

## What the Bible Teaches About Hell

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Tough Questions the Critics Ask

Luke 16:19-31

As many of you know, I have been doing a series that I entitled “Tough Questions the Critics Ask.” In the course of the series we have tried to honestly tackle some of the questions that people commonly ask followers of Christ. Things like: If God is so good why is there so much suffering? Why do Christians believe that Jesus is the only way to God, what about all the other religions in the world?

Well today we are going to talk about life after death and specifically I am going to talk about the subject of hell. There is a growing fascination in America with death and near-death experiences. If you go to any bookstore you are going to see a growing body of literature regarding reported accounts of near-death experiences. Feelings that people have of going through a tunnel and being embraced by light. I have not studied this phenomenon enough to render a complete opinion about what people are experiencing. A number of physicians think that before clinical death there is a simple physiological response that creates this feeling of going through a tunnel and seeing light. Many Christians believe that some of the reports of near-death experiences are demonic deceptions designed to lead people away from the only real salvation – salvation found through Jesus Christ.

One thing I have been interested to note is that there has been very little writing or reporting about an extremely common near-death experience. That is the experience of unimaginable suffering. Most of the press has gone to very pleasant experiences – an experience of peace and light and joy.

Recently there has been more writing by people who say that their experience of being removed from the body was torturous, horrible. That they had the most searing kind of pain and fear and horror, something that went beyond words. Again, I can't testify concerning the accuracy of the reports in one direction or the other. What I can tell you is that there is a growing fascination in America with death. There are death and dying classes taught at universities now. School children are asked as part of creative writing to write their own obituaries. School counselors are meeting in elementary schools to guide discussions concerning death.

Surveys indicate that the vast, vast majority of Americans believe in some possibility of life after death. When asked about heaven and hell, a Gallup Poll listed that 78% of the public believed in heaven and 60% believe in Hell. Among those claiming no religious belief, 46% still believed in heaven and 34% believed in Hell. But among those who believe in heaven, 99% believed that they are going there and less than 1% believe they are going to Hell. This is a great country.

But if you talk about the after-life with a follower of Christ, at some point you ought to get around to discussing the subject of Hell. And there is an extreme uneasiness in discussing this subject. Most of the time in America when you hear Hell discussed, it is discussed as part of a joke. People joke about being interested in going to Hell

because that is where all their friends will be. “We will just party and have a great time down there.” Have you ever heard someone say that?

Or hell becomes the punch line of a joke. I remember reading one about the old Yankees manager, Joe McCarthy, who had a dream in which he was in heaven and he assembled a baseball team of all time baseball greats – Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe Dimaggio. He was ecstatic. He had the best team in the history of the game. The phone rang and it was Satan challenging the heavenly baseball team to a ball game. McCarthy was surprised at the challenge. He said, “You haven’t got a chance, Satan. I have all the players.” To which Satan responded, “Well, you may have all the players, but I have all the umpires.”

The way we deal with hell in America is that we make it a joke.

Or we most commonly push it aside and say, “I don’t want to think about Hell. It is too emotionally troubling to me.” And, in the same way people avoid discussions about death, they avoid discussions about Hell. “Let’s not talk about that,” a wife might say to her husband. “I don’t want to talk about our wills or planning for the future. It is too unpleasant.” People do the same thing with Hell.

There are a lot of folks, and maybe you are one of them, who would say that Hell is so inconsistent with your understanding of a God of love burning someone up forever in Hell. Let’s be clear what I am talking about. Having someone suffer forever. Some people say that that is so inconsistent with a God of love that Hell could certainly not be God’s idea or taught by Jesus. The only time you will ever hear about Hell is from extremely oppressive, harsh people like Irish Catholic Nuns or Southern Fundamentalist Preachers. So Hell must be the idea of people who want to manipulate you to believe what they believe or behave in a certain fashion, so Hell is used as a club. But a God of love would never talk to us about Hell.

Before we look at what the Bible teaches regarding Hell, I want to lay out one foundational principle. I have been trying to express this throughout the whole series on Tough Questions the Critics Ask. I am afraid that Christians fall into the same trap that every American does in the decade of the 90’s. It is the trap of deciding whether to believe in some idea for a reason other than it is true. See, what I find friends, and maybe you see the same thing and it is in some of you, but I find that Christians and those who have not yet made a decision for Christ are alike in believing things on every basis other than whether it is true or not. People say, “Well, you know, I find it comforting to believe such and such.” Or “I like to believe that God would do this with people.” Or “I just can’t accept that such and such would be the case because I don’t like that.” Or “I find that interesting or horrible to think about or comforting.” Or “It fits what I was previously taught.” We have a hundreds of reasons for believing.

There is only one reason for believing anything. Because it is true. Not because we like it or dislike it. Or prefer that it be the case. Or find it comforting or horrible or painful. The fact is, friends, there are lots of things that you and I could discover to be true which would be very painful for us. Very uncomfortable, but they might be true nevertheless. For example, we might at some point discover that we have terminal cancer or that a dear friend of ours whose integrity we have always trusted is having an affair. Or a business partner is embezzling money. The point is that the pain or discomfort that an idea causes should not be the determinant for whether you believe something. The reason to believe something is because it is true.

In today's talk we are going to consider *What the Bible Teaches About Hell*. And we are going to be evaluating the fact whether there really is a place called Hell. And whether a loving God will really send people to this place. First, let's pray and ask God's presence.

Many people are surprised at the answer to the question: Who taught about Hell more often than anyone else in the Bible? A lot of people think that the answer to that question would be someone in the Old Testament – maybe Moses, or in the New Testament the apostle Paul because, after all, Paul took Jesus' simple, loving message of how God was going to save everyone and made it rigid and harsh. That is the popular view.

A lot of folks are surprised to find that the person who talked more about Hell and more explicitly about Hell than anyone else in the Bible is Jesus. There are actually very few explicit references to Hell in the writings of Paul. But in the gospel of Matthew, there are 18 clear and explicit references to Hell. Five of them are in the Sermon on the Mount alone.

Listen to some of Jesus' statements.

Matthew 5:21-22: "You have heard that the ancients were told that you should not commit murder and that everyone who commits murder shall be liable to the court. But I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca' shall be guilty before the supreme court and whoever shall say 'You fool' shall be guilty enough to go into the Hell of fire."

Matthew 5:29: "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it away from you. For it is better that one of the parts of your body should perish than that your whole body be thrown into Hell. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you. It is better that one of the parts of your body perish than that your whole body go into Hell."

Or how about Luke 12:5. "But I will show you whom to fear. Fear Him who after killing the body has the power to throw you into Hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."

Or as the punch line to some of His stories, He says things like, "Then he will say also to those who are on his left, 'Depart from me you cursed ones into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Some people spend eternity burning up with the devil and his angels.

Or He says in Matt. 13:49: "So will it be at the end of the age, the angels shall come forth and take out the wicked from the among the righteous and will cast them into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The fact is Jesus spoke about Hell more than anyone else in the Bible.

Now, in listening to this talk today about Hell, the Bible speaks about two very different kinds of consciences. There is a conscience that is called a weak conscience. You may be one of the people who have a weak conscience. A weak conscience is noted by the constant feeling that you are walking on eggshells before God. That God is always upset with you and always angry. People who have a weak conscience are highly perfectionistic and are always asking the question about whether they have committed an unpardonable sin that God will not forgive them for. You tend to view God as a kind of Pharaoh who not only requires you to make bricks, but for you to make them double time. And then the next time I am not going to provide you with the straw.

It is never enough. You can never get off the treadmill of feeling like you are not doing enough to please God.

If you have a weak conscience, and some of you know you do, what you need to do is soak yourself in the grace of God. You need to understand that anyone who turns to God will be received. That God is the Father of the Prodigal Son who runs out after His child. You don't have to guess what is in the hand of God if you turn to Him. What is in the hand of God is always forgiveness, always mercy, always grace for anyone who turns to Him in repentance. If you have a weak conscience, grace is the medicine you need to prescribe to yourself.

But, friends, I am afraid in the Christian church in America right now, our problem is not churches filled with folks who have a weak conscience, the way they were filled in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, people who are terrorized by the thought of going to Hell. It is quite the opposite. Our churches in America are filled with people who have callused consciences, for whom God's warnings and God's threats don't in the least impress.

Listen to me, friends, I am mostly Calvinistic in my theology. I believe in Philippians 1:6 as much as anyone where it says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." I believe that the genuinely converted Christian in whom the miracle of the born again experience has been worked in their soul, I believe as much as anyone that that person's name is in the book of life and that they will never be excluded from citizenship in heaven.

But I am deeply troubled that this doctrine that is sometimes called the doctrine of eternal security has been perverted by callused professors of Christ who think that because of sometime in the past they raised their hands at a meeting or signed a card or made some kind of decision, they can live in rebellion against God and still merrily walk into heaven. Do you not ever wonder to whom the warning passages in the Bible are addressed? When the Bible says, "Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." How is it that we think if we live in unbroken sexual immorality that we will inherit the kingdom of God? Don't you wonder sometimes, even shudder to think that you may be one of the ones who may be deceived? When Jesus says in Matthew 7, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my father in heaven." How can we look up to heaven and say to God, "Get out of my face. I don't care that you tell me that you hate divorce. I am going to go ahead and get a divorce anyway, but I know I am saved?" Friends, I tell you that kind of Christianity sends a shudder up my spine. And I would not want to hinge my salvation on the person who rebelliously shakes their fist at God in a repeated fashion and says, "It is okay because at some time in the past, I signed a card. I raised my hand. I went forward."

I am afraid the problem in the church right now is not a bunch of people with weak consciences, but many, many who have callused consciences and have never applied the warning passages of the Bible to themselves. Those who have never done what the apostle Paul tells us to do to test ourselves to see whether indeed we are in the faith.

Are you soft towards God?

Are you running toward him or away from him?

Are you walking in repentance and brokenness or in rebellion and hardness?

What is the general direction of your life?

Well, Jesus tells the story of two men to warn us, to wake us up. Luke 16:19-31, talks about the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Let’s take a look at these two men. It says in verse 19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.” This man has no name, no I.D. apart from his wealth. The only thing that his obituary reads is that he, a rich man, died. It can’t even say that he was a good father or that he was a loving husband, a major benefactor to a hospital or a university. The sum of his life can be summed up in these words, “He was a rich man.” What he had to show at the end of his life was a lot of stuff.

What about his relationships? Well, he was impoverished there.

What about his spiritual life? Well, that was non-existent.

What about his passions? Oh, he had some passions. His passions were for things—for clothes and for decorating his house. It says that he wore purple. Purple dye was extremely expensive. It came from a shellfish in the ancient world. It was a sign of great wealth to have purple clothing. And fine linen was also very expensive. It was very hard to weave. So he loved to own things and the only things he cared about were the appetites of his body, not the cultivation of his soul. It says that he lived in luxury every day. He never set aside a day for prayer or a day for God, a day to worship, a day to fast, or a day that would be consecrated. Every day was a day for more consumption. If he were living today we would say, “Well, Sundays, we spend Sundays on the boat, Sundays on the golf course, Sundays at church drumming up more clients for his newest investment scheme.”

In contrast, we read about a beggar in verse 20 named Lazarus. “At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”

This is the only time in any of Jesus’ parables that a man is named. The name of Lazarus literally means “one whom God has helped.” His Hebrew name would have

been Eleazar. This poor man could not turn to any other person on earth; no man or woman showed him pity. Apart from God, he had no help. He is the kind of man people walked around. Who when you drive by in the car, you roll up your windows. You avert your eyes. A guy who pinned his hope and his desire for help on the only one who cares about people like that—and that is God. He is ill. He is crippled. He had probably leprosy. The sores on his body were oozing pus. He didn't have enough strength to fight off the dogs.

The rich man walked around him every day of the week. He stepped over him as he was walking out of his gate. Lest we be too harsh toward this rich man and feel that we are better people than he is and miss the point of this parable, let's remember that in one way or another all of us here in this audience are wealthy. And at some point in our life there will be a Lazarus at our gate and at our back door who has their hand outstretched to us. Perhaps you are wealthy because you are gifted. You are intellectually wealthy and you love books. And you have someone near you who spends their time watching television and soap operas and who get their news mostly from the tabloids.

Maybe you are wealthy because you are loved. Because you have a husband in your life who loves you. Or a wife or children or friends. And you have a neighbor who is crotchety and who is bitter. Who screams at your kids.

Maybe you are wealthy emotionally. You are a stable person. And you have someone with their hand outstretched who is emotionally unwell and who is on medication for some kind of significant psychological disorder. I don't want to be around such a person. I want to avoid them at all costs.

I tell you the truth, if you have any wealth at all—intellectually, relationally, emotionally, financially, God will cross your path with a Lazarus whose hand is stretched out to you. And you will get a chance to see what kind of person you are.

These two men had two different kinds of funerals. Verse 22 says, "The time came when the beggar died. The angels carried him to Abraham's side." I imagine his funeral was probably unattended. No mahogany casket for him. No organist. No hearse. Perhaps he died alone on the street and was buried in an unmarked grave. But he died in the company of angels. It says that he was carried to Abraham's side or Abraham's bosom. He was carried into close fellowship with Abraham who is the father of all children of faith.

The rich man – think about his funeral. I love the way Helmut Thielicke describes the scene at the rich man's funeral. Thielicke writes, "Often during his lifetime he allowed himself to imagine and in pleasant moments of vanity what a splendid affair it would be. How many charitable societies would be in the procession. And surely the best preacher in the town would praise him to the skies. While the poor whom he had showered with a thousand benefactions were sobbing into their hankerschiefs. But now he actually sees his own funeral. He sees it however from the viewpoint of hell. And suddenly and mysteriously this alters the whole thing. It is all so oppressively different from the way it appeared to his coquettish fantasy. True, it was a magnificent funeral, but it no longer pleases him. It only gives him a pain because it is such a screaming contradiction to his real state. He hears a shovel full of earth coming thumping down on his coffin. And one of his best friends saying, 'He lived life for its own sake.' He wants to interject, though no one hears him, 'I failed to live. I am in anguish in this flame.'

Then the second shovel full falls again. And again the clods of earth come thudding down on his mahogany casket. 'He loved the poor in the city,' said another voice. And the rich man wants to shriek, 'If only you suspected what is true. I am in anguish in this flame.' Then the minister, the popular and beloved father of his church casts the third shovel full. 'He was so religious. He donated bells and windows and a seven-branch candlestick. Peace be to his ashes.' And again the clods of earth come rumbling down on his coffin. Or is it the rumbling of Hell that he hears as he cries out, 'I am in anguish in this flame.' How different, how dreadfully different are the judgments of God?"

This story tells us that there are at least two qualities of Hell that we ought not overlook. The first is that it is eternal. Verse 26, "Besides all this between us and you a great chasm has been fixed so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." At death your destiny is fixed. Judgment on your life is irrevocable. There is no repentance after death. No crossing over. You are in paradise, heaven or you go to Hell. And it is forever.

I want you to think about this because we all [and you can underline all], whether we accept the pardon of Christ or not, we all live forever. The issue, friends, is not whether we are eternal. We are. You are eternal and every person you have ever seen is eternal. They will never cease to exist. The only issue is where are we going to spend eternity? You will never cease to exist. You cannot escape existence through suicide. Another person cannot deny your existence. An accident cannot erase your existence. Created in the image of God, you are eternal. The Bible does not teach some kind of annihilationist judgment, then poof you're gone.

You say, "Rich, is it really true that Hell is eternal? That there isn't a point where it just stops?"

Listen to Jesus' words in Mark 9:43-48, "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into the Hell, to the unquenchable fire." You can underline that word "unquenchable." "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into Hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Hell where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

We are talking about unending misery. The worm does not die. It is eternal. That is what Jesus says in Matthew 25:41, "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"

And in verse 46, "And they will go into eternal punishment. But the righteous into eternal life."

If heaven is eternal, so is Hell.

Or how about this from Revelation 14:11, "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. And they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the Beast and his image. And whoever receives the mark of their reign."

Finally Revelation 20:10, "And the devil who had received them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the Beast and the False Prophet were and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Remember, Jesus says that the damned also go with the devil and his angels.

Hell is eternal. And it is also unimaginably horrible. It is not possible to over state the horror of being in Hell.

Jesus uses images of a raging thirst. We know physically that there is virtually nothing more painful than to have every cell of your body crying out for water and receiving any refreshment. I think of the agony of this man's regrets. He not only cries out for personal relief, but he cries out for his brothers. He says, "I beg you father Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so they won't also come to this place of torment." In Hell you have nothing other than your remembrances and your regrets.

Let me put it this way. If, indeed, Jesus was telling the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive, then imagine the horror of being in a position where you want to give and it is too late. Where you want to love and help and warn and do good and you no longer can. If only I hadn't thrown away my life, the man must have thought, if only I had done something for my brothers while they were alive. If only I had done something for my children while they were growing up. If only I hadn't taken so much time on myself. If only I hadn't thrown away my marriage on that affair.

Is there anything more painful than the pain of regret? Looking back over a life and realizing the extraordinary waste of time and missed opportunities, and not being able to do anything about it? It is too late. I shouldn't have been so prideful. I should have worked harder. That is what people experience in Hell to the nth degree. Physical agony. Agony of the soul. Regrets without the hope of forgiveness.

Some people say, "I can't reconcile the existence of an eternal torture chamber, an eternal concentration camp with a God of love."

I have mediated deeply on this issue. Let me share with you what I have come up with. What if Hell was simply the experience of God's love by a person who hates and rejects God? Think with me, friends. God never stops being loving. God is love. But what if God's love was distasteful to someone? What if they wanted nothing to do with God? What if praising God, rather than being music to our ears and a joy to our hearts was repugnant and painful and irritating in the extreme? See, I wonder if something can be awesomely positive like God and His love and yet be felt as horrible because the heart of the person to whom it comes?

Work with me. Imagine a person. Let's call her Sally who views another woman at work, Joan, as her chief rival. Sally is eaten up with envy and animosity and jealousy every time she thinks about Joan. Sally resents Joan. She resents her looks. She resents her money. She resents her promotions at work. She hates her.

Now imagine if Sally had to sit through an awards banquet for Joan where person after person gets up and talks about how incredible Joan is. How she is the best employee in the company, the brightest, the best motivated, the hardest working, the main reason for the success of the company. How do you think Sally would feel listening to Joan getting praised over and over again? Have you never felt the sting of watching praise and success be heaped upon a person who you envy? Who you deeply dislike? Whose honor you reject? Have you never watched a child try to push away and kick away from the hugs and kisses of a relative?

Multiply that pain by an infinite degree. Understand that the essence of sin is that we want to be worshipped. That we want our opinions to rule the day. That we want to be honored, praised and appreciated. The essence of sin in the human heart is the desire to replace God as the object of other people's worship.



What if that rebellion and that desire to be the center of the universe, what if that is never repented of? What if it is nurtured and it consumes a person? What if the thing that causes the pain of Hell is forever hearing God praised and worshipped and loved when you have no love for God in your heart? And the very thought of being smothered in the love of God makes your skin crawl?

Can Hell be reconciled with the love of God? Maybe for some people, I don't know. But maybe for some Hell is precisely the experience of God's love. Just as the same sun melts ice and hardens clay, perhaps the same love of God melts some people's hearts and hardens others. However you understand it and whatever the cause, you cannot overstate the horrible pain of being in Hell.

Let me share with you two reasons to believe in Hell. Free will demands it. Understand that God offers forgiveness for our sins and heaven, as a consequence if we accept His offer of forgiveness. But what if we voluntarily choose to reject God's offer? What if we go into eternity in the state that we were in at death? What if the position that we are in at death is the position toward God that we remain in forever? If at that moment, God just stamps us? Should God make us accept his pardon? Should we be forced to love God against our wills? Should we be forced to go to heaven when we don't want to?

G.K. Chesterton once said that Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice.

Think about it this way. This rich man continually said no to God. I am too busy for you now. I have one more thing to buy for my house, one more item of clothing, one more fork full of food to put in my mouth. Do you understand that sin is simply saying no to God? Get out of my face and leave me alone? That when you say no to God that means no God? People don't understand why Hell results from sin because they think that sin just means behaving badly. You have been a bad boy, so God says, "I send you to Hell as a punishment." That is not what sin is. Sin is not just behaving badly. Sin is saying no to God. No.

And the way the universe is designed, you are allowed to say no to God. But if you do, the most troubling thought is that God will respect your "no" even when it is a stupid no. Even when it is an insane no. Even when you do it at the peril of your own soul. God takes our choices more seriously than we do.

C.S. Lewis once said that in the end there are only going to be two kinds of people. Those who say to the Lord, "Thy will be done" and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."

Why believe in Hell? Because free will demands it. And I believe in Hell because Jesus taught it. He taught it more plainly than any one else. And I have come to the place in my life where I have decided that Jesus is my authority for what is true and what is false in the universe. I trust Him. I know He doesn't lie and I know He is not making something up to scare me, to motivate me, to manipulate me. He is telling me what is true. There is a Hell and I and everyone I know ought to want to avoid it at all costs.

Let me give you a little aside here. If you don't believe in Jesus' teaching on Hell, that there is a place where those who say no to God are sent and that you cannot overstate the horror of this place, if you don't believe in Jesus' teaching on Hell, then why should you believe in Jesus' teaching about anything else?

As I said before, a lot of people find it difficult to reconcile eternal Hell with a God of love. But I think a really fair question is to ask why do you believe that God is a God of love at all? What I mean is that it is not intuitively obvious that the God who made this world is a God of love. I know that the fact that God is a God of love is a major tenet of American religion. But why do you believe that? How would you come up with the idea that God is a God of love?

What I mean is if you look at the world, creation wouldn't tell you that God is a God of love. When you look at nature in a fallen world, the facts are really ambiguous. There is a lot of beauty and majesty and provision. But there is also a lot of ugliness, sickness and death, tornadoes, disease and earthquakes and floods. Creation doesn't necessarily reveal God's love.

How about history? There are so many wars. And so often the poor person, the sick person, the weak person, the Lazarus' of the world gets stepped on. Where is the love? Your conscience wouldn't tell you that God is a God of love. It would tell you that you are condemned. That when you fail, you deserve to die.

There is only one way that you would ever know that God is a God of love: by His revelation through the Bible and through the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Not because of creation, because of history, because of your conscience, but only because of what Jesus taught and you accept Jesus' authority regarding God. Because you say that Jesus accurately communicates to you about God and about the universe. And about God Jesus said that He is a Father who runs toward every repentant child of His. That when any child of God turns and faces God, God runs toward that child with open arms and pardon and grace in His hands.

Why should you believe in Hell? Because Jesus taught it. And you either accept Jesus' authority, however uncomfortable the truth, whether it is about Hell or your money or your sexuality or divorce, or you reject His authority. And you reject His authority about God as well.

Listen to what I am saying because we can misuse what we learn about Hell or properly use it. The reason why I think some people just turn off to teachings about Hell is because Hell is misused. It is misused in the pulpits of America. It is misused by some TV evangelists. It is misused by folks popularly. When I say it is misused, I mean people talk as if they want some people to go there. "So and so ought to end up in Hell." You can't want someone to go to Hell. That is wanting what the devil wants.

The Bible teaches in 2 Peter that it is God's will that none should perish, but that all should have eternal life. God doesn't want to lose one. It breaks God's heart when anyone says no to Him. It should be our desire that everyone, before they breathe their last breath, says yes to God and yes to the offer of His pardon.

It is a misuse of Hell to coolly and detachedly speak about it without it causing you profound sorrow. I cannot coolly and detachedly talk about the Holocaust as a Jew. I cannot sit and watch a movie like "Schindler's List" without being overwhelmed, sickened and numbed. This has been one of the messages that I have wanted to avoid for so long. How should we use Hell?

Let me read to you from the great C.S. Lewis' *Problem of Pain*. Lewis says, "In all of our discussions on Hell, we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation not of our enemies or of our friends, but of ourselves." He goes on to say,

“This chapter is not about your wife or son, nor about Judas Iscariot, or Nero or Hitler. It is about you and me.”

I was trying to communicate that at the beginning of this talk. I am deeply concerned about a religious culture that we find in America today and in this church, with people who never contemplate their own possible damnation. Where the question just never arises about whether someone is just a false professor of faith or a real possessor of the miracle of God. Where people don't take His warning seriously. See, the point of this parable is that we must take the warnings seriously (verses 27-31). If we're waiting around for some greater experience than the warnings of the Bible to convince us to turn from sin, that experience won't come.

I am deeply concerned, as a pastor, as I sit in my office with person after person who looks me in the eye and say, “I really don't care what God says. I am getting a divorce and I know I am on my way to heaven. I don't have to forgive so and so who hurt me.” I say to you, Christian counselor, Christian leader, do you ever add the possibility of going to Hell to your arsenal of counsel? Do you ever say to someone, “If you continue in this addictive pattern like Jesus said in Matthew 5, or Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6, you could end up in Hell?”

The proper use of Hell is to have us dangle for awhile if we have a callused conscience so that we flee into the arms of a loving, merciful God, and repent of running from Him and to have us cry out for our friends and our families, “Please God, don't allow one of them to be lost.” And the proper use of Hell is to cause us to be urgent to sacrifice for world missions for our neighbors.

Let's pray.