

**What Kind of God Sends People to Hell?**  
***A Loving God and Ultimate Punishment***  
January 9, 2011 – “Tough Questions” series  
Rev. 20:11-15, 21:5-8  
Luke 16:19-31

I did a personal inventory this week.  
First, I looked up all the passages in the Bible that talk about Hell  
(and the synonyms Hades, and Eternal Fire).  
Then I read what behaviors are associated with going there.  
I wondered how I was doing.

The Old Testament never talks about Hell.  
The New Testament List I compiled of who goes to Hell, while not long,  
includes the following:  
Those who call a neighbor a fool.  
Hypocritical religious leaders.  
Those who don't take enough risks with their God-given gifts.  
People who don't help the needy.  
Those who lust in their hearts.  
Cowards.  
Liars.

I am in big, big trouble.

At least I don't have to lay claim to this part of the list. I am not:  
Someone who puts stumbling blocks before children,  
Faithless, Polluted,  
Murderer, Fornicator,  
Sorcerer  
or One underdressed for a wedding feast.

How will this balance out?  
Not being underdressed hardly seems like it will balance out  
failing to help the needy.  
On the other hand, rolling my eyes at one neighbor's  
obnoxious use of a leaf blower  
seems like it ought to carry considerably less “sin weight”  
than murder  
(though sometimes watching Wes's blood pressure rise  
in reaction to this neighbor,  
I'm wondering if the two sins are more connected  
than it would seem at first glance).

Risk-averse use of gifts and cowardice amount to the same thing.  
Will I be doubly dinged?

And according to Jesus' teachings,  
 lusting in my heart and fornicating amount to the same thing,  
 so can I really put one in the "done" category  
 (I have suffered many a crush in my life)  
 and one in the "never done" category?  
 And if longing and doing are equivalent, I may have another problem.  
 While reading the Harry Potter books,  
 I have occasionally wished to be a sorcerer  
 (just because I sometimes long to be invisible).  
 But since I am well aware that is fiction, does it count?

Of course, the fact that I end up on any of the lists  
 certainly adds up to being a hypocritical religious leader.

I'm surprised to see that I'm off the hook for owning too much stuff,  
 not sharing that stuff,  
 and sometimes coveting other people's stuff.  
 And I note with a raised eyebrow that failing to be a Christian is not listed  
 as something that will get you sent to hell.

So who goes to Hell?  
 Is this really how it is decided?  
 All the jokes and folklore are based on this premise:  
 If you do good, you go to heaven,  
 if you do bad, you go to hell.  
 When we die, we stand before St. Peter at the pearly gates  
 and our life's actions are weighed in the balance.

One problem.  
 God is never pictured with scales in the Bible.  
 Most of the scales in the Bible are on fish.  
 If you have that image in your head,  
 you have probably visited a museum's Egypt display,  
 and you are actually remembering the Egyptian goddess Ma'at  
 weighing hearts on a balance against a feather,  
 to see if the departed was good enough for Egyptian heaven.  
 But that is not our God.

As a matter of fact,  
 aside from borrowing (and warping) a few Biblical images  
 (like St. Peter being given the keys of forgiveness,  
 and Revelation's images of the New Jerusalem  
 having 12 gates, each one a single pearl)  
 that common cultural image of who goes to hell  
 has nothing to do with the Christian faith.

A lot of devout Christians can tell you that.  
 Ask them who goes to heaven,  
     and they will tell you in no uncertain terms,  
     it is not about how many good deeds you have done.  
 There is no earning your way into heaven.  
 Being saved is not about works, it is about grace.  
 Grace that was given through Jesus Christ,  
     whom God sent to remove the consequences of our bad deeds,  
     so that we don't have to go to hell as punishment.  
 [A note: there are lots of ways to unpack exactly how  
     the life, death and resurrection of Christ saves us,  
     and we'll be doing that during Lent.  
     But that's a bigger task than I can cover in today's sermon]

Put in the simplest possible terms:  
 Who goes to heaven?  
     Those who have understood and welcomed this gift.  
 Who goes to hell?  
     Those who have not.

It is so simple, wonderfully easy –  
     God loves and accepts us,  
     forgiving our bad deeds so that they no longer get between us.  
 Just accept the gift given by God. Accept that you are accepted.

There are some advantages to this understanding.  
 It is much more Biblical.  
 And it takes seriously the fact that God in Christ  
     came to overthrow an understanding of *earning* God's favor.  
 God in Christ came to *give* us a love we don't deserve,  
     and cannot possibly merit.

This is not theological hair-splitting.  
 It is at the heart of the Christian faith,  
 what makes us unique among religions:  
     we are not made right with God by our works.  
     We are made right with God by God's gracious welcome.  
 The church founder Paul  
     was made practically apoplectic over this issue  
     when some tried to teach that you had to follow certain Jewish laws  
     in order to be part of God's family.  
 You almost have to wipe the spit off the letter he sent to the Galatians,  
     he was spluttering so angrily at them:  
*We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping  
     but only by personal faith in Jesus Christ...*  
*I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God,*

*and it didn't work.  
 So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man...  
 Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping,  
 peer-pleasing religion  
 would be an abandonment of everything personal and free  
 in my relationship with God?  
 I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace.  
 If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping,  
 then Christ died unnecessarily. [Gal 2:15, 19, 21...The Message]*

This distinction between winning God's approval through our good deeds  
 vs. through Christ's life and death,  
 is the argument that split the Church,  
 Catholic from Protestant:  
 Martin Luther saw the Church moving toward a religion  
 where you earned favor with God by your actions,  
 when what is needed is a faithful trust in God.  
 And he thought it was important enough  
 to break away from all that he knew up till then  
 to emphasize it.  
 This is a teaching central to being Christian –  
 we don't win God over by our deeds;  
 we receive God's love as a gift.

But there is danger – actually at least two dangers –  
 that accompany this understanding of who goes to heaven,  
 both of which are made clear  
 when you try to answer the corollary question: Who goes to hell?

One of the dangers is that of turning  
 acceptance of God's gift  
 into a work, a good deed, in itself.  
 If the answer to the question: "Who Goes to Heaven" is  
 "those who accept the gift God gives in Christ,"  
 then you might answer the question, "Who Goes to Hell?"  
 by saying: Those who don't have a relationship with God in Christ  
 as evidenced by their being born again, praying a certain prayer,  
 and living with no further lapses in good behavior....  
 And if we do that, we have just returned to the old model,  
 just with a different list of good and bad deeds.  
 The danger is that we can be led to a model where  
 what tips the balance toward a trip to hell  
 is the failure to speak a certain formula of words,  
 and participate in a particular emotional experience of relationship  
 that has been named "being born again."

The ultimate danger in taking “grace” this direction,  
 is it turns God into the most cruel and unremitting  
 stickler for the rules of them all,  
 sending people to hell  
 for failing to say the right words and feel the right feelings,  
 even if they have lived exemplary lives,  
 and/or have simply never been adequately convinced  
 that Jesus is from God  
 by the words and actions of those who follow him.

If we are not careful,  
 the understanding that we don't earn heaven by our acts,  
 rather it is a gift we need only accept,  
 can be turned into yet one more version of earning heaven  
 by the act of formulaic acceptance,  
 and earning hell by doing it wrong.

And what kind of God would do that?

The kind of God  
 many don't want to accept, even if it is a free gift.

There is another dangerous twist on this explanation of  
 who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, that we can get caught in.

If it is true that we can't earn our way to heaven,  
 does the same hold for hell?

If nothing we do qualifies us for the rewards of heaven,  
 does that mean nothing we do merits the punishments of hell?

Or to put it another way,  
 does everybody get to heaven,  
 because God loves everyone too much to send them to hell?

It is another over-extension of the doctrine of grace  
 (though in the exact opposite direction of the last one).

If we are made fit for a relationship with God  
 simply because God loves us, forgives us,  
 and accepts us, through no merit of our own,  
 then how could anyone possibly end up in hell?

All sins are wiped away,  
 and all are joined to God in blissful joy.

But this too can lead to problems.

For one thing, it leads to the idea that what we do in this life  
 doesn't matter at all – we can get away with murder. Literally.

There are no consequences.

Do whatever you like, God will still love you.

And Adolph Hitler.

And Jeffrey Dahmer.

No matter what.

What kind of God would this be?

A wishy washy pushover,

who is too weak to make anyone stop doing wrong.

A saccharine God, who doesn't really love us enough

to want to shape our behavior toward one another  
into something more loving.

A God we might try to wriggle away from,

as we do from an over-affectionate, cheek pinching auntie.

Navigating this narrow path, what kind of God *do* we have?

Not a God standing with balance in hand.

Not a God waiting to damn us for saying the prayer wrong.

Not a God who smiles no matter how we behave.

So what kind of God *does* send people to hell?

Perhaps a God who is not about punishment,

so much as logical consequences.

And a God who loves us enough to respect our free will.

Perhaps the reason that we are given so many laws,

so many cautionary tales,

and so many warnings about bad behavior,

is not so we can avoid hell and punishment.

Maybe God wants us to refrain from all of the

selfish

violent

greedy

me-first acts that are described in the Bible

because the logical consequence of such actions

is a world that is bad for everyone,

including each of us,

and is particularly bad for human community,

all of us together.

Maybe God is not so much interested in

punishing infractions

as in helping us avoid self-destruction.

Refusing to judge us by weighing up our life's actions fits this God,

because certainly very few of us could do only good deeds,

and most of us would have trouble

even getting our good to outweigh our bad.

Coming to us as a savior who will express his love for us,

do anything, give up anything,  
to break down the barriers between us, fits this God,  
because this is a God who is actually rooting for us to succeed,  
not looking for a chance for us to trip up.

But the existence of hell also fits this God.  
Because this is a God who needs us to choose the good.  
God will not override our freedom of will  
and *make* us live in a world  
of love, fair-play, and self-sacrifice.  
God will not *force* us to love him and live the life he wants for us.

And if we refuse to live out of God's will,  
and would rather live by hating, killing, stealing,  
taking advantage of others, putting ourselves first,  
then God will let us live in a place, a state  
where that is what rules,  
and there is no goodness.

How would you name a place  
where everyone lives only for themselves,  
not only with no thought for the good of any others,  
but even intentionally at the expense of all others?  
I would call it hell.\*

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I have come to the end of what I can assert Biblically  
in this limited time.  
But I have one last thing to say,  
that is hinted at in the scriptures.

If we truly have a God who will do anything, give up anything  
in order to woo us back to the life he knows is best for us,  
I have to wonder about how far God's persuasion extends.  
Does God ever give up?

I am encouraged by the picture hinted at in Jesus' parable in Luke –  
the way he paints a picture of Abraham and the Rich Man  
still in dialog after the Rich Man's death.  
Perhaps death is not the end of the question.  
I note that because the Rich Man has not actually changed,  
and still believes that he is the one to be served,  
he has still not truly chosen to leave hell.  
But maybe he will figure out one day,  
that if *he* were to offer to *serve* Lazarus,

rather than the other way around,  
he would find himself in heaven.

And one last thing –

I noticed something very odd in John's last picture  
of the last judgment  
at the last days of the world.

Maybe you noticed it too.

At the very end, in the final judgment,

John sees that Hades is thrown into the lake of fire.

If Hades and the Lake of Fire

are both ways of speaking about Hell,  
how can God throw hell itself into hell?

Perhaps by the last day,

God will have no more use for it,  
and God will wad it up like an empty bread bag  
to be thrown in the trash.

*\*[Credit to Adam Hamilton for his definition of hell in the chapter "The Logic of Hell" in Seeing Gray]*