

Sunday, May 2, 2010—Clear and Present Danger: Eternal Punishment and the Justice of God

Review/Introduction

- Last week we considered how Hell changes dispensationally throughout time.
 - Time Past: Hell is a two compartment place (torments and paradise) in the heart of the earth where the souls of both the saved and the lost go upon physical death.
 - But Now: Subsequent to Israel's rejection of the Kingdom in the early chapter of Acts, Paradise has been relocated to the third heaven. The soul and spirit of believers who die today go straight to the third heaven to be with Christ. All that is left in Hell presently is the torment section.
 - Ages to Come: During the Millennium, Hell is going to be a visible reality on earth as a monument to God's attitude toward sin. Ultimately at the Great White throne death and Hell will be cast into the Lake of Fire.
- This morning I want to consider common objections to the doctrine of eternal punishment and their theological answers.
- Luke 16:27-31—this passage highlights a couple points that are vital to our discussion this morning.
 - Once in the flames of torment no one is able to get out.
 - The rich man is unreformed in his character.
 - The Law and prophets, i.e. the word of God is enough testimony for anyone who wants to avoid eternal punishment.
- Make point about the book 23 minutes in Hell.
- This morning's message is divided into two parts. First, we will look common objections to the notion of eternal punishment as well as answer these objections. Second, I will lay out theologically why eternal punishment is necessary in defining the justice of God.

Common Objections

- Objection One: Why Punish People in Hell—Why Not Reform Them for Heaven? Why doesn't God try instead to reform sinners? How much more should God, with his unlimited abilities and resources, have a reformatory, rather than an eternal penal institution, for the creatures He made in His image and likeness?
 - God does try to reform people: the time of reformation is called life (II Peter 3:9). After the time of reformation comes a time of reckoning (Hebrews 9:27).
 - Eternal punishment is only for the unreformable, unrepentant and reprobate (II Peter 2:1). God desires that all men be saved (I Timothy 2:4).

- Contrary to the assumption that once a person reached such a place of torment they would want to leave, it is simply not so. How can a place devoid of God's mercy accomplish what no measure of His grace could accomplish on earth? If Hell or the Lake of Fire could reform those who chose evil, then they could be saved without Christ, who is the sole means of salvation.
- Lastly, God cannot force free creatures to be reformed. Forced reformation is worse than punishment, for punishment honors the freedom and dignity with which God endowed His human creation. Humans are not objects to be manipulated; humans are subjects to be respected. People, made in God's image, receive punishment when they do evil because they were free and knew better.
- Objection Two: Isn't Eternal Damnation for Temporal Sins Overkill? To punish a person eternally for what he did temporally seems like a gigantic case of overkill. No human parent would mete out a lifetime of punishment upon his child for a crime that involved a few minutes; why should God punish forever those who have only sinned for a short time?
 - Only eternal punishment will suffice for sins against the eternal God. God's justice demands eternal punishment because "the heinousness of any crime must be gauged according to the worth of dignity of the person it is committed against."
 - Without an eternal separation of evil from good (in hell), there could be no heaven, an eternal preservation of good. Evil is contagious (I Corinthians 5:6, Revelation 20) and must be quarantined like a deadly plague, if uncontained, evil will continue to contaminate and corrupt (Matthew 13:24-30). The eternal rule of God necessitates eternal punishment.
- Objection Three: How Can We Be Happy in Heaven Knowing a Loved One Is In Hell? The mere thought of a loved one eternally separated from God is dreadful. Therefore how can anyone be happy in heaven?
 - First of all, the seriously flawed presupposition of this question is that we are more merciful than God. He is infinitely more merciful than we are. Furthermore, God is happy in heaven, yet He knows that not everyone will be there.
 - Read quotation on pages 342-343
 - Revelation 21:4—we would not be happy in heaven if we know that others had been unjustly kept out. However, we can be happy in heaven the same way we can be happy eating while knowing that others are starving—namely, if we have offered them food but they have refused to eat it.
- Objection Four: Why Did God Create People He Knew Would Go to Hell? Some critics of eternal punishment argue that if God knew some creatures would reject Him and eventuate in such a horrible place, He would have never created them. Wouldn't it be better to have never existed than to exist and spend eternity in Hell?

- Nonexistence cannot be said to be a better condition than existence, since nonexistence is nothing; to affirm that nothing can be better than something is a colossal logical mistake.
- That not all people will win in the game of life does not mean it should not be played (Super Bowl, Driving). Likewise from God's standpoint, it is better to have loved all the people of the world (John 3:16) and have lost some than not to have loved them at all.
- Objection Five: Is It Right (Just) to Send People to Hell When They Can't Help Being Sinners? The Bible says we are born sinners (Psalm 51:5) and are "by nature the children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). If sinners cannot avoid sinning, then is it fair to send them to Hell for sin?
 - People go to Hell for two reasons: 1) they are born with a bent to sin, 2) they choose to sin. They are born on a road that leads to Hell, but those how remain on that road also fail to heed the warning signs to turn from destruction and be saved.
 - While human beings sin because they are sinners by nature, nonetheless, their sin nature does not force them to sin; they choose to sin.
 - Hebrews 11:6
- Objection Six: Eternal Punishment Is Contrary to the Mercy of God Some have insisted that a merciful God would not permit suffering in Hell. No loving earthly father could allow his child to be in perpetual torment if he could do anything about it.
 - Mercy is not a passion or emotion that overcomes the justice of God. When someone says this they are saying that they are better than God because they would not torture anyone.
 - God has done everything he could do, short of robbing His creatures of their volition. He has loved all (John 3:16), sent His Son to die for all (I John 2:2), and sent His Holy Spirit to convince all (John 16:8). He cannot make their decision for them, and He cannot force a free decision (Matthew 23:37), so the rest is in human hands; God could not possible have been more merciful.

Theological Basis For The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment

- God's Justice Demands It: Psalm 73:3 teaches that not all justice is accomplished in this life. Thus, the existence of a place of punishment for the wicked after this life is necessary to maintain the justice of God.
 - When people say would a loving God torment people what they are really saying is I am better than He is because I wouldn't. This is a lie because given the right circumstances they would.
 - If you believe there is a God than you recognize there are some absolute standards of justice. If there is no absolute right or wrong there is no way to have

justice. The issue is not that God is unloving. Rather the only way a just God can function is the separate out the things that offend.

- Justification deals with having the justice of God satisfied and accepting of you. God's justice will give eternal life to anyone with perfect righteousness.
- The holiness of God is made up of two of his attributes one is righteousness the other is his justice. God's justice is the enforcer of his righteousness. When God's righteous standard is violated the justice of God goes into operation to hold people accountable.
- Romans 2:2—this why man in his natural state is in trouble. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.
- Hebrews 9:27--If there is no eternal punishment then there is no way to get real justice.
- God's Love Demands It: The Bible asserts that "God is love" (I John 4:16). But love cannot act coercively, only persuasively. A God of love cannot force people to love him.
 - II Corinthians 9:7—Forced love is not love; it is rape. A loving being always gives space to others. He does not force himself upon them against their will.
 - Hence, those who do not choose to love God must be allowed not to love him. Those who do not wish to be with him must be allowed to be separated from him. Eternal punishment allows separation from God.
- Human Dignity Demands It: Since God cannot force people into heaven against their free will, human free choice demands a hell.
 - C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*—"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'They will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end 'Thy will be done.'"
- The Cross of Christ Demands It: The cross is central to Christianity.
 - I Corinthians 1:17-18, 15:3, Romans 3, 31-26, 4:25—without the cross there is no salvation. Only through the cross can be delivered from our sins.
 - Jesus suffered great agony and separation from God the father upon the cross.
 - Why the cross and all this suffering unless Hell and the Lake of Fire are real?
 - Christ's death is robbed of its eternal significance unless there is an eternal separation from God from which people need to be delivered.

Conclusion

- Genesis 18:25—God will not do anything in the end that is not right.

- While it might seem nice to imagine that there are no consequences for defying God, given the depravity of humankind (among other facts), this is an absurd theory.