

How can a loving God condemn people to suffering in hell?

Question 9

For this study I did not prepare a detailed study outline. Included here are a brief outline of the lesson, and then a verbatim of the message (sermon!) given at CSF.

***Hell in the first-century (Jesus' time)**

- ◆ God had punished his people for disobeying His commands (Deuteronomy 28)
- ◆ *When would God return and forgive?*
- ◆ Pharisees answer: when they obeyed the commands perfectly
- ◆ Pharisees accusation – those who did not obey were the reason God had not yet returned and forgiven
 - Blamed prostitutes, tax collectors, less strict Jews – threatened them with hell for their disobedience
- ◆ Jesus turns the tables – shows love to those “outsiders”
 - Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28
 - Matthew 7:21-23; 8
 - Matthew 23:13, 15, 33-34
 - Jesus says the Pharisees are in danger (more danger?) of hell than the outsiders!

Have we used hell in the same way the Pharisees did?

***Reality of Judgment**

- ◆ Matthew 25:31-46 – God judges
- ◆ Matthew 12:37-38; 1 Corinthians; Hebrews 4:12-13 – all of us face judgment
- ◆ Jesus speaks for us (1 John 2:1) yet our lives are judged

What kind of lives are we living?

***Living as a Follower of Christ**

- † Matthew 5:43-44 – love enemies
- † Romans 5:8 – Jesus loved us when we were enemies
- † John 13 – Jesus washed feet of those who would desert him

The Point:

- *There will be judgment and hell (we cannot ignore this!)
- *It is not our place to condemn people to hell
- *May we love our enemies with a self-sacrificial love in the way Jesus loves us!

Conclusion: Countless multitudes will praise God

- Revelation 7 – John “heard” 144000 but “saw” a countless multitude praising God
- God’s love will save countless multitudes
- **How big is our love?**

A question many people ask of Christians, and perhaps many Christians wonder it also, is how can a good God allow people to suffer in hell for all eternity? Hell is one reason why many people struggle to believe in God and it is one of the things many Christians also struggle to believe in, even though we believe in God.

The subject of hell causes me to ask a lot of questions.

First, I do not understand how a message can be called good news that basically states God loves you enough to send his son to die for you on the cross but if you refuse to believe that, this loving God is going to send you to eternal torment in hell. That sounds more like the bully on the playground teaching a lesson to weaker kids who refuse to admit he is a big bully than a loving God.

Second, I struggle with the over-emphasis on belief. It sounds very selfish. I am a sinner destined for hell so I believe in Jesus to save my own butt and go to heaven. I am selfish and my goal is to save myself and by believing in Jesus I do. But what is belief? Is it just assenting to something as true? Do all who simply have the wrong beliefs about Jesus go to hell? Does that mean six million Jews who suffered in the holocaust went from this suffering life to that one and are now suffering for eternity? Does this mean poor teenage girls forced into prostitution in Calcutta are destined for eternal suffering following suffering in this life? I am not talking about people who consciously reject God; just people who live as good, if not better, lives than Christians but who do not have the right beliefs.

Perhaps what I struggle with most of all is the image in my mind of a house where a party is going on upstairs in the attic while there is torture going on downstairs in the basement. If you are at the party upstairs, perhaps next week over Thanksgiving, with your friends having a good time and you learn about the torture downstairs, could you continue to party? To act as if it did not exist? Wouldn't you want to do everything you could to help the people in the basement?

Finally, if heaven is just for those who have the right beliefs about Jesus then it seems that most people who have lived and are currently living are going to hell. At the end of time the loving God's victory on the cross will mean a few get saved while Satan's work means many more suffer in hell. Just looking at numbers, who won the real victory here?

For me those are tough questions. Maybe they are for you too. Maybe they are not; the Bible talks about hell and you are satisfied with what you were taught it says. Or maybe you do not believe in hell; you are still in the closet. I believe in hell but I struggle with it; now you

know where I stand. Tonight we cannot answer every question or cover every base; I just ask you to remember as I speak that if I say one thing and do not say something else it does not mean I do not believe the something else, it just means there is not time to say everything.

As I think about hell I really believe that, more than the reality of hell, Christians have misused hell in our preaching, teaching and in this we have missed an important point about being Christians. To understand what I am getting at we need to go to scripture and history.

In Jesus' day the Roman Empire dominated Palestine. Rome was just the last in a line of powerful empires that controlled the Jewish homeland. The question the Jews asked was why had God allowed pagan nations to dominate them, his chosen people, for so long? God had chosen Abraham and his descendants Israel, had given them the land, had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and had given them rules on how to live. Why had God turned his back on them and allowed these other nations to rule over them? We do not need to guess; Deuteronomy 28 was a message from God to the people promising blessing if they obeyed God and curses if they did not. The people did not obey God as they worshipped idols, false gods and oppressed the poor, widow and alien, so God punished them. By Jesus' day the question was when would God return to the people?

One group with a solution was the Pharisees. Prominent characters in the stories of Jesus, they were visible religious leaders who many people admired for their holiness and seriousness about God. The Pharisees basically believed that if God had punished them for disobedience then he would bless them for rigid obedience and thus they sought to promote a perfect obedience to the law. They even added all kinds of traditions to follow to protect the law: if you do not do these ten things then you will not break the law. Through all this they became models of holiness. But things went on the same way with Rome dominating them. Some Pharisees came to see that it was other people who did not obey the law rigidly enough who were at fault: prostitutes, cheating tax collectors, even average Jews who did not pray or give enough money. It was these people's fault that God had turned away and their fault he had not yet turned back. If we could get these people to stop sinning God would send his Savior and save us!

So the Pharisees came to see themselves as the holy ones while other people were the problem. From this, they began to use hell as a weapon to threaten these people. The good people, including Pharisees, would be resurrected by God to new life at the end of time. But

these sinners, if they did not change their ways, would be condemned to hell. Hell became a weapon to scare people into living rightly.

Into this Jesus shows up. What does Jesus do? He shows love to the marginal, to the sinners: those same prostitutes, tax collectors and other people the Pharisees said were not good enough. Instead of judging those sinners, the Savior shows love to them! To see a little bit of what this looks like let's flip to Matthew.

First we can look in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Here Jesus quickly points out a holiness even greater than that of the Pharisees. In 5:21-22 he talks about how it was said not to murder but anyone who gets angry with a brother is subject to judgment. Anyone who says 'you fool', calling someone a derogatory name, is in danger of hell. All of a sudden the Pharisees and everyone else are on an equal playing field. It is easy to point to a command not to murder and take pride in obeying, but when anger and calling names is added in the Pharisees, and all of us are guilty. No longer is hell a weapon, for by this standard all are in danger.

We see the same thing in 5:27-28. Most Pharisees would not have committed adultery and thus could look down on prostitutes. But when Jesus says that any who have looked at a woman lustfully are guilty, now the Pharisee is in danger of hell along with the prostitute.

When we get to chapter 7:21-23 and Jesus says that when the end comes some will be surprised to be on the outside; it should make us all tremble. No longer could the Pharisees point at other people with confidence that those others are the outsiders going to hell. Rather, the confident Pharisees and religious leaders might surprisingly learn they are the outsiders.

In chapter eight we read a story that adds to this. Jesus meets a centurion, a military leader in the Roman army; someone the Pharisees would have considered an outsider along with the other sinners. The centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant but when Jesus says he would go do it the centurion declares he is not worthy to have Jesus under his roof. Jesus responds by saying this man has greater faith than any in Israel, which we can assume includes the holy religious leaders. In fact, many outsiders will come from far away and take their place in the feast with God's people, in heaven. At the same time, we read this cryptic line about the subjects of the kingdom being thrown out. The subjects of the kingdom are physical descendants of Abraham, those who think their race makes them special. What Jesus means is outsiders will be welcomed into God's presence while insiders, such as Pharisees, are thrown out. Now Jesus is

even more explicit: the insider Pharisees who think they have the market cornered on God will be thrown out and the outsiders who the religious leaders say have no hope are welcomed in.

Finally we come to Matthew 23 and Jesus goes off on the Pharisees! This reminds us of Deuteronomy 28 where God promised blessing if the people did right and curses if they did wrong. Well, here Jesus pronounces curses on the Pharisees – the message is that they have not done what God wanted them to. Starting in verse 13 we see that the Pharisees shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. Those who want to know God are blocked because of the Pharisees rigid rules. Yet Jesus tells them they will not enter; they will not be welcomed into God’s presence. Then in verse 15 he says that the Pharisees work hard to make a convert, but when they do get one that convert becomes twice as much a son of hell as they are. Jesus calls the religious leaders, the holiest people, sons of hell! The Pharisees, despite thinking they are the holy ones of God’s favor, are sons of hell. Finally, if they did not get the idea yet we can read verses 33-4 where Jesus calls them snakes and vipers and asks how they are going to avoid hell. The message is clear: it is the Pharisees who are in danger of hell.

The Pharisees thought they were the holy ones and the problem was someone else and those other people were in danger of hell. Jesus turns it around on them and says they are just as in danger of hell because of their own evil. Further, they are more in danger of hell because all those other people are being welcomed in by Jesus. The Pharisees are like the cool kid upset all the band geeks are invited to the party!

But here is the question I want to ask us: Have we Christians used hell as a weapon in the same way the Pharisees did?

Do we draw a line between “insiders” and “outsiders”? Because we Christians know the most about God, have the right theology of the Trinity or of Jesus, have said the right prayers, know the Bible best and live the way God wants do we see ourselves as privileged? Do we see ourselves as insiders? Do we threaten those not like us to hell?

I think it is important at this point to make sure no one misunderstands what I am saying. There are times when discussions about heaven and hell are important and should be had. But we must be wise about how to talk about those things because the danger is that we will appear to use hell as a weapon to gain power over people in the way the Pharisees did. Scaring people into heaven is not the way of Jesus. He could have arrived with millions of angels, looked each of us in the eye and asked us to confess he is the Lord and Savior. For effect he could have the

door to hell opened right next to us. That would scare many in. But it is significant that Jesus won his victory on the cross by sacrificing himself and more than just something to believe in, though we should believe in it, this is our model for life. Instead of threatening the people we declare are outsiders with hell, let us sacrificially love them.

Conversations about hell do have a place, though may we find that place with wisdom. Ultimately humans will be divided into two groups. We can see this in Matthew 25: 31-46 as some people go right and some go left. Interesting, the challenge here is that the division is not just on belief but on how we treated the poorest among us. So even here we have questions, which I will let you figure out on your own. My point is there will be a division between, if you will, insiders and outsiders. In the end, that decision is made by God who knows his people.

Judgment is a fact; God will judge and punish all evil. All of us will stand before God with our souls bare, unable to hide a thing. Matthew 12:37-8 says that we will have to give account to God of every word we have spoken. 1 Corinthians says that all things in darkness will be brought to light. Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us basically the same thing; all will be laid bare before God. These verses do not just apply to non-Christians; all of us will have our lives laid open before God. It is true that Jesus Christ speaks in our defense (1 Jn. 2:1) and trusting in his death saves us from ultimate judgment. But beyond that, what kind of lives have we led? If God removes all evil and keeps the good, what will be left of us? When God looks at us on that day what will be saved?

How about an example? Imagine a person who is a Christian, who truly believes Jesus' death on the cross paid the price for his sins. Yet this person lives a life of anger at all those who disagree with him politically and theologically. He gives some money away, but is greedy. He loses friends through bad decisions and instead of seeking reconciliation he carries a grudge. This person dies and sure enough is saved by Jesus. But what is there to save? Will God magically take this person and force him to all of a sudden become loving, forgiving, caring? If we say yes, then why not just say God can take any person in hell and force them to be these things? The point I am getting at is that the kind of person we become now is the kind of person we will be for eternity. We cannot wait until death for God to make us loving, peaceful, merciful people; the kind of person we are on that side is an extension of who we are now.

This is why CS Lewis points out that hell is locked from the inside. People who end up in hell consciously choose to be opposed to God. Eventually God says, thy will be done, and allows them leave him forever.

Jesus died for us. He loves us just the way we are. Any person anywhere can know Jesus and receive new life. Perhaps even more amazing is that Jesus will not leave you how you are but will begin to change you. Will we let Jesus change us?

Last week I saw an interesting picture. It is a picture of Jesus washing a number of world leaders' feet, including Osama bin Laden. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies (Matt. 5: 43-4). Do we love those we consider "outsiders"? Do we love those we think are going to hell?

In John 13 Jesus washes his disciples' feet as the ultimate act of service. The Savior of the world humbled himself to wash the feet of people who would desert him within hours. At the same time he commands them to wash the feet of others. Our message is one of self-sacrificial love. Who is that one person you struggle with; your enemy. Will you wash their feet? Will you serve them? Romans 5:8 says while we were still sinners Christ died for us. God loved us even though we had no love for him; will we in turn love others who have no love for us? Instead of condemning them to hell let us pour the self-sacrificial love of Christ on them.

Hell is indeed a difficult subject. I doubt I answered many of your questions on it, though perhaps I answered a few. We can talk afterwards, or anytime really, about related issues. But I want to close with a picture of heaven that shows the number of people with God is countless. In Revelation 7 the apostle John "hears" the number of those who were sealed as God's people: 144000. But when he looked he saw a great multitude that no one could count which came from every tribe, nation, people, language all over earth. This multitude is praising God. We see here that countless people will be saved. More than we can possibly imagine. All of them saved through the blood of the lamb, Jesus. That is encouraging, that is beautiful. Somehow the grace of God will win out in the end.