

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN A GOD WHO SENDS PEOPLE TO HELL? MATTHEW 7:13-14; 25:41-46

“Love Wins.” That’s the title of a book written by mega church pastor, Rob Bell, last year that caused quite a controversy among both Christians and non-Christians in our country. Bell has quite a substantial following not only at his Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan (with some 10,000 in weekly attendance) but all across North America. He’s developed a reputation for being an exceptional communicator and Bible teacher who has a real gift for understanding how to share biblical concepts with younger people who didn’t grow up in the church. I heard just recently, by the way, that Rob Bell has now left Mars Hill Church in order to focus on a broader audience.

Why the controversy? Full confession now. I have not read “Love Wins”, but I have read several reviews of it. The problem appears to be that Bell, considered to be a star in the evangelical constellation of church leaders, now – more or less - advocates a form of universalism. Universalism is the idea that ultimately everyone will end up in Heaven with God. If there is such a thing as Hell, it will not be a permanent situation for anyone. In the end, all will be saved regardless of belief or lack of belief in Jesus in this life. On the one hand, theologically liberal Christian pastors and theologians have been saying this sort of thing for centuries. On the other hand, when a supposedly evangelical “rock star” like Rob Bell begins to question the doctrine of Hell, it caused a real ruckus.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone here today that non-Christians don’t believe in Hell. The problem is that many Christians don’t believe in Hell either!. Clark Pinnock, a Christian theologian, says: “I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine..... How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God.”

“Why Should I Believe? A Fresh Look At Old Doubts” is the title of our Lenten message series this year. We’re looking at seven objections to the Christian faith that we hear most often in our own culture. Why? Because we owe everyone – especially curious or questioning non-Christians – a reasonable answer to any reasonable question about why we believe what we believe. And also because we owe ourselves the chance to recall why we believe what we believe with the ultimate hope that come Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday our confidence in and appreciation for our faith will have grown. Let’s get at our question today by recalling again the basic scriptural teaching about Hell.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HELL?

I’m making no attempt today to provide an exhaustive exploration of everything Scripture teaches or suggests about Hell. Think of what I’m presenting today as

a quick survey. First of all, Hell is a literal place of eternal judgment. Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mt 10:28 NLT) Turn with me to something else Jesus said: Matt. 25:41-46. Those – and many other passages – reveal that Jesus clearly believed and taught that Hell is a literal place – not an idea, a myth or a fantasy. That is not to say that the Bible doesn’t use lots of imagery to depict Hell. As you might know, the Bible refers to Hell as a place full of fire, worms and gnashing teeth. I happen to believe that those may indeed be images rather than literal depictions of Hell, but every figure of speech has a literal point. Hell is a literal place of utter heartbreak and the absolute loss of everything. Hell is the worst situation that could ever happen to anyone.

By the same token, Hell is eternal or everlasting in duration. Consider and compare Daniel 12:2 (NLT), “Many of those whose bodies lie dead and buried will rise up, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting disgrace” with what we heard Jesus say a moment ago in Matthew 25:46 (NLT), “And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” Even some Christians have struggled with the idea of the eternity of Hell because it sounds like God is over-reacting to sin and unbelief or that He’s over-punishing people. So they suggest that after a period of time in Hell God will allow unbelievers simply to go out of existence. But notice how the same words “everlasting” and “eternal” are use to describe both Heaven and Hell in those verses. If you are going to believe that Heaven is eternal on the basis of those verses, then it would seem that you need to believe that Hell is eternal as well.

Secondly, Hell is for everyone who rejects God’s answer to human sin in Jesus. The Bible says, “I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God’s throne. And the books were opened, including the Book of Life.... And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Rev. 20:12, 15 NLT) The Book of Life refers there to all those who have put their faith and trust in Jesus. The lake of fire is a reference to Hell. All sin and any sin is terrible in the eyes of God, but unbelief – the deliberate rejection of the need to restore your relationship with God as well as God’s method of restoration which is trusting in what Jesus did for you in and through the cross – is the worst sin of all. When you live in such a way that says, “I could care less that God has created me. I could care less that Jesus died on the cross or rose again. I’m going to ignore all of that and live to please myself” – that is the ultimate sin. And that sin will send you straight to Hell for all eternity.

Our culture absolutely believes that if your good deeds outnumber your bad deeds, God will overlook your lack of any relationship with Jesus and open the doors of Heaven to you. A few years ago, fabulously rich Warren Buffett announced he would give 85% of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. When asked about his extreme generosity, Buffett said, “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” Most Americans absolutely agree with Warren Buffett. But the Bible makes it crystal clear that the

quantity of your good deeds or your sins has nothing to do with getting into Heaven and staying out of Hell. You can be a member of this church and go to Hell. You can be a very moral, kind person and go to Hell. You can be compassion incarnate and go to Hell. The deciding issue is whether you have thrown yourself upon God's mercy and grace for this life and eternity and have placed your faith in what Jesus did for you at the cross and the empty tomb.

What else does the Bible say about Hell? Thirdly, Hell is the absolute absence of God and all He provides. Sometimes, Hell can be wrongly depicted as a kind of torture chamber where God will inflict all kinds of fiendish, horrific acts upon the bodies, minds and spirits of unbelievers. The essence of Hell is relational. Ultimately, Hell is separation or banishment from the most beautiful Being in the universe – God Himself – and all that He provides. Even though we live in a sinful, fallen world, God is present in this world in a multitude of ways that none of us fully recognizes and appreciates. Likewise, none of us can fully understand what it would be like to exist in a place in which you would be excluded from all that matters, from all value and from all that comes from God – like companionship and friendship. This cultural myth that Hell will be this kind of happy go lucky place where you get to hang out with your God-rejecting buddies and swap stories about life on Earth and share a few laughs is sadly mistaken. Instead, it is much more likely to be a form of eternal solitary confinement.

And then, Hell is the default destination of all human beings. Did you know that for every American who believes he or she is going to Hell, there are 120 who believe they're going to Heaven? That foolish optimism is in stark contrast to what Jesus says in Matthew 7:13-14. Jesus' words are sobering. He implies that Heaven is no one's default destination. Instead, you and I are born with our autopilot set towards Hell. You can't just sort of drift into Heaven. A choice must be made. A definite decision needs to be entered into. An intervention must occur. A transformation must happen. It's called different things by different people – getting saved, being born again, getting converted, receiving Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord, seeing the light, having faith, trusting in Christ – whatever. Just do it. Make sure it has happened to you.

Early in his ministry, Will Willimon served a little church in rural Georgia. One Saturday he and his wife went to a funeral in a little country church. Willimon grew up in a big downtown church. He had never been to a funeral like this one. The casket was open, and the funeral consisted of a sermon by the preacher. The preacher pounded on the pulpit and looked over at the casket. He said, "It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to get his life together. He might have wanted to spend more time with his family. He might have wanted to do that, but he's dead now. It is too late for him, but it is not too late for you. There is still time for you. You still can decide. You are still alive. It is not too late for you. Today is the day of decision." Then the preacher told how a Greyhound bus had run into a funeral procession once on the way to the cemetery, and that that could happen today. He said, "You should decide today. Today is the day to get your

life together. Too late for old Joe, but it's not too late for you." Willimon was so angry at that preacher. On the way home, he told his wife, "Have you ever seen anything as manipulative and insensitive to that poor family? I found it disgusting." She said, "I've never heard anything like that. It was manipulative. It was disgusting. It was insensitive. Worst of all, it was also true." Now, let's ask and try to answer our question today in a different way.

HOW CAN YOU RESPOND TO OUR CULTURE'S OBJECTIONS?

Obviously, most non-Christians don't believe the Bible is right about everything or has a unique authority. So, how can you have a reasonable and profitable discussion? Well, first of all, it might be helpful to point out that dislike is not a basis for disbelief. In our culture we tend to evaluate whether something is true or not based on our feelings about it. If we find it emotionally offensive, we like to dismiss the validity of it. Just from a rational point of view, that doesn't make much sense. I don't like cancer, but it exists whether I like it or not. I don't like war, famine or tornadoes, but I'm compelled to believe in their existence anyway. Dislike of something doesn't mean I get to dismiss the reality of it. To get beyond our feelings about Hell, we need to ask whether Hell can be a morally just or a morally right state of affairs, not whether we like or dislike the concept. Remember that God hates Hell as well and He takes no pleasure in the death of even those who reject Him. The Bible says, "As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?" (Ezk. 33:11 NLT).

Here's a second idea or concept to run by a non-Christian friend. God's love doesn't nullify God's judgment. Now, right there, is something very interesting. Most Americans believe in a God who is loving, kind and compassionate. They struggle with the idea that God could send people to Hell. But where does this belief in a loving God come from? Can you look at the world and find proof that God is love? Can you look at history and see proof there of a loving God? Can you look at other religions and find consistent teaching that God is love? No, a study of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and even Judaism would not result in the conclusion that God's greatest attribute is love. So, why in our culture do so many people believe in a God of love? It's because of the influence of the Bible and Christians in our culture for hundreds of years. The Bible and Christianity is the only place where we're taught that God is love. And yet, the Bible also teaches that God is holy, just and will not allow unrepentant people to escape judgment. On the one hand, the Bible teaches both and sees no contradiction. On the other hand, our culture wants God to be loving but not judging.

We need to challenge this cultural assumption that a God of judgment simply can't exist. The very idea of a judging God is offensive to many in our culture. But why aren't they equally offended by the idea of a forgiving, loving God? It's a fact that a forgiving, loving God is nonsensical and absurd to many people

outside of American culture. Why should our American culture be the final court in which Christianity is judged to be valid or not? Why can't a God of judgment also be a God of love? People might say, "If God is loving and perfect, He should forgive and accept everyone. He shouldn't get angry." But don't all loving persons get angry not just despite their love but because of their love? Parents love their kids and yet get very angry with them precisely because they love them. And often punishment follows as an expression of love. Couldn't it be said that the opposite of love isn't anger; it's indifference? Total indifference to someone else's welfare is a pretty good definition of hate, is it not?

You can also point out, thirdly, that Hell's existence reveals God's respect for human freedom. Maybe that's ironical, but it's also true. G.K. Chesterton, the great English writer and Christian, put it like this, "Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice." If God were to force everyone to go to Heaven, it would be immoral and dehumanizing. Because of human free will, God gives people what they ask for and the simple fact is that some people don't want anything to do with Him and prefer eternal separation from Him. But didn't God create Hell? Yes, but Hell wasn't part of God's original creation which he declared to be "very good." Hell is something God made out of necessity because people chose to rebel against Him.

It's accurate to say that God doesn't actually send anyone either to Heaven or Hell. Each person chooses to respond to God's grace or to reject God's grace and that choice has inevitable consequences. I like how C.S. Lewis states it: "There are only two kinds of people – those who say, 'Thy will be done' to God or those to whom God in the end says, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice it wouldn't be Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it." It's a travesty to picture God casting people into a pit who are crying out for mercy, forgiveness or a second chance. Everyone in Hell will actually prefer "freedom" to salvation, separation from God to being in God's presence and eternal misery to eternal joy.

You might not be able to get your non-Christian friend to agree with you about Hell right away, if ever. I think one legitimate goal, however, is to help him or her see that Christianity holds together despite some unanswered questions and some very troubling truths. And let's admit it – the existence of Hell is a very troubling truth! Getting a non-Christian to see that all the various parts of our faith - sin and forgiveness, the cross and the resurrection, judgment and grace, Heaven and Hell, God's love and God's judgment - work together and hold together in a way that makes sense is huge. When they can see that there's no painful contradiction between the love of God and the justice of God - that not only does love win, but justice, too – that's a pretty significant milestone.

Here's a final point that may not occur to people who are thoroughly dominated by our culture. You can't follow Jesus and reject Hell. Why's that? Jesus speaks and teaches about Hell more than any other person in the Bible. Most of

our understanding of Hell comes right from the mouth of Jesus! Our culture wants to respect Jesus, like Jesus and agree with Jesus as much as possible. But if you think Christianity's teaching about Hell is very wrong, then you think Jesus is very wrong about something very important. One famous atheist, Bertrand Russell said, "There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment." Well, I don't agree with Mr. Russell, but at least he's consistent! You can't have Jesus in all of His love and compassion, and not, also, have Hell.

That's a good reminder as well to all of us who claim to follow Jesus this morning. You can't truly follow Jesus and reject Hell. If you are ever tempted to soft-pedal Hell, minimize Hell, or belittle the Bible's teaching about Hell, you are actually lessening the impact of what Jesus did at the cross for every human being. If you take Hell away – its reality, its horror, its mind-blowing finality and eternity – you make what Jesus did at the cross less heroic, less powerful, less important and less deserving of our praise and thanksgiving. By the same token, you are doing your non-Christian friends a great disservice by minimizing Hell, or dismissing Hell, or suggesting that you can be a faithful follower of Jesus while rejecting something He clearly taught and believed. They need to know that this life matters so very much and that the choices they make in this life have eternal consequences. I freely admit that Hell is a tough issue. It's very hard to get your head and heart around it. It can be hard to reconcile with all the wonderful things we know and believe about Jesus. But if you're learning to trust Jesus more and more every day as you grow in your relationship with Him, then, by faith, hold on even to those truths that are hard to grasp. They're there for a reason!

On October 25, 2010, a massive earthquake set off a tsunami that struck some Indonesian Islands. The tsunamis leveled whole villages, leaving hundreds dead or missing. According to the survivors, the deaths could have been avoided, or at least minimized. Unfortunately, the tsunami warning system - buoys floating in the ocean off the island - weren't working properly. As a result, they didn't alert the islanders to the coming danger. Since 2004, experts have improved the tsunami detection network. The buoys measure wave height. If a buoy measures an unusual wave, it transmits that information to the shore. This system often provides the only warning signal for islanders to prepare for the oncoming danger. Unfortunately, according to the report, the buoys had become detached and drifted away. Sensors had failed. As many as 30% had been inoperable at any one time. As a result, those buoys often failed to awaken people to the reality of future tragedy.

You not only have the privilege of sharing Christ's love; you also have the responsibility to confront sin and warn people of judgment gently. If, like those tsunami buoys, you "have become detached or drifted away," and you're not so sure that Hell is worth believing in anymore, you may leave others unprepared for the consequences of a life lived apart from Jesus.