

5/27/12 (The Reason for God #6) HOW CAN A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?

Well, this is a big one. “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?” This was big enough for us to spend four weeks on it last year about this time as we talked about Rob Bell’s book “Love Wins”. And I’m going to resist the temptation to pack four weeks of material into this one sermon. Nevertheless, I am going to use some of that material, so if it sounds familiar, it probably is. But before we get started, I want to just remind you why it’s important for us to talk about “Apologetics.”... About giving answers... Again the Bible tells us we need to do this:

**Slide:** “...in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...” (1 Peter 3:15 NIV)

Every now and then I’m challenged about this. People will say, why do we need to get into all these questions and all these specifics. I know what I believe. Why can’t I leave it at that? Well, if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord, good for you. And it is good for you. But what about your neighbor, co-worker, relative, friend? The Lord Jesus said as His last command to all His followers:

**Slide:** “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

And folks, those people in “Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria...” in “Coopersville and Michigan and Dearborn Heights” and to the ends of the earth, no longer think like you think – if they ever did. And if you are going to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ, you are going to have to make an effort to get into their heads and know how they’re thinking. This was very abruptly brought home to me this week by the following short clip. It’s hard to watch, but I think we need to:

**Slide:** “Unlike Christ” clip from Worship House Media:

<http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/31157/Unlike-Christ>

Folks, I checked it out, and it’s absolutely true. I did a similar Google search and went all the way through the alphabet A-Z, and I found three positive endings for that search out of about 100 possible. That is a very sobering look into the mind of our culture and how they see people with the name of Christian. We talked a little about that in the Women’s Bible study this week and Jenny suggested that we need to try to get people to look at it this way:

**Slide:** “Why are Christians so h-uman.”

It’s a very simple truth, but one that non-Christians and Christians alike, seem to forget. We don’t gather here on a Memorial Day weekend because we think we’re better than everybody else who’s out on the lake this morning. We’re here because this is a spiritual hospital and we know we are sick with sin and need healing. We need forgiveness and cleansing and a new chance to live as God wants us to live. From that perspective, I would wish that the “Why are Christians so” search might also look like this:

**Slide:** “Why are Christians so h-umble.”

So willing to look at the speck in their eyes before tackling the log in somebody else’s. Unfortunately, we don’t always come across that way. And of course there are some folks out there with the name of Christ, who simple do not seem to have ever read 1 Peter 3:15, or heard the words, “with Gentleness and respect.”

This week I was made aware of the comments of one North Carolina Pastor Charles Worley. I had never heard of this guy before and hope I never hear of him again. He said last week in his Mother's day sermon that his plan for gays and lesbians was to isolate them in separate pens behind an electric fence and let them die out as they fail to reproduce. Is it any wonder why people would tend to have negative web searches about Christians? Why they would respond to hate with hate? So there are those out there who bear the name of Christian who are misrepresenting Christ and we condemn them in the strongest possible terms. And if we do, then we need to be very, very careful in how we ourselves represent Jesus, so that we can be His true witnesses and share His love to everyone we know and whose life we touch. We need to do **what is in our control** in presenting a true, loving Christian witness. Some of it of course, is outside of our control. So, with that said, let's tackle the next question, the next objection to the Christian Faith: "How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?"

According to recent surveys from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 74% of Americans believe in heaven, but only 59% believe in hell. But it doesn't keep them from thinking about it. In fact, there's a lot of imagery and discussion of hell in our culture. A while back, Capital One sought to "capitalize" on one aspect of that discussion:

**Slide:** Capital one hell commercial

"When hell freezes over..." Just one of the many phrases in our vocabulary about hell. And of course, there is Satan complete with horns and Spock ears... an idea that is presented for us to chuckle about, but not to take seriously. But of course, if there is a hell and people go there, it's nothing to chuckle about and it's something to take **very** seriously indeed. But the problem is, people don't like to believe what they don't **want** to believe. That's why more Americans believe in heaven than believe in hell. But folks, truth is not determined by what you want to believe, or by some survey. You don't create truth by what you feel or don't feel. And the fact is that

**Slide:** I. It's DANGEROUS to Deny What You Don't Want to Believe

I perfectly understand not liking some truths of God's Word. But that does not give us the right to just deny that they exist, or to ignore them.

I like this picture I use in the Fit for Life in Christ class.

**Slide:** "Don't worry, I believe this car is an airplane.

Well, in a free society, do you have the right to believe your car is an airplane if you want?

Sure, but it's dangerous to act on that belief, isn't it? First of all,

**Slide:** A. It's not SMART.

Obviously. For example, the Bible says

**Slide:** "The fool says in heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalm 53:1)

And then this verse should be enough to keep anyone from messing with God's Word:

**Slide:** "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." (Revelation 22:18-19 NIV)

Folks, God went to great lengths to give you His Word and to protect His Word. He does not take kindly to people twisting it **in any way**. So, ignoring the truth isn't smart, and

**Slide:** B. It's not **LOVING**.

It's not at all loving to ignore the truth. God says in His word:

**Slide:** “When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.” (Ezekiel 3:18 NIV)

God doesn’t want us to just find the way to salvation ourselves and let the rest of the world go to hell. We believe Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life – that no one gets to the Father except through Him. And that does mean that if somebody has rejected God’s offer of salvation in Christ, they will go to hell. And for us to ignore that or deny it in our relationships with our friends and relatives and neighbors is not doing anyone any favors. I don’t think we **should** feel comfortable about hell. I don’t think we **should** like it. God doesn’t either.

In his book, “The Reason for God,” Timothy Keller uses this analogy:

**Slide:** “Imagine two people arguing over the nature of a cookie. Jack thinks the cookie is poison, and Jill thinks it is not. Jack thinks Jill’s mistaken view of the cookie will send her to the hospital or worse. Jill thinks Jack’s mistaken view of the cookie will keep him from having a fine dessert. Is Jack more narrow-minded than Jill just because he thinks the consequences of her mistake are more dire? I don’t believe anyone would think so.” - Timothy Keller

Folks, we only warn people about danger for their own good. And rejecting God is the most dangerous thing a person can do. It’s not smart, it’s not loving and...

**Slide: C. It’s not **BIBLICAL**.**

Of course it’s not. Jesus, in His high priestly prayer to God the Father, asked for us:

**Slide:** “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17 NIV)

Of course it is. We should always be praying with the Psalmist:

**Slide:** “Teach me **your way**, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.” (Psalm 86:11 NIV)

The problem is that people today don’t want THE truth, they want THEIR truth. And ultimately, that is what is behind accusing God of “sending people to hell.” If they can convince themselves that the Christian God is guilty of injustice, of unloving behavior, then they can free themselves from their responsibility to live under Him. But the truth is that

**Slide: II. Our Loving God SENDS No One to Hell.**

God says through the prophet Ezekiel:

**Slide:** “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11 NIV)

Really, this whole question: “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell” is loaded because of a misunderstanding of the nature of God. Folks, God is not some sadistic overlord ready and willing to send his subjects to the dungeon. He’s not in heaven sitting by the smite button ready to zap His children. God’s not like that.

**Slide:** Far Side Smite ‘toon

In the book, “The Case for Faith”, Lee Strobel interviewed J.P. Moreland on this question, and he said the following:

**Slide:** “God is the most generous, loving, wonderful, attractive being in the cosmos. He has made us with free will and he has made us for a purpose: to relate lovingly to Him and to others. We are not accidents, we’re not modified monkeys, we’re not random mistakes. And if we fail over and over again to live for the purpose for which we were made – a purpose, by the way, which would allow us to flourish more than living any other way – then God will have

absolutely no choice but to give us what we've asked for all along in our lives, which is separation from Him." - J.P. Moreland.

And that really is the most accurate definition of hell. The Bible writers do the best they can with the imagery of fire and torment, but the real agony of hell will be separation from God. It's described for us in three words from Matthew 25: "**Depart from me...**"

**Slide:** "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" (Matthew 25:41 NIV)

Our God is the sum of all that is good and noble and loving and pure. To be separated from Him is to be outside of all that and consequently, in the middle of all that is evil, shallow, hateful and corrupt. And folks, you need to understand, that is not a place where God wants any of His children to be. The entire history of the world is a history of God urging people to accept His love and come to Him for life and salvation, and all too often, of man rejecting those offers. And folks, with choices come consequences. Hell is simply the unavoidable consequence of rejecting God. When someone refuses to have a relationship with God, they are putting themselves outside of His love. They're saying that they don't want any part of God. And some are saying that today in no uncertain terms. In my apologetics research on line I came across this response to a youtube video:

**Slide:** "if heaven or paradise is full of those islamic p\*\*\*s and creationist r\*\*\*\*\*s ... i rather spend eternity in hell , thank you very much . i will submit to nothing ! not now .. not ever .. to no one ! . you can stick your god where the sun doesn't shine .. amen !

That is hard stuff to see or hear, but that is what is out there. And finally when people reject God to that extent, eventually the day will come when they will get their wish. They won't have any part of God – forever. And God will confirm it. And they will gnash their teeth in anger that they were wrong. See folks, no one likes the idea of people going to hell, but what they forget is that many people in this world simply do not want God to be their Lord. "Not now... not ever!" And for God to force them into a relationship with Him would be immoral. We've talked about this before in other contexts. Even though God loves all His children and He wants them to love Him...

**Slide:** A. Our Loving God Does Not FORCE His Will On People.

Again, in "The Reason for God", Timothy Keller quotes the great Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis, in one of the great answers to the question of hell from his book, "The Great Divorce" (copies available on the resource table by the church office). Lewis calls Hell "the greatest monument to human freedom." And Keller says, "All God does in the end with people is give them what they most want, including freedom from himself. What could be more fair than that?" And then he quotes Lewis again:

**Slide:** "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." - C. S. Lewis

As Jesus approached the city of Jerusalem for the last time, there to lay down His life as the sacrifice that would satisfy the justice of a holy God against your sin and the sins of the world, He looked upon the city and said:

**Slide:** “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34 NIV)

And God was not willing to turn them all into puppets and force them to receive the forgiveness Jesus came to bring them and us. Again J.P. Moreland puts it this way: “...it would be unloving – a sort of divine rape – to force people to accept heaven and God if they didn’t really want them. When God allows people to say ‘no’ to Him, He actually respects and dignifies them.”

Our loving God sends no one to hell, but he will not force His will on anybody. At the same time...

**Slide:** B. Our Loving God is Also a JUST God.

And He does not ignore evil. He will bring justice to the evil-doer in His way and time. You know what’s interesting folks? You will probably never hear the statement: “I can’t believe in a God who would send a mass murderer like Osama Bin Laden to hell.” What you did see after his death were magazine covers like this:

**Slide:** Rot in hell Osama – Daily News cover

And the Daily News used that cover to survey it’s readers. They found that 7 out of 10 believed that Osama is in hell – even though not that many even believe in hell... People seem to think that hell is the right place for someone like Bin Laden. Folks, the good and righteous judge is not responsible for the crimes and judgment of evil people, their actions and evil choices are. After the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, the disciples were choosing a new disciple to replace Judas, and they prayed to God to show them the right one...

**Slide:** “...to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” (Acts 1:24-25 NIV)

And no one would think that Judas doesn’t belong in hell. But folks, why would we ever assume that there would **ever** be **anyone** in hell who doesn’t belong there? I keep quoting this important verse about God, and I hope it’s getting through:

**Slide:** “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4 NIV)

I freely admit that I don’t understand everything about God, but I completely trust in His justice and in His mercy and I am perfectly content to leave the final judgments in the hand of our loving God.

And our final point for today is the also the most important:

**Slide:** C. Our Loving God Invites All People to HEAVEN.

The Bible couldn’t be clearer:

**Slide:** “God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4 NIV)

The entire record of history after the fall of man into sin, is a record of God desperately working to accomplish that desire. Again, the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wrote of his conversion from atheism in his autobiography “Surprised by Joy”: "I had always wanted above all things, not to be 'interfered with.' I had wanted 'to call my soul my own.'... You must picture me alone in [my] room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, when ever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In 1929 I

gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The prodigal son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape? The words 'compelle intrare,' compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but properly understood, they plumb the depth of the divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation."

“God wants all people to be saved...” and that is precisely what Jesus accomplished when He went to the cross. The wrath of God against sin is real and it all fell on Jesus Christ. All your wrongdoing was punished in Jesus so that by believing in Him you could be totally forgiven. And you are when you simply receive His invitation, and His forgiveness and trust in Him as your Lord.

Let's do that again in prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You for Your great sacrifice for people like us, who do not deserve Your love or to stand in Your presence. We thank you that by the cross we know and believe we are truly loved and forgiven of everything we've done wrong and failed to do right. Lord, we do receive Your invitation to spend forever with You. Come into our hearts and empower us also to extend that invitation to others. Amen.