

# ⇒ MY ⇒ PROBLEM *with God*

## Message 6 | The Good Place and The Bad Place

Hey very, very exciting day for Mercy Church Today! After our last service we will have a brief member meeting and there at that meeting we are going to do 2 things:

1. We are going to vote on our two newest elder candidates!
2. We are going to give a facility search update.

So I hope you will stick around. We are going to keep it to just a few minutes.

There is a relatively new sitcom out called “The Good Place.” The premise is a woman who has just died and arrives in the afterlife. She sits across a desk from the guy in charge and asks if she is in the thumbs up place or the thumbs down place and The Guy says “It’s ok, you are in the good place.” BTW – the guy in charge of the good place is played by none other than Ted Dansen, which makes sense because in the afterlife everybody knows your name.

The woman asks “who was right?” And he says, all religions got a little bit right, about 5% each. Dansen says every one of your actions in life netted you either a positive or negative

score and you make it to the good place if you got a high enough positive score. The storyline is the main character is there by mistake. She was actually a terrible person on earth and there was a mix up and she schemes to make sure nobody finds out. Because if they do, she will be sent to the bad place. Well at one point her cover is blown and she has to face an interrogation to determine if she qualifies for the good place. Here are the questions he asks her to determine whether she deserves the bad place:

- Did you ever commit a serious crime?
- Did you ever have a vanity license plate like lexusforliz or mamasbmw?
- Did you ever reheat fish in an office microwave?
- Did you ever take off your shoes AND socks on a commercial airline?
- Did you ever appear on the American show the bachelor or bachelorette OR did you ever post on a social media site that you were emotionally invested in the relationships any contestant was pursuing?

This humorous commentary on the positive outweighing the negative is a fantastic assessment of the typical 21<sup>st</sup> century western mind. We think its arrogant to assume anyone can really know what happens when we die, but in general there is a good place and a bad place and though we know bad living should have consequences, we still secretly think we deserve a shot at going to “The Good Place” no matter what we do. And “The Bad Place?” That’s only for the worst of the worst of the worst.

This isn't new with us of course. All humans want to know about the afterlife. The sense that we will live forever *somewhere* has shaped every civilization in human history. Australian aboriginals pictured heaven as a distant land beyond the horizon, In the pyramids in Egypt the bodies were buried with maps placed beside them as guides to the future world. Romans believed the righteous would picnic in the elysian fields. Yes these depictions all differ, but the one thing every culture has in common is an innate sense of the eternal – that this world is not all there is.<sup>1</sup>

Today we are going to talk about The Good Place and The Bad Place. I want to show you what Christians believe about Heaven and Hell. This is our final message in the “My Problem with God series.” Today I want to hopefully address some real problems skeptics have with the Christian understanding of Hell specifically. Why does it even exist? Could a loving God really send anyone to hell? You are like does 70 years of bad living really warrant torment for ***eternity!?*** **Seems like an overreaction.**

I know it can be offensive and truthfully I have been a little anxious with this sermon all week. Because I want to preach truth in love as God says to. And this is the one doctrine that I'd happily do without if it wasn't in the bible. I don't like it but I also don't get to decide truth based on how it makes me feel. Those of us who believe in hell aren't sadists who enjoy the idea of eternal suffering. In fact, the thought of people I know who are outside of Christ spending eternity in hell is deeply

heart-breaking. Our community group has been working through that lately and its empty and heavy. Hell is a difficult reality, but it is something that the Bible teaches, and we can't fully understand God and His world unless we grapple with it.

And listen I think....I think today is going to be BIG for some of you. I'll go ahead and tell you the Lord has been working on some of you and today you are going to make a decision finally to let him in. And its going to be scary and awesome all at the same time but we'll get there. Here we go.

We are going to be in **Luke 16.19-31**. A bizzare but important passage for our conversation today. This is a parable Jesus taught his disciples and some Pharisees that were listening in. Since he taught it as a parable I want to read the whole thing to you. Then I want to work through what it means for us ok.

[19] “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. [20] And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, [21] who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. [22] The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, [23] and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. [24] And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ [25] But Abraham said, ‘Child,

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<sup>1</sup> Alcorn, Randy. *Heaven (...)* 1.

remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. [26] And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' [27] And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— [28] for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' [29] But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' [30] And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' [31] He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" Luke 16.19-31

Like I said, this is a parable. There are many lessons in a parable and we'll see several today but almost always there is a big overarching purpose behind it. this passage is a giant warning about the reality of hell. So here is the big idea we will build towards the rest of the morning:

To Get us out of Hell, God must get Hell out of us.<sup>2</sup>

This passage surfaces threads that run throughout the bible. So I want you to follow but I won't have the sermon structure you are used to. I've got about 4 main points that I'll identify

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<sup>2</sup> While this is my re-phrasing, the concept comes from J.D. Greear's sermon "how could a loving God send people to hell?" preached in the *Why I'm not a Christian* Series.

that we either need to believe or reject in light of this parable that will dictate what we do about the Christian teaching on heaven and hell.

### **Let's just go straight to the man who finds himself in hades.**

What do we know about him? Well, first we know **he is religious**. We know it because in verse 14 we hear the setting is "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him." Luke 16 is filled with rebuking these Pharisees. And that's important because whenever you see Jesus calling out Pharisees he is calling out people who are spiritual and moral models of their day. These are the people the rest of God's people want to be like. He was in a position of leadership in the temple. Jesus does this often and its recorded often because sometimes it takes a few times for church people to realize GOD IS TALKING TO YOU!

The danger of having been around church for a while is that you can think "oh I've heard this" and just mozy along in your routine and the problem is that God is saying..THIS IS FOR THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HEARD THIS! Like when I say to my kids "no eating in the living room." "dad you've told us that like 100 times." "I KNOW. YET STILL THE WORDS SEEM TO STOP AT THE EARS AND THEY HAVENT BROKEN THROUGH TO THE DECISION MAKING CENTER OF YOUR BRAIN!" God is talking to you today so listen up.

**Second thing is this guy is rich.** [19] “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. I mean, if you are feasting...sumptuously...That is like a Willy Wonka level food word.

And this is important because it leads into the other thing we know about this guy. While he appears successful and religious to others, **he never knew God.** He was what the Bible calls a white-washed tomb. Which means it looks pretty on the outside but inside it is rotting bones. It's worse than empty, it's filled with darkness and death. This is the rich man. In fact our first clue of this I read in a comment on this passage this week is that we never get this guy's name. He's only called “a rich man” because his life & identity had been built on the pursuit of money. And now, the money is gone. And there is nothing left of him other than the label he used to hold on earth.

This is a fascinating representation of the fate of every single person who tries to find their identity in something other than how they relate to God. For this guy, money was functioning as his God. We call those things idols.

So... What is your idol? What is the thing that holds priority #1 for you and you treat it with the supreme respect, admiration, priority, and submission? I asked that around the dinner table the other night and the responses were awesome: 7 yr old says “oh, people worship their phones.” MOM & DAD just got burned! People worship their kids. They put so much pressure on them to succeed and live vicariously through it. Kids were never meant to carry the weight of your worship. Neither was your phone...even with a nice case. This man's life was

defined by his pursuit of money and eating scrumptuously.

DESPITE HIS DEVOTION TO HIS RELIGION...HE DIDN'T KNOW GOD! Which is a common situation many in the Bible Belt find themselves in. And the one surefire sign we get he doesn't know God...outside of the fact he's in Hades...is that he was unkind & stingy towards the poor. Namely Lazarus right in front of him who was just wanting some scraps from his table.

The Gospel is a message that God has been very generous towards us when we did nothing to deserve it. In fact Abraham hints at this in verse 25.

[25] But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime **received** your good things,

The wealthy man with the insatiable appetite can't get enough wealth but what he misses is that all of his wealth is a gift from God. He received it. When we realize anything we have is not what we've earned but is a gift from God, we become much more humble, generous people.

This is true most of all when we think about our Salvation from our sin. God redeemed us when we didn't deserve it. So how do Christians live in response to that? We are generous towards others who are in need & helpless because we were in need and helpless. This guy? EVEN IN HELL he treats Lazarus still like a servant. Come bring me some water. He was religious but he did not know God. Because something else was more important to him than God.

In the book *The Reason for God* which devotes a whole chapter to the question of hell, Tim Keller said this guy

winding up in hell is a clue to us as to what Hell really is. "hell is simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity." See one of the realities of Hell is that God is completely absent from it. This guy is shut off from God left to himself which is what this guy down in his core really wanted.

The most common descriptions of hell in the bible are darkness and fire. St. Augustine once wrote that the smoke from the flames of Hell is already visible in our own souls when we take time to look at them.<sup>3</sup>

- We feel unhappy, unfulfilled: At every point in your life you think, "Now I'll be happy." But it's never worked.
- We are prone to jealousy: jealousy usually arises out of personal unhappiness... you look at someone else and think that they have what you need to be happy and so you resent and hate them for it. That's the smoke rising up in you.
- We trample on others in pursuit of our pleasure: it's not that we are sadistically mean people, it's just that we prioritize our happiness, and if we have to occasionally use others to get what we need. So we mistreat our family, step on people at work to get what we need, cheat or cut corners, or, like our rich man in the story, we aren't kind to the poor.
- We are prone to addictions: we can't say no to pleasure: takes the form of drug addictions, alcohol, pornography, food addictions, eating disorders. These all arise out of a soul that craves something inordinately.

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<sup>3</sup> Originally from John Piper's *Brothers We are Not Professionals*, I found it in J.D. Greear's sermon on this same

- Obedience to God feels like a drudgery. God bores us and we secretly resent Him trying to rule our lives so if we do submit to him we do so out of fear or guilt, but when you look close at us, like the rich man, we don't delight to obey God.

These all stem from having God in the wrong place in your life. Do you see how close hell is to you? As one pastor put it "It's vapors saturate your soul." This is why it is not enough to get us out of hell, God must first get hell out of us! And this is no easy thing because of how much the smoke has clouded our judgment. Blinding us to God's truth and to his love for us.

And God created us as free beings. Which means we are free to reject him. The danger is that God may eventually allow you to have that which you really want. Romans 1.24 says God eventually gave them up to the desires of their flesh. In eternity God is giving people what they most want...and in the case of hell it is eternal freedom from Him.

So let me tell you why I spend all this time on the description of the guy in hades: It's because it shows you HOW SERIOUS rejecting God really is. If you keep telling God to get out of your life, the frightening thing is that eventually he might give you what you really want. He is patient and long suffering, but do not presume upon his patience. So often the problem people have is "how could a loving God send people to hell?" but in that question is a big misunderstanding of what is happening.

passage. Sermon "How could a loving God send people to hell?"

Big first thing I want you to see here today: **God doesn't send us to hell. We send ourselves.**

The idea of a loving God sending people to hell is so offensive to our culture right. And I want you to know God's desire is NOT for you to spend eternity in hell. He loves you! He loves you so much he sent his only son to DIE FOR YOU! To take away your sin so that you could be made holy and enter into his presence forever when you die. He doesn't want to spend eternity apart from you. He doesn't want you to suffer! He didn't create hell for you, according to 2 Peter 2 he created it for Satan and his angels when they rebelled against God. But, God is not a tyrant. So he's not going to force you to worship him. So if you say God "get out of my life"...ultimately one day he may grant that wish.

John Paul Sartre said hell will be a door locked from the inside.  
C.S. Lewis

"In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does...

elsewhere he said

"There are only two kinds of people – those who say to God 'Thy will be done' or those to whom God in the end says 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it.

- **C. S. Lewis**

I need you to hear the reality of Hell this morning. I don't like staring at it. In fact this was one of the toughest sermons to put together because I felt like I had to spend time considering that which crushes the soul more than anything else. And I don't like it. But the smoke from the flames of hell are already present in every soul and there is something that has to be done about it. God can't just get you out of hell, he must get hell out of you.

Jesus talked about Hell more than anyone else in the Bible and he talked about it because it is a real place. Matthew 8.12 We who do not put our saving faith in Christ will be thrown outside (out of the presence of God), into darkness (because God is light), where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 25.41 - the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Matthew 13.42 – Hell is a fiery furnace

Matthew 22.13 – Outer Darkness, weeping & gnashing of teeth

In Dante's "Inferno" written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there is a famous sign posted above the entrance to hell that says "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

This is one of two eternal destinations and Jesus says the only way to God & into heaven is through him. And I know many say, wow it's really unloving of you to talk about people going to hell. Do you really think people deserve eternal punishment for their sin? That seems harsh. Maybe hell is for Hitler, other

evil dictators, rapists and kidnapers, but for everyone who sins? That makes God seem like an angry God. Let me be very clear: God is angry at your sin. And that anger is loving and righteous. My old pastor gave the best illustration to get this across. He said ladies, imagine you found out your husband was having an affair. And on the way to the hotel room to betray you he tips the bellman. Now, tipping that guy is a good deed right? Listen the fact that we don't center our lives on God and worship him is cosmic adultery worthy of the most serious punishment. Genuinely good deeds done in the context of rejecting God are like tipping the bellman on the way to destroying your life.

And that is why Hell is infinite. If you think the punishment doesn't fit the crime, you probably don't understand the crime. Your sin is against an infinite God which means justice requires infinite punishment! Hell is what it is because God is who God is. One theologian said hell is not one degree hotter or one minute longer than what our sin demands it to be.

**And I know you say but where is the love of God for us in all this?**

The love of God for us is found in allowing us, if we desire, to share in his glory in heaven forever. See in a sermon focused mostly on understanding hell let me make sure I don't overlook the glory of heaven. Some people think heaven is this never-ending church service where we sing 20 million stanzas of amazing grace. And that sounds terrible. And we feel guilty for not being spiritual enough for that to sound appealing to us. That's garbage. I wouldn't want to spend

eternity there. But the bible talks about Heaven in terms of a new heaven and a new earth. That one day God is going to bring heaven down to earth and restore all of earth. Imagine what earth would be like without sin or corruption of any kind. Listen to this description from Revelation 21

[1] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away....[3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.....[4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." [5] And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

Can you imagine new heaven & new earth? Imagine relationships without pain & conflict, a body never afflicted by disease, delicious food without calories, work without email, nature without mosquitos! Imagine the adventures you can have exploring that world. And I say this because the people who have done the greatest work for God on earth are the ones who have had their hearts most fixed on eternity with the father.

And even though we've rebelled against God, and every single one of us has, his love for us is so great that he offers us heaven. Eternal joy, eternal adventure, eternal peace & security, reunion with everyone we know & love, all while being there with God. Which leads to a second really important point:

## **2. The reality of Heaven and Hell shows us the extent of God's love in saving us.**

People often feel that hell is some great blemish on God's love. The Bible presents it as the opposite. Hell magnifies for us the love of God by showing us how far God went, and how much He went through, to save us.

Up on the cross he was slowly tortured and eventually died a horrific death. But it wasn't just a physical death that made it so horrifying. It was that he was taking the payment for sin. All of the hell reserved for us was being poured out onto him. That was the true horror.

## **3. How God Saves us from Hell**

One of the things that really bothers me is how Christians can come across as fire and brimstone type people who will manipulate people into belief. And critics say "That's wrong!" And What you are seeing right here is God agreeing. In this little exchange the rich man thinks that if some dead man comes to visit his brothers, that will get them to repent of their sins.

[30] And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

He's thinking they can be scared into heaven. But that isn't going to work. That's manipulation without heart change. And to be in scared into heaven would be like forcing you spend eternity with a God you do not love. And that sounds more like slavery or prison than it does paradise. And I see this sometimes where people have a really scary moment and so they pray a sinners prayer as a parachute to escape falling into

hell. The problem is, there is no heart change. So 3 months later there is no difference in their lives and they just hold their spiritual experience in their back pocket in case they need that parachute again. That's not a Christian! That's a guy or girl who had a momentary spiritual high. And the south is full of them. God is after your heart. He's not calling you to be perfect, but he is calling you to a life of worship. The only way you go to heaven is when you learn to love and trust God.

That's where Abraham's words come in.

[29] But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them....' [31] He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

Moses and the Prophets tell us about the love of God for us. We have moses and the prophets pointing towards the messiah who would come to deliver people from their sins. We also have the apostles who tell us the messiah was Jesus! HE CAME! They tell us why Jesus came and endured the horrifying suffering of the cross. And we have a saying around here at the gospel changes everything and this is why. The Gospel says you were bound for hell which is justice owed for your sin.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved." Ephesians 2.4-5

See when you fully understand that, the gospel becomes a waterfall in your heart that quenches the flames of hell. It

totally restructures your heart from deep down in the core of your soul and changes everything about you. That's why when God saves you the scriptures call you a new creation. The old is gone, the new is come.

**God can't just get us out of hell, he must first get hell out of us**

The cross is Jesus taking the hell we deserved and carrying it himself. And because he took it, I can be free from it. Which leaves you with a choice right now.

God offers you salvation from your sin. We are all born with hell set as our default destination. You can be rescued from it. God loves you! He is offering you salvation. Today you've heard it and you cannot claim ignorance. You have two options:

1. Resist him. I KNOW some of you are resisting him. I hate seeing you fight him. Maybe today you realize that's you.

2. You can turn to him today. If you'll trust him, he can save you. He wants to save you. 2 Corinthians 6.2 Paul says to a bunch of Corinthians sitting gathered together in a church just like this "today is the day of salvation!" Turn to him

Lastly let me say one thing to the members of Mercy Church. This is why we are the kind of church that is so urgent about getting the gospel message out. "Spurgeon... how can we believe in a loving God who allows millions of people who have never heard... Spurgeon said, "That is troubling, but that's not what most troubles me. What most troubles me is how we who claim to have known and experienced the love of

God could be doing next to nothing to take the love of God to those people."

#### **Closing invitation**

- Repent & Believe
  - Great Commission
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