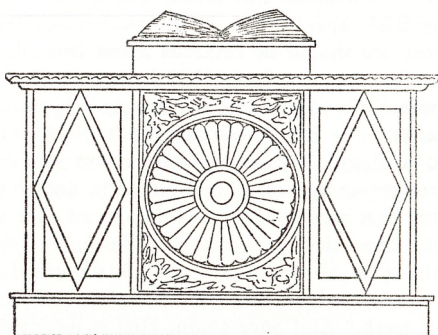


Crescent Hill Sermons



"God's Love and Hell"

A Sermon

by

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Delivered at

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Vol. IV

February 4, 1968

No. 33

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE:

I Timothy 2:4, Matthew 23:37-39

A few Sundays ago in a sermon entitled "The Forgiveness That Sets Free," I laid considerable stress on the unconditional nature of God's love. I tried to show then that we do not earn it or deserve it, but rather receive it as a gift of grace, and that because God's love is like this, there is hope for forgiveness on the same terms. In the mail that came in the following week, I received this postcard from a person who identified himself as "a friend from your radio audience." It read: "Dear Dr. Claypool, Why would a God who 'really' loves, send people to Hell? Where does unconditional love fit into that picture?"

The moment I read these two questions, I sensed that the writer possessed genuine religious sensitivity. If a person has reflected even the slightest bit upon the religion of the Bible, he is bound to have run head on into this very dilemma: how can God be love in any real and unconditional

Published weekly by the Crescent Hill Baptist Church, 2800 Frankfort Avenue, Louisville, Ky., 40206. Second-class postage paid at Louisville, Kentucky.

sense, and there still be a place like Hell where men go and suffer unspeakable agony? Now admittedly, we do not know as much about this reality called Hell as we might think. The Bible speaks of it in all kinds of different ways, and therefore we should be cautious about becoming too dogmatic about it. In one place, Hell is described as a lake of fire into which the devil and his angels are cast. In other places, the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem is used as an analogy. This place was always smoldering, and worms were forever moving in and out of it, and so the images of the flame that never went out and worms that never died are pressed into service. In yet another instance, however, nothing is said at all about fire, but Hell is described as a place of outer darkness where there is "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." And once again, Hell is depicted as a condition of separation or isolation that results from having departed from God. My point is, the descriptions of the reality of Hell in the Bible are many and varied, and we could argue all day about the details, but who can escape the sober import back of all of these images? Conceive of it any way that you will, the reality of Hell is present in the Bible, and it stands for some dark and foreboding peril to which every man is subject, and this sends real shudders through the soul.

It is no wonder, then, that people of sensitivity are disturbed by the sight of these two realities side by side—a God of love on the one hand, and a place of agony on the other. And no wonder they ask the question: How do these things fit together or relate to each other? On the surface they appear to be contradictory. I have only a measure of love and I would not send my children to torment. How then, can God do this and still be called love? It is a dilemma, as basic and far-reaching as any one in Biblical religion, and I hope the one who wrote this card is listening again this morning, for I want to struggle with the question. However, even if he is not, I do not feel I am wasting your time, for I suspect that most of you have asked the very same question at one time or another: "How can God be love and still send men to Hell?"

I have already intimated that on the surface these two realities seem to contradict each other, and this is exactly the conclusion to which many people have come. They assert flatly that "something has to give," for both of these statements cannot be true and at the same time be related. Thus, solution to the problem is sought by adjusting one side or the other.

For example, some people challenge the assertion that God's nature is essentially one of unconditional love. They would concede that love is one aspect of God's Being, but they say that concepts like justice and righteousness are ac-

tually more basic, and thus Hell fits into the picture logically. They would set the following kind of framework around life. Out of unconditional love, God created the world with certain laws built in, and then created man to live within this structure. God's agreement was clear-cut from the first. If man would obey and live according to the rules, then he would be blessed and experience real joy. However, if he refused to obey, then consequences would be dire and terrifying. He would thus break the infinite law of God's righteousness, and for that must pay a comparable penalty. Thus was the agreement between God and man in the beginning. The part of God called love set things up initially and got life started, but from then on the part of God called justice and righteousness took control of the process. This meant that if man chose to disobey and deal with God on these terms, he automatically set in motion the consequences that had been ordained for that kind of behavior, and the punishment of Hell followed quite logically and justly. On these grounds, you could say that a sinner in Hell is just as true an expression of the will of God as a saint in Heaven. After all, God sets up the options in love; it is man who determines how he will use these, and justice is the last word in the working out of the process.

This approach to the matter does ease the tension and make the relation of Hell to God more understandable, but the question is: is it valid and in keeping with the broad sweep of Bible revelation. Can you, for example, trace the footprints of God through the long corridors of the Old Testament and finally to that cross outside the wall of Jerusalem, and conclude that justice and righteousness are the deepest words about His nature? I, for one, cannot agree with this, for it appears to me that the unconditional love of God does not stop with the act of creation. It continues right on into the period of our use and misuse of the gift of life. If love is found only at the beginning, and justice then takes over, how can you account for forgiveness, or God's agonizing effort to reclaim Israel, or Jesus coming to seek and to save that which is lost? You see, if justice is the last word, Jesus would never have looked out over the Holy City and said, "O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, how I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks," *and then wept*. Would not He have said, with tears in His eyes: "All right Jerusalem, you paid your money, you took your choice. Here is what you get — destruction". Nor would Jesus have prayed from the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," had justice been the last word. He would have prayed, rather for those legions of angels to administer the penalty that was so richly deserved.

The point I am making is that the God who is revealed in the pages of the Bible is something more than a righteous

Judge. He is more like a father who pitieth his children, and has mercy upon them. God's love is involved with more than the giving of life; what man does with the gift is also a concern of God's love. Jesus openly declared that "it was not the will of the Father that even one of the little ones should perish;" therefore, to imply that God is only just, and does not really care which alternative man takes—to Heaven or to Hell—cannot be right. If the Bible teaches anything, it teaches that God would rather man be saved than be lost. God so loved the world, even after sin, mind you, that He sent His only begotten Son that men might not perish but be saved. No God of mere retributive justice would have gone to such lengths for the obviously guilty. Therefore, I say the attempt to solve the problem by making adjustments in the nature of God is not valid.

However, this is not the only attempted solution by way of adjustment. There are other people who find the relation of God and Hell contradictory and go to work on the other extreme; namely, adapting the nature of Hell and eventually eliminating it from the scene. These are people who take very seriously the words of Jesus that it is not the will of the Father that any should perish. They link with this another statement of our Lord's, to the effect that "with God, all things are possible." They thus come to the conclusion that God will some day win all men back to Himself and eventually save every creature that comes from His hand. This is called "Universalism" or "the pious hope", and looks forward confidently to the day when "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

This does not mean that Hell is no longer a reality for these people. They rather look on it as one of the instruments God will use in achieving His final victory. Nels Ferre, for example, speaks of Hell as "a school with a door in it," and believes that Hell is the place where God shows men the consequences of evil so graphically that they are moved to repent and be saved. The function of Hell in this view is akin to the way a juvenile judge in Florida recently used a jail cell. A teenager had been arrested for public drunkenness, and, as a penalty, the judge sentenced the boy to have to spend twenty-four hours in the same cell with a confirmed, pathetic alcoholic. Seeing the condition of one who was far down the road he was just starting, had a redemptive effect on the boy, and he emerged shaken and sobered and hopefully a good bit wiser. This is the way Nels Ferre sees God using this place called Hell. It is not a permanent abode, but a school where men are brought face to face with what they have done or neglected in life. And as a result of such exposure, Ferre is dogmatic in asserting that all will repent and come to accept life on God's terms. This position links power to love,

and asserts dogmatically that Hell is not a final stage of existence, but a stage along the way by which the most recalcitrant are finally redeemed. Hell, then, is real but not eternal, and thus compatible with a God of unconditional love.

I think any sensitive Christian will find in this solution something deeply appealing, for who would not delight to know that finally God's love will win out with everyone? Yet, here again, is this a valid solution in light of all that we know about God and ourselves? I, for one, have some misgivings; in fact, there are two big problems with this position, and they have nothing to do with wrath or vindictiveness, but rather the nature of human freedom and of love itself.

It sounds wonderful to say dogmatically: "God will eventually find a way to win back every single person to Himself, but ponder for a moment the price that must be paid on such an assertion. For one thing, it means that man is not ultimately free. When you say flat-footedly that a group of people are going to do a certain thing, you are eliminating any real freedom on their part. You are saying, in effect, that no matter how they feel individually, they will eventually be over-ruled and if necessary, coerced. Now this may seem rather raw and blunt, but this is what universal salvation ultimately implies. It eliminates any final choice or real freedom on the part of man, and thus takes a supposedly free person and turns him into a mechanical puppet. This might be called salvation by some, but it is, in fact, the destruction of the most distinctive capacity of man; namely, his freedom to say yes, and his freedom to say no.

This is bad enough in itself, but there is another difficulty, and that is the fact that love, by its very nature, is not a coercive power. Take any form of love you may choose, from the lowest right up to the highest, and one characteristic is always to be found—love does not force itself on another against the will. Love has many powers—the power to give, the power to woo, the power to persuade, the power to sacrifice itself. But the moment coercion enters, or the desire to dominate becomes irresistible, in that moment love ceases to be, and what you have is a reality of a very different sort. This is an extremely important insight as far as universal salvation is concerned, for would a God of unconditional love force Himself and His way on a creature against that creature's will? To do so would be to violate both the nature of man as free and the nature of God as love. To say that Hell is a school in which man cannot help but repent and be saved may sound lofty and magnanimous indeed, but it is in fact purchasing salvation at an exorbitant price in terms of both who we are and who God is.

I have to reject, then, both of the positions that a God of love and the reality of Hell are so contradictory that

one or the other must be changed. In all that I have learned from the Bible and experience and life, I am convinced that both of these entities have reality as they are, and cannot be adjusted away. Therefore, if a solution is to be found to the dilemma, I think it must come from another direction; namely, finding a way to relate these two as they are.

I believe this can be done, and I would like to attempt it by challenging first my friend's statement: "God . . . sends men to Hell." I do not think this is true. What should be said is that men send themselves to Hell, and because God is serious about their freedom and His love, He allows this to happen. The movement to Hell is not so much an act of God as it is an act of men. The problem is essentially with us, not with Him.

The thing we need to get out of our mind is the image of God as a sadistic tyrant who, whenever He is thwarted or frustrated, loses His temper and begins to torture people. This kind of reaction is a very human characteristic in the face of personal failure. When other people let us down or harm us in some way, our own sense of honor is thwarted, and we want to lash out at them and meet our needs at the expense of the offender. However, let me say emphatically, God is not like this! The idea of His stooping to torture a creature in a fit of anger is almost unthinkable after the restraint He demonstrated on Calvary. No, is it not part of the majesty of a Christ-like God that He does not have so to defend Himself? I think it is true to say that God is far more serious about us than He is about Himself and His honor, and herein lies the crux of the matter. Hell is not rooted in Divine wrath or anger or malice, but rather in an incredible respect for our freedom and a love that will not coerce us or force us against our wills.

I find it staggering to contemplate just how seriously God takes my freedom. He not only allows me to say yes and no; He goes much further, and allows the consequences of my decision to stand. If God let us make decisions, but then intervened and overruled the effects that followed, the freedom we have would be shallow, indeed. But He does not do this! The true extent of our freedom can be seen most clearly in the fact that we are allowed to embody the choices that we make, and God thereby honors both the decision and the consequences that flow from it.

This, then, clarifies the source of Hell's anguish. It is not torture in the sense that God inflicts it upon us from without. It is the torment that rises up within when we misuse our freedom and make for ourselves a horrible mess of existence. If I go out and eat too many green apples and get a terrible stomach-ache, it is wrong for me to regard the pain as torture by God. It is rather torment of a self-inflicted nature; in the face of all I knew to the contrary, I chose to act this way,

and because He takes seriously my freedom and His love, God lets me experience what I have chosen.

This principle, which I have illustrated on so simple a scale, is the real key as to how a God of love and a Hell of suffering do fit together in the same picture. God wants us to be His joyful children, and to this end He both gives and will forgive and forever show us mercy. The only thing He will not do is trample on our freedom and force us into His way. Do you remember the father in the great parable of the prodigal son who was giving a party and wanted his elder son to join it? With the music and dancing in full swing behind him, he begged and pleaded and did everything in love's power to invite the son in. However, he did not coerce him. He did not finally get hold of his son's arm and twist it and say, "You are going to come in, no matter how you feel." No, he who chose misery and the darkness was allowed to stay there. Why? Not because the father was mad or vengeful, but because he respected the son's freedom both to choose and then to embody the choice that he had made.

This is the only reason in the world there is a Hell—it exists not in spite of God's love, but because He is love and thus will not coerce. C. S. Lewis states it perfectly when he says: "In the end there will be just two kinds of persons—those who say to God: 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says: 'Thy will be done.'" One group will inherit the Kingdom of Joy that it is the Father's pleasure to give to His children.

The others will experience that unspeakable darkness that comes from choosing to walk away from the light and the joy and celebration of God's house. And the sobering truth is: God will let us walk away and so suffer, because He takes most seriously not His own honor, but our freedom. He allows us to get in eternity exactly what we have chosen in time; to have what we want the most. If this choice is God and His way, then a Heaven and the joy of relationship will follow. But if we choose ourselves and nothing else, then that is what we shall get, and nothing more.

I read once of a man who awakened in the dead of night, and for some reason could not go back to sleep. It was one of those nights when he could not see or hear anything. All he was conscious of was himself lying there breathing in the darkness. It was an eerie and empty experience, and he thought to himself: "What if I had to go on like this forever and ever in total aloneness?" And then he sat up in sheer terror, for it suddenly dawned on him that *this kind of existence was the logical end of a self-centered life!* If we do get in eternity what we have chosen in time, and that choice has always been ourselves, that is what we will get and nothing else, and that would be torment!

My conclusion is this: a God of unconditional love and the reality of Hell do fit together in the same picture. Strange as it may sound, there is an inner logic between the two. It is because of this love, not in spite of it, that Hell is a possibility. If God were more serious about His own honor or less serious about our freedom or the non-coerciveness of love, then things might be different. But given what He is and what we are, you cannot say dogmatically: "There will be no Hell," for if we chose it, He will not coerce us, but in Paul's phrase, will "give us up with tears." It is sobering then to remember that because He takes our freedom so seriously, we dare not take it lightly. He wants us to be saved and will do anything in mercy to accomplish this. But the question is: Do we want this? God never sends a man to Hell at His initiative. But listen, He will let me send myself, if I resolutely refuse the Kingdom of Joy. The father in the parable wanted the son to come in but allowed him to stay out, and so it is with God.

Therefore, having thought the problem through, I find I cannot do away with either aspect of the dilemma. God is love, unconditional and free, and for that reason, Hell is possible. It is not a place of Divine torture, but a place of self-inflicted torment for those who will not have Heaven. I think Lewis is right. Because God is love and we are free, in the end there will be just two kinds of people—those who say to God "Thy will be done;" and those to whom God says: "Thy will be done." From time to time I must ask myself: In which of these groups do I stand? . . . And you?