

YOU'RE FIRED!

How Can a Loving God Send Anyone to Hell?

Text: Luke 16:19-31

Is Jesus the Divine Donald?

Does life ultimately and finally work something like that reality show, *The Apprentice*? Could there come a day when God, like some cosmic Donald Trump, calls all the contestants into the Board Room, rehearses what pleased and disappointed him about the performance of each, and then looks across the table at some of them and says coldly or angrily: "You're Fired!" Only, he doesn't just mean: "You're not going on in my company." He means: "You're Hell-fired. You're heading for the eternal brimstone barbecue. You have been such a failure that you are *toast* and going to *roast*, forevermore." Does it work that way?

In a spate of recent books, contemporary atheists like Richard Dawkins cite this vision of reality as further evidence that Christianity is, essentially, a religion of terror and abuse.¹ While I boldly disagree with that assessment, I am familiar with the biblical texts that give rise to such a view. In his Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus warns against the selfish passions of lust and covetousness: "**If your right eye [or right hand] causes you to sin, [get rid of it] and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell**" (Matt. 5:29-30). In his Parable of the Sheep and Goats, Jesus contrasts the fate of those who care for the poor and powerless with those who don't. "**Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance.' 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'**" (Matt. 25:34,41).

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus pictures those who have faithfully invested in his service as going on to "**joy**." But of the one who has peevishly hoarded what he has, the Master says: "**Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**" (Matt. 25:30). In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus says: "**As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**" (Matt. 13:40-42).

In other words, if we've been comforting ourselves with the idea that Hell is not a very central doctrine in the New Testament, or that Jesus didn't mention it much, we need to look again. There are even more passages I haven't quoted, but three big ideas emerge from them all. FIRST, Hell exists. SECOND, no one in their right mind would

want to wind up there. I think it's important to remember that Jesus is speaking in parables here. The images he uses of fiery furnaces and outer darkness or, elsewhere, of a burning trash heap (gehenna) or of a **"lake of fire"** (Rev 20:14-15) are analogies not literal realities. Nonetheless, the big idea is that these are not destinations anybody would purposely book on Expedia.com. The THIRD idea, however, is the biggest and most important: The way we live here and now determines whether we enter that hellish dimension or a place of joy and abundance. Our attitudes, choices, investments, treatment of other people, the way our soul develops, counts greatly – here in the present but also for our eternal future.

Natural Selection?

Why is this such a shocking notion to some of us? It shouldn't seem a scandal to an evolutionary biologist like Dr. Dawkins, for in many ways it parallels the principal of natural selection he identifies as the rule of life. The ones that adapt and develop the traits best-suited to the larger environment prosper and survive. The ones that don't are consumed in the furnace of competition or are lost in the outer darkness of extinction or found in the trash heap of the fossil record.

If you think about it, this storyline is also consistent with the pattern that most people in the Western World express their assent or active commitment to every week. From *American Idol*, to *Making the Band*, to *Elimidate*, from March Madness and college admissions, to politics and the latest mutual fund ratings, people seem to understand that there is this selection process going on. There is this testing and trial process by which the most viable qualities are cultivated and the worst culled out.

Why, therefore, does the teaching of Jesus on this subject seem so bizarre and upsetting? We know that there are particular capacities required for surviving and prospering in certain environments. For example, it is good that I have never been invited to play in the Masters tournament. I would injure the gallery every time I teed off. Eventually they'd decide to hurt me. I *might* make the cut with Donald Trump. I'd *never* survive Simon Cowell! But the much more important question of my life (and all of ours) is: "How have I adapted to God's way?"

What if it turns out that that there IS an environment larger than this world we see with our eyes? What if it exists as surely but as invisibly as the quantum world we're only just now discovering? What if it has certain definite properties to it, like the physical and social world we now inhabit? For the sake of discussion, let's just call that dimension what Jesus called it: **"The Kingdom of God"** or the **"Kingdom of Heaven"** -- literally, the invisible place where God completely rules.

Now, let's suppose that the ONE adaptation absolutely required to make it in that world was the ability to humbly, gratefully take in grace and then let it out again, like a fish takes in water, absorbs the oxygen, and cycles the water out again, so other fish can

breathe it. What if you couldn't survive in that next environment unless you developed that particular trait (grace-gills) here in this one? And how *would* you develop it?

Adapting to Grace or Not

Maybe you'd start by learning to recognize life as a gift instead of an entitlement. Perhaps you'd get honest about your selfishness, confess it often, and ask for forgiveness. Recognizing how much grace you'd been given in life, maybe you'd start looking at those without enough food, clothing, or visitors and start extending grace to them. Maybe you'd begin viewing everything you have as a gracious trust. You'd progressively stop burying so much in self-protecting or self-padding things and start investing those talents in the service of the Master's gracious purposes in the world. You might even start gouging out or cutting off from your life those things that were blocking you from taking in grace and cycling it out again. In other words, you'd begin to do what Jesus said in those passages we read earlier. How is that happening for you?

The alternative, I suppose, is that you could hold your breath against grace or against developing this adaptation. You could remain a self-sealed, self-saving, self-focused being. In the passage we read together from Luke 16 earlier, Jesus tells a story that describes someone like this. It is telling that Jesus doesn't give him a name, other than calling him "**a rich man.**" His identity has been defined by the luxurious riches he has been able to take in but not breathe out. "**At his gate,**" Jesus says, "**was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.**" In other words, the rich man could help the poor man and not be depleted in the slightest, but he somehow does not develop the ability to allow the grace he has received to flow through him. The local dogs offer Lazarus more comfort than the rich man.

But, suddenly, both of them are dead. Lazarus is in heaven with Abraham, the great hero of faith. The rich man is "**in hell, where he was in torment.**" What's fascinating is that though there has been a complete reversal of fortunes, the rich man doesn't seem to know it. There's no repentance. There's no sense that he should have cycled out the grace he'd received in life. It's still all about him. Sitting in hell, he tries to order Lazarus to be his waiter, the way he might have done in this world. "**Father Abraham,**" he says, "**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.**" The boldface words there in verse 24 are "**me,**" "**my,**" and "**I.**"

The great biblical scholar, Matthew Henry, suggests that when it comes to reading the Bible on the subject of Hell, modern readers have completely misread the meaning of the phrase, "**weeping and gnashing of teeth.**" The phrase, says Henry, is not describing *physical* pain, such as you'd hope a loving God would not want to deal to

people. The phrase is actually describing spiritual pain (emotional and psychological agony) -- the grief and anger of someone who feels he's gotten a raw deal.

The Rich Man doesn't ask to get out of hell, he just asks that it operate by his rules and meet his needs. The closest he comes to changing his heart is a concern that his five brothers not find themselves in **"a place of torment"** like him – a place without people to serve the me, my, and I that is him.

Seeing Hell With Fresh Eyes

Do you want to know what Hell is? I know there are many people who believe that Hell is a place of eternal retribution. God cuts and crushes evildoers like a cosmic Trump or Cowell. I personally find some comfort in the eternal punishment idea myself, simply because I'd like to think that those child molesters and genocidal maniacs are going to be dealt with in some way that balances the scales at a level that no human justice seems sufficient to do. I take comfort in the statement God makes in Deuteronomy: **"It is mine to avenge; I will repay."** Justice will be served. Count on that. But God makes it clear in the next sentence that, in the end, Hell is not so much something that God sends upon the evil but something into which the selfish slide themselves. Deuteronomy 32:35 says: **"In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them."**

What if it's true, that the Kingdom of Heaven is the dimension where God's rule is absolute and his grace is everywhere like living water? What would happen if someone fell into it -- someone who'd never really adapted to it, never developed the capacity to take in the grace of God freely offered in Jesus Christ and to cycle that grace out – someone who had to have air, oxygen, life on their own terms... had to be the eternal me, my, I, God? What would happen after their foot slipped and they plunged from this life into the next?

Here's what I think: They'd hold their breath as long as they could, then (ironically, tragically) they'd drown in grace. Its very inrushing would feel to their lungs like fire, then darkness. "There are only two kinds of people," says C.S. Lewis – those who say 'Thy will be done' to God or those to whom God says in the end, '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."² And I would add: No soul ever need be fired. The Gospel According to John tells us: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son... full of grace and truth (John 1:14)... that whosoever believed in him, should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved"** (John 3:16; John 1:14).

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p.318.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1946), p.72.

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Discussion Guide

1. What do you hear other people saying about the subject of God and Hell?
2. Which of the following describes your thoughts/feelings on the subject?
(check all that apply)
 - I'm not sure I believe in Hell
 - I'm afraid there might be a Hell
 - I hope there is a Hell
 - I am certain there is a Hell
3. Fill in the blank: I believe that Hell is....
4. What is your response to the following statements?
 - God actively "sends" people to Hell?
 - God "lets" people go to Hell
 - The absence of God IS Hell
 - The presence of God is Hell to those who can't accept grace
5. To what extent did you or did you not resonate with the idea that eternity works by a process of "natural selection"? (i.e. people either do or do not "adapt" to the grace, surrender, and worship of God that is the essence of heaven)

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

"If your right eye [or right hand] causes you to sin, [get rid of it] and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29-30).

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance.' 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'" (Matt. 25:34,41).

"Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30).

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt. 13:40-42).

"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. (Luke 16:19-31)