



# Pastor Ken's Sermon

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SERMON - 11TH PENTECOST LUKE 13:22-30

AUGUST 21, 2022

"HELL, AND A GOD OF LOVE"

Divine judgement is one of Christianity's most offensive teachings, even though we live in a culture steeped in law and value (most of the time at least) the rule of law. Yet the thought God will judge a person according to his law is distasteful or worse, even to many Christians. Why? A big reason is that most of us have heard, and probably used the phrase "God is love" - from I John 4:8, repeated in I John 4:16.

Following that phrase is a discussion of how we can say something like "God is love." I John 4:10 says it is because God gave us his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Then, I John 4:16 says, we can live in that love and therefore love one another. The Bible is most assuredly the source of our belief that God is loving - but the Bible is also the source of our belief that God is a just judge who will put right all that is wrong in the world one day, and forever.

That "judging" God is in plain view in our lesson from Luke today. Jesus is asked a question - a good but tough one, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved." Keep in mind this questioner was likely a Jew and therefore may have in fact believed, even preferred Jesus respond 'yes -- the sons and daughters of Israel'. Or, he or she could have been someone who'd heard Jesus' interpretations of God's law and started to despair just a wee bit.

Jesus had said anyone with lust in their heart was an adulterer; anyone with wealth had the same chance of heaven as a camel making it through the eye of a needle; anyone who expressed anger was guilty of murder; and most recently, you may recall, he said he came to divide families and bring to the world not peace but a sword. You can therefore understand the question - Who can measure up? Who can possibly do, avoid or endure all that and "be saved?"

Jesus' response goes from challenging - strive to enter the kingdom by the narrow door of obedience to the law - to chilling. Many will try to enter but will be refused - they will be labeled evildoers, forever weeping and grinding their teeth. How can a God of love send people to what we presume from this text, is hell? That's not so different from the question in our lesson today - "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

Divine judgement is one of Christianity's most difficult teachings. Some would like to do away with the idea of it - others walk away from the faith because of it. I'm not particularly fond of preaching hell. I'll simply respect that Jesus spoke with passion and urgency in this passage - something that He can do at least, in love. Objections to divine judgement are as you might imagine more of a modern phenomenon but attempts to understand and explain it go back to the very infancy of the church.

Until a few centuries ago, there was universal belief in a divine, spiritual order to the world which, if violated, had consequences, much as violating the physical order of the world, by say placing your hand in a fire had. It could harm you in other words. People "strove" to live in harmony with both orders for their wellbeing, physically in the here and now - spiritually for the hereafter.

But the modern world, eschewed by science and its offspring the "soft sciences" of psychology and sociology began to argue that the physical world can be both understood and tamed and consequently, the spiritual world, if there was one. So instead of striving to live according to the laws of the physical and spiritual world, shaping our desires to fit what they demanded, we sought to control and shape reality to fit our desires.

Pastor Tim Keller, in his book "The Reason for God" said "the spirit of modernity ...gave us the responsibility to determine right and wrong. Our confidence that we can control the physical environment has spilled over so we now think we can reshape the (.spiritual) realm as well." Hence... out with the old... divine judgement. ... in with the new... or not so new... God is love, and judges no one. Hell, whatever it is, should repel us and we should never revel in the thought of anyone spending eternity in it.

But neither can we wish or reason it away. It's as much a part of the way creation works as the law of gravity or the fact that we need air, food and water to survive. Karl Marx famously called religion (Christianity in particular) "the opiate of the masses" because of its promise of a happy afterlife. He wanted our heads and hearts fully immersed in the only thing that was real ... the here and now - and through social revolution, heaven on earth.

But today, many people charm themselves with another opiate - the belief in nothing after death - consoling themselves by turning away from God, saying in so many words "we heard you God, but found no reason to follow you" and in so saying, saying evil will not be judged. God can only love. But that misrepresents entirely what evil is, according to the Bible, and very likely what our Lord Jesus is addressing in our lesson today.

Evil is unbelief - a condition of the soul. A common image in the Bible of judgement, and therefore of hell, is fire and worms. Why? Because fire consumes, it disintegrates what it engulfs. Worms slowly eat away at something till it's gone. When our souls turn from God, from the goodness of God, from the reliability, kindness, grace and wisdom of God, they start to disintegrate. Our souls were made to be filled with, filled by God. Absent Him, they are consumed with something else. Selfishness, self-absorption, then bitterness, envy, anxiety. Hell on earth. Hell, in the hereafter, is just a continuation of its here and now version. "I never knew you" is another way of God saying, "you have other loves."

In his book "The Great Divorce" C.S Lewis said "*It is not a question of God sending us to hell at all. In each of us there is something growing, which will be hell if it is not nipped in the bud.*" There all humility and all sense of concern for another is gone. That may be what Jesus' questioner in our story was inflicted with. Hell is, Lewis said, "*the greatest monument to human freedom*", and all who may be there, choose it. So, what can we say? 'C 'mon pastor, you 're running out of time - where is the good news, the hope'? The hope of course, is Christ. He may, he does have the authority to say, "I never knew you", but also the grace and the determination to seek and want you forever. Our Jesus is not behind any sort of door, but on the loose, free, knocking on the door of your heart, occupying the likes of you, calling those the world may call "last place folks" into his kingdom.

Yes, it's a dilemma - and if not for the gospel of grace we've heard and believed, we'd be tempted to wonder which side of the door we're presently on. But that is not the point of this story - its point is where Jesus is, and that cannot mean anything but everywhere, all the time, seeking, saving, securing, promising that no one who desires joy, will ever miss it. We'll say more next time. AMEN