hell is the judgment of the total person. We should resist the modernist temptation to establish an artificial, unbiblical dichotomy between soul and body in the afterlife. The Scripture leads to another conclusion. Of course, one day the Lord will raise the wicked from the graves. For now, prior to that resurrection, hell judges the spirit, but following that resurrection, hell shall judge the total person.

A second question some ask is, “How can darkness and fire coexist in hell simultaneously?” Fire and light would certainly dispel darkness. Of the commentators who address this question, some assume Jesus means for hearers to take his references to “fire” and “darkness” as metaphorical.⁹ Some go so far as to argue this point because darkness and fire cannot co-exist in the physical world.¹⁰ Popular preacher and commentator John MacArthur even states, “Hell is a place both of darkness and fire, a combination not found in our present world. Part of the supernatural quality of hell is that it will be a place of fire . . . that will continue for all eternity in total darkness.”¹¹

Unfortunately, none of the commentators that I have read consulted research on the nature and incandescence of fire. In preparation for this message, I spoke with my hometown fire chief and asked him if he could imagine any conditions under which fire and darkness could co-exist? To my surprise, he remarked that the co-existence of fire and darkness occurs more often than most imagine. Firefighters, in fact, receive training on how to handle such situations. He mentioned at least two conditions under which fire and darkness co-exist simultaneously. First, when fire burns certain materials, it can create a black smoke. If a ceiling is present, it can contain the smoke, blackening the room. The smoke from such a fire can grow so dark that a firefighter will not see the fire until he is a few feet away from it. As he spoke of the smoke of fire, I remembered John’s words, “And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and forever” (Rev 14:11).

Another factor that makes the co-existence of fire and darkness possible involves oxygen. Besides other factors, the availability of oxygen can determine the color of a flame: the more oxygen that is available, the lighter the color of the flame; the less oxygen that is available, the darker the color of the flame. A white flame indicates an ample supply of oxygen, but a blue flame indicates little oxygen. Those with gas water heaters and gas stoves often see a blue pilot light. The pilot light is blue because the flame does not access enough oxygen to lighten its color. These two conditions make it entirely possible for fire and light to co-exist simultaneously. It is not necessary, then, to dismiss the physical nature of hell because of the co-existence of fire and darkness in hell. In fact, the simultaneous existence of fire and darkness in hell confirms its physical nature.

⁹Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 142n15; R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 156.

¹⁰William V. Crockett, *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 30; Frank Stagg, *Matthew*, Broadman Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 125.

¹¹John F. MacArthur, *Matthew 8–15*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 14.

A third question that arises from the biblical description of hell involves annihilation. Some say, "Fire usually consumes what it burns. It annihilates and turns to ashes many of the materials it burns. Does it not stand to reason that the fire of hell would annihilate, consume, and turn to ashes the people suffering there?" Not necessarily. Fire does not always consume that which it burns. It is hard to imagine a fire consuming the spirit of a person, and it is hard to imagine the fire of hell consuming the material, physical body of an unbeliever. I say this because there is an instance in the Scripture in which God set an object aflame and the fire did not consume it. You probably learned of this biblical story in Sunday School. I am talking about Exodus chapter three, where Moses came upon the burning bush and heard the Lord say, "Take off your shoes for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Moses made it clear that he saw the bush, and that it was aflame, but that it was not consumed (Exod 3:2). God has at His disposal a flame that burns but does not consume. Hell does not consume the unbeliever and turn him into ashes. Hell is eternal conscious torment.

Thus far we have seen Jesus emphasize the fire, darkness, and eternal nature of hell. These issues surface a fourth question: "How painful is hell?" Jesus described it as a place of fire, wailing, and gnashing or grinding of teeth. He described it as a place of darkness. He said it is eternal. The lost shall dwell in hell as long as God dwells in heaven. How painful is hell? To put it simply, "Hell is so painful that Jesus died to keep you from going there." The Son of God took on a human body that could suffer His own judgment on the cross and went to the cross in redeeming love to keep the likes of you and me from going to hell. What a vivid commentary on the nature of hell that our Savior would die to keep us from perishing there. Jesus shouts to the world from Calvary, "You will go to hell over my dead body!"

For people to die and go to hell, they have to climb over every church they stumble upon, over every Bible to which they have access, over every radio broadcast that preaches the gospel, and over every Christian they know. They have to climb over creation and over conscience. They have to climb over the Father Who planned their salvation, over the Son Who bled for them, and over the Spirit Who has drawn all since Jesus was lifted up on Calvary (John 12:32). In other words, people who die and go to hell have to force their way into hell.

A fifth and final question is: "How should we preach on hell?" Should we modify Jesus' description? Should we minimize his words? Should we limit our description of hell to separation from God? Dr. Criswell said in one message,

Is hell a place of fire and brimstone? Is heaven a place of gold and pearl and beautiful mansions? When I speak of these things, I ought to use the language of God. I have never been to heaven. I have never been to hell. I must trust God's revelation concerning these two places. I cannot improve upon God's language however smart, shrewd, and erudite I may think I am. I cannot improve upon what God says, and, therefore, I must deliver this message as God has revealed it. I must use God's language.¹²

Unless a preacher can improve upon Jesus' words about hell, I suggest he use Jesus' own words on hell. The present economy should lead us to describe hell's essence as Jesus described it.

¹²W.A. Criswell, *Why I Preach the Bible is Literally True* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969; reprint, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 131.

Some Theological Reversals

Besides a reversal in our view of hell's essence, this text calls for a second reversal. Hell should lead us to reverse how we view religious leaders. In Luke 16:14, Jesus said, "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money also heard all these things, and they derided him." Following this statement, Jesus rebuked these Pharisees for their love for money (Luke 16:15–18), then relayed our subject story of the rich man in hell. In fact, Jesus could have stated in verse 19, "There was a certain Pharisee who was clothed in purple and fine linen," instead of, "There was a certain rich man." He told this story in a more subtle manner, but Jesus kept the Pharisees clearly in view when describing the rich man in hell. Later, in Luke 20:47, Jesus warned that the scribes were subject to "a greater condemnation." Jesus Christ imagined religious leaders perishing in hell.

Today, there are those who believe and preach false gospels, saying, that a christening or an infant baptism gives saving grace. Sadly, almost every person to whom I have ever witnessed that was christened or baptized as an infant placed hope for their salvation in that christening or infant baptism. Many a religious leader has misled many a religious person towards a false sense of security. Will such religious leaders go to heaven? Jesus warned religious persons and leaders that they could go to hell. Billy Sunday famously said, "You can throw a pitchfork in hell and hit a church member on every corner." And I would add, "And on one out of every four corners, you may hit a religious leader as well."

Shall I name some names? I would rather not. What I will do is describe the religious leaders of whom Jesus spoke. These leaders denied the deity of Christ and the Trinity. Their theology had no place for Jesus' deity or the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. They also loved money and lived flamboyantly. They loved money. Finally, they preferred the miraculous over the Scripture. Any person with all or one of these characteristics ought to engage in rigorous self-examination. We may need to reverse how we view religious leadership.

A third reversal that must occur involves how we view the Scripture's sufficiency. There are some who naïvely believe that if we were able to perform more miracles and engage in the sensational, that we could convince the world to come to Christ. In other words, some are confused as to why Abraham did not fulfill the request of this rich man in hell, that is, to raise Lazarus from the dead and send him back. They miss the fact that Jesus did raise Lazarus from the dead in John 11. The religious leaders did not respond by trusting Christ; they responded by plotting both Lazarus' and Jesus' death.

In this text, Abraham offers an alternative to the merely sensational and miraculous. He offers the Word of God: "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). Moreover, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets of the Scripture, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Jesus said that Abraham insists that Scripture is sufficient for evangelism and converting people. He insists that miracles are of no use if the lost will not believe the Scripture. If people will not tremble at the Word, they will not trust because of a miracle. What many lost people need is not a miraculous display of power; what they need is more Bible. Sometimes, they have enough Bible, so some do not need more information or more proof. What they need is more humility before God and love for his truth (Matt 13:11–12). The text makes clear that the Word of God is sufficient for evangelism. Paul said, "Faith comes by *hearing* and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17). When we preach it, when we teach it, and plead God for the anointing and the power of the Holy Spirit, then God will work more effectively through the Word than a miracle. We need to reverse how we view Scripture's sufficiency.

Reversing Our Lost Burden for Souls

A final reversal surfaces in this text, too: We need to reverse how we view personal evangelism. What I am about to say is not license to witness in strange, weird, or obnoxious ways. Christians should demonstrate kindness and the golden rule when witnessing. Having offered that qualification, I must admit that most of what I have read on personal evangelism over the last twenty-five years has little in common with verses 27–31. This man in hell finally has a burden for souls, and sadly, while a burden for souls apparently has not fallen out of fashion in hell, it has fallen out of fashion in the evangelism literature. Most evangelism literature will instruct you to be natural, normal, and conversational when witnessing, and this is true of personal evangelism and pulpit evangelism. There is some merit to naturally communicating Christ to lost people, and my words here do not license anyone to act in a strange manner when doing evangelism.

The problem with this type of instruction is not so much what it says, but what it does not say. It does not account for the biblical concept of a burden for souls.¹³ The man in verse 27 cries out and says, “I beg you, therefore, father, send him to my father’s house.” “I beg you!” the man weeps. His burden supplies him with the audacity to object to Abraham’s response. This man has a burden for his five brothers to come to repentance. Sadly, there is more of a burden for lost souls in hell than there are in some of the churches. This man’s heart is not stony, cold, and apathetic. Even as an unregenerate man perishing under the judgment of God in hell, this man has a burden for souls.

Whether we have a burden for lost people to come to Christ affects our credibility as witnesses and preachers. If we believe all that the Scripture says about hell, should it not melt our hearts into compassion, urgency, and positive action for lost souls? I remember when I was a student in North Carolina: I came home one day. When I came through the front door, I stepped into our living room, and there in the living room was my wife, Michelle, collapsed in a heap of tears on the floor. My oldest two children, who were about 3 years old and 4 years old at the time, were standing around her, and as best as preschoolers can, trying to console their mother. They spoke kindly to her, saying, “Momma, it is going to be okay. Why are you crying?” They gently patted her on the back and shoulder. Michelle, however, was inconsolable, unable to control her tears. She did not even attempt to hold herself together. Her grief overwhelmed her.

What I discovered later is that I had just stepped into our home a minute after she received horrible news. Though I was not immediately aware of the bad news, she had my attention. She did not need to convince me that something was very wrong. What raced through my mind was the thought, “I have got to do something. Whatever is on my schedule is now canceled. I must act once she composes herself.” After a few moments, she pulled herself together and told me that her uncle had died in a work related accident in Tennessee. Her tears convinced me something was wrong and that we needed to act.

The apostle Paul says in Romans 9:1–2, “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren.” Paul spoke to lost people with a burden for their lost souls. He wept over them and his tears watered and nurtured gospel seed that produced a mighty evangelistic harvest. Someone opined that, “If we had Paul’s tears then we might also have his results.” How will the people of the world

¹³Ps 126:5–6; Isa 15:5; 16:7, 11; 66:8; Jer 9:1, 18; 13:17; 14:17; 22:10; 48:31; Matt 9:36; Luke 19:41; Acts 20:31; Rom 9:1–3; 10:1.

believe in the severity of their lost condition if their lost condition does not break our hearts? If we take their eternal destiny casually, they may as well take it casually, too.

If our hearts are cold and not burdened for lost souls, and there has ever been a time when we have possessed more concern for lost people than we do right now, we are backslidden. Jesus is not cold towards lost souls. The heart of the Savior beats and pulsates every moment and has every day all through eternity for the hearts and souls of lost people. He has such a consuming burden to save them that he went to the cross to die for their sins. Lost people in hell today are not cold towards lost souls either.

An Invitation

L.R. Scarborough, the second president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, sought to be an attorney before he surrendered to ministry. Twenty-five years after he surrendered to God's call to ministry, he reflected back upon his call to ministry. He said that after he finished Baylor University, he enrolled at Yale University to pursue his ambition of studying to become an attorney. While there he wrestled with God's call to ministry, which for Scarborough meant preaching the gospel and winning lost souls to Christ. On 16 April 1896 he sat in his dorm room in Farnum Hall at Yale University and read this passage, Luke 16:19–31. God dealt with him about changing his course of life from a career in law to the gospel ministry as he read that passage. As he read, he focused on Luke 16:27–31 and heard the rich man cry, "Go and tell my brothers not to come to this place." Scarborough said, "For twenty-five years I have been looking for that man's brothers."¹⁴ Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. He cares for them. He loves them.

If you and I fail to win souls, there are not many who will succeed at it. If we do not get this right, probably no one else is going to get it right either. We have got to be soul-winners who have great hearts of love carrying a great burden for souls, accompanied by a dynamic and growing prayer life focused upon the Word and the Spirit.

Lead me to some soul today,
O teach me Lord, just what to say.
Friends of mine are lost in sin,
And cannot find their way.

Few there are who seem to care,
and few there are who pray.
Melt my heart and fill my life;
Give me one soul today.¹⁵

¹⁴L.R. Scarborough, *Gospel Messages* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1922), 45.

¹⁵Wendell P. Loveless, "Lead Me to Some Soul Today" (1936), in *The Baptist Hymnal*, ed. Wesley L. Forbis (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), 560.

Dr. David Mills

**Assistant Professor of Evangelism and
Assistant Dean of Applied Ministry**

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

