

Asking for a Friend

Week 3: How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Luke 16:19-31

We're wrapping up our "Asking for a Friend" series today where we've looked at some questions that we might be a little afraid to ask, but we're curious about the answers. And we've been saying through this series that we want to be a church where we don't feel like we have to "Ask for a friend" because we're afraid of what others might think. We want you to be able to "Ask a friend."

Connect Groups give us that space where we can wrestle through these kinds of things and share life with others. We want every single person at Sherwood Oaks to be in a Connect Group because we want all of us to experience the kind of community that comes from them. If you're not in some kind of group, come to Connect Gathering...

And men, I'm talking to you for a moment. We're often times the worst at this, even though we might need it the most. We have several groups through our Ministry to Men and we'd love to get you connected to one of them. Come join us on Wednesday at 6pm in the Fellowship Hall. Allen Burris is smoking some meat...I don't even know if there will be side dishes...just more meat! Come join us and find a group.

A couple of weeks ago, I read this line...**"Of all the doctrines in Christianity, Hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe, and the first to be abandoned."** And it's what we're looking at today.

This topic makes us uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable. And I think there are several reasons for that. It makes us think about things we may not want to think about. It raises a lot of questions about people we love who passed away without putting their faith in Jesus. Some of us may be uncomfortable right now because you grew up in a church that NEVER talked about Hell, and so the mystery of the unknown makes you squirm a little. Others are squirming right now because you grew up in a church that ONLY talked about Hell, and you just want to get as far away from that as you can.

This is one of those topics that most of us just don't want to think about. Like, I've never heard anyone say, "You know what I love about the Christian faith? That part about Hell!" For a lot of people, the doctrine of Hell is not just a stumbling block to Christianity, it's a dealbreaker. Charles Darwin pointed to it as a significant reason for why he abandoned his faith and I think it's why many others have done the same thing.

So, we end up with this question that many of us have, but few of us ask because we just don't want to talk about it. But, the Bible talks about it, and Jesus talked about it a lot! In fact, 13% of his teaching and half of his parables talk about Hell. So, if the Bible talks about it and Jesus talked about it, then we've got to talk about it, too. If you have a Bible, or Bible app you like to use, turn with me to Luke 16.

Our specific question today is “How can a loving God send people to Hell?” I want to respond to that question by looking at a few misconceptions we might have about things like sin and the nature of God and how Hell intersects with these things. I think for many people, when they think about Hell, they imagine this vindictive God casting people into a lake of fire because they didn’t believe the right stuff or always make the right choices.

And, we imagine that as these poor souls tumble down into the pit of despair, they beg and plead for mercy, but God says, “Nope, too late. Now you’re going to suffer for all eternity as punishment for what you’ve done.”

But, Jesus tells a story in Luke 16 that I think paints another picture. And, it’s a story, so we can’t build an entire theology of Hell around it, but I think it gives us some insight that might be valuable as we talk about our question for today. Let’s take a look at it together. Luke 16, starting in verse 19...(READ Lk. 16:19-21)

So, Jesus introduces us to the two characters. And again, because this is a story, I think we can read into the names Jesus uses. Names carry meaning and identity. So, we have this poor beggar named Lazarus who is covered in sores. His friends or family just laid him by the gate of some guy’s house and left him. He’s been rejected. His body is riddled with disease. He has no money, no friends, no future.

And so, it’s interesting that Jesus gives him the name Lazarus, which in Hebrew means, “Whom God has helped.” That was his name. That was his identity. And it’s ironic because, if you look at his situation, you wouldn’t think that this was a guy whom God has helped. In fact, the people hearing this story would have thought, no, that’s a person God has rejected because clearly he did something to deserve this.

But, by giving him this name, I think Jesus wants us to know that this is a person who has turned his heart towards the Lord and the Lord has been merciful to him.

The second character in our story is simply called A Rich Man and, in Hebrew, his name means...”A rich man.” By not giving him a name, I think Jesus is inferring that this man has found his identity in his riches, not in the Lord. By dressing in purple and fine linen, he wanted to present royalty. Self-importance. He lived in luxury and probably had to step over Lazarus every time he left his home.

Clearly, Jesus is using this contrast to make his point. And I want to use this contrast to clear up the first misconception we may have about Hell, and it comes down to sin.

We often think that sin is the bad things we do, but it’s actually worse than that. Sin is the underlying cause for why we do those things we do. Our hearts are rebellious against God and His design for how we are to live. God has made known what we are to do and how we

are to treat one another, but our sinful hearts defy God and His design. So **sin is choosing our way over God's.**

And the primary way we sin, I sin, is not in the bad things we do or the good things we don't do. The primary way we sin is when we take God off His throne and put ourselves on it. We make ourselves the center of our lives and our universe and say to God, "I'm the king now. We're going to do things my way, not yours."

And I think that's what we see with the rich man in our story. He's dressed in royalty and living in luxury. He's sitting on the throne of his life. We know from later in the story that he's familiar with the Law and Prophets. He knows the Scriptures that tell us to submit to God and His ways. To care for the poor, the widow and orphan, the foreigner. And yet, every day, he walked over Lazarus. He added to his pain and suffering. He was too self-important to stoop down and help.

The rich man's sin was not that he was rich. It's that he knew the law, but he'd rejected the lawgiver. He had turned his back on God and was choosing to go his own way and do his own thing. He'd put himself and his riches above God and the people God cares about.

So, sin is not about our actions. It's about rejecting God and choosing to go our own way. It's about our heart that is unwilling to surrender to anyone or anything else, even the God who created and designed us to find all our meaning, joy, and life in Him.

Jesus continues...(READ Lk. 16:22-24)

Did you notice the reversal? Lazarus is by Abraham's side. It's this picture of Heaven, which is often referred to as a great banquet or feast. But the rich man is now the beggar. And Jesus taps into classic literature and says he's in Hades, which is the realm of the dead. Another strong contrast to the blessing and abundant life that Lazarus is experiencing.

And it's telling what the rich man does when he notices Lazarus by Abraham's side. He doesn't look at him and say, "Lazarus, I'm so sorry for the way I treated you. The way I walked over you and added to your pain." He shows no repentance. No remorse. In fact, it's almost like he expects Lazarus to serve him, even from beyond the grave. He says, "Send me Lazarus to cool my tongue."

Even in this place described as torment and agony, he's demanding that others serve him because...he's on the throne. He's still unwilling to acknowledge his sinful heart and is only thinking about himself. He's continuing in death the way he lived in life.

And the last word of verse 24 leads us to the second misconception about Hell I want to talk about today. All of the descriptions and depictions of Hell, and Heaven for that matter, are metaphorical and symbolic. They're used to describe what Hell is *like*, not necessarily what it is.

And so, Scripture describes Hell as being a place of:

- **Unquenchable Fire.** Fire is destructive. It disintegrates anything in its path. Fire destroys life and leaves a place barren of anything good. That's an image of Hell. Void of life and full of destruction.
- **Utter Darkness.** James 1:17 says that every good and perfect gift has come from the Father of light. Meaning everything good that we enjoy in this life is from God. All joy and pleasure, laughter and love, art and music, food and water. God gives us these things and more.

And so a place described as utter darkness is a place void of God's light and the good things He has graciously given humanity. It's a place void of meaning and community. And the darkness of Hell leaves people feeling isolated and alone. I don't know anything that feels darker than that.

- **Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth.** Pictures of sadness and despair. Worry and anxiety.

These are the symbols used to describe what Hell is like. It's a place absent of God's presence and grace, where people are left to the very worst of themselves. If Heaven is what it's like when God gets His way, Hell is what it's like when we get ours. If Heaven is a place of no more tears, no more pain, no more separation, no more brokenness, Hell is a place filled with tears, pain, separation, and brokenness.

If Heaven is a place filled with love, Hell is a place where we lose our capacity to give or receive love. As C.S. Lewis said, **"Hell is the greatest monument to human freedom."**

It's filled with people who chose to be their own god in this life and continue to choose it for eternity. It's the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on forever. It's a place void of any goodness or grace where everyone is only looking out for themselves. Fighting for their way. And the self-absorption and backbiting and isolation only increases in the complete absence of God's goodness and grace.

And so, how can a loving God send anyone to a place like that? Jesus continues...**(READ Lk. 16:25-26)**

Did you notice how Abraham addresses the rich man? He calls him "son." There's compassion for him. It goes back to what Matt said last week. God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance. God wants all people to turn towards Him and, in love, He gives us every opportunity to do it.

But there are people who never will. They want to continue to choose their way over God's. They want to continue to sit on the throne of their own hearts, declaring, "I'm the king of me. I make the rules." And there comes a point where God's love must also include His

justice. We say that God is love, and He is, but there are other qualities within the nature of God that help define what His love is like. We don't get to define God's love for Him, He defines it for us. And **part of God's love is revealed in His justice.**

We see God's justice in these two verses. The rich man lived his life rejecting God and adding to the brokenness and pain in the lives of others. And, in His justice, God is making right the things that sin made wrong. Even when we see injustice in our world, there is something inside of us that cries out for it to be made right. Hell is about this kind of justice. When God will make right all the evil in this world and all the pain it caused to those He loves.

On one of my trips to Mozambique, Africa, we visited a port where people were auctioned off, loaded up into a ship, and forced into slave labor. The remnants of the auction block were still visible. I remember standing in the room where these men and women and children who had been abducted from their villages were held before being sold off and separated from their families and homes.

I think one of the most atrocious outcomes of sin is that we're unable to see the image of God in the eyes of another person. And it was that sin that allowed practices like the transcontinental slave trade. Holocaust. It's that same sin in our own hearts that leads us to devalue human life in the way we treat others. Talk to them or about them.

And as we were walking through a village near this port, we came upon two older ladies walking towards us. When they saw us, they turned and ran the other way. I asked my friend why and he said there's still a fear of white men that resides in these communities because of what happened all those years ago.

This is centuries later. Generations have passed. And it all made me think, "God, bring justice on the evil that still makes these women run when they see a white male."

When we think about love and justice through our mostly Western eyes, we tend to wonder, **"How can God be loving AND just?"** How can He be a God of both love and wrath? But when I think about the pain that makes these women still turn and run hundreds of years later. When I think about the pain our sin, my sin, has caused in the lives of others. Pain that others still care today because of MY actions, I'm left wondering, **"How can God be loving WITHOUT being just?"**

How can God be loving without being angry at the injustice and deception in our world? How can He be loving and not hold accountable those who add to broken systems and hearts of our world? We cannot let our Western sensibilities rewrite the complexity of God's nature. Just because I may not like an aspect of God's character doesn't mean it's not a part of who He is, and shouldn't be a part of His love.

He's not going to change. The question is, will I?

Am I, are you, willing to surrender your will and your way to the God who created you, who loves you, and who wants to set your life on a course towards Him. Who wants to lead you and guide you on the right path. Or do you just want to say to Him, “No, I’m going to do it my way.”

At the end of this story that Jesus tells, the rich man begs for Lazarus to go back and warn his brothers so they don’t end up in the same fate. And Abraham says, “It doesn’t matter. They’re not going to listen. They have everything you had. They know God. They know His laws. They know how He has called us to live. It’s not that they don’t know Him. It’s that **they do know** and have rejected Him.”

They are choosing to live apart from God, just like the rich man did. And just like the rich man, God will allow them to choose their own way right into eternity. Which is why I don’t believe that God “sends” anyone to Hell. We choose it. We want to sit on the throne. Hell is where God fully and finally says, “Okay, then let me step out of the way.” And he leaves those who have rejected Him to experience the full consequences of their decision.

Again, C.S. Lewis puts it like this, “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.’ (*And then he makes this sobering claim...*) 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, *The Problem of Pain/The Great Divorce*

You see, the truth about us is that all of us have chosen to go our own way. All of us, at one point or another, have rejected God and told him, “No, MY will be done, not yours.” We’ve all added to the brokenness and pain in this world. The Apostle Paul says in **Romans 3:23**, “**for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” All of us have this sinful, rebellious heart within us.

And the question that we’re exploring today is “How can a loving God send someone to Hell?” but I think it’s the wrong question. When I consider everything I know about myself and humanity, and all the ways we have rejected God and turned our backs on Him, I think the better question is, “**How could a God of justice allow any of us into Heaven?**”

Again, the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:23, “**For the wages of sin is death...**” This is what we have earned for our rebellion against God. Eternal separation from Him. Jesus says that Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), but the people who choose to follow Satan’s rebellion will end up following him all the way to where that rebellion leads.

But here’s the good news for us today. Paul continues, “**For the wages of sin is death...(say this next part with me)...BUT the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

You see, the good news of the Gospel is that God took on flesh. Jesus became one of us and he carried all our guilt, all our shame, all the punishment that we deserved for our rebellion, He carried it all to the cross. Jesus took the weight of Hell upon himself so that we don't have to.

And when we surrender our life to Jesus and make Him our Lord; when we say, "THY will be done, not mine," we take ourselves off the throne and give Him His rightful place in our life. We repent and turn from our old ways to start walking in His. And we won't always get it right, but we are moving in His direction. Our lives bear the fruit of repentance and we find the joy of a heart fully surrendered to Him.

And the gift of grace is that, in spite of what our sin deserves, in spite of how far we have wandered from Him, done our own thing and gone our own way, when we put our faith in Jesus, God rescues us and redeems us, and we will spend eternity with Him.

That's one of the reasons we practice baptism here at Sherwood Oaks. It is this physical expression of faith saying, "Father, I'm dying to myself and my way and surrendering to You." And when we come up from that watery grave, we are forgiven and set free. We are filled with the Holy Spirit who gives us power to walk in new life. And we are assured of a life with God for the rest of eternity.

And since the beginning of August, we've been able to celebrate 20 baptisms here at Sherwood Oaks. We have more today. And if you're ready to surrender your will and your way to Jesus and find new life in Him, eternal life, we're ready to help you take that step.