

Eternal Punishment

Matthew 25:46

30 Aug 09

Let's take your Bible's tonight and open to Matthew chapter 25. Matthew chapter 25 and I want to start by reading verses 41 through 46. Matthew chapter 25 verses 41 through 46. This is Jesus speaking and He says "Many will say to those on his left, depart from me accursed ones in to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not invite me in; naked and you did not clothe me; sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they themselves also will answer 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirst or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then He will answer them, 'truly I say to you to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not do it to me'. These will go away in to eternal punishment, but the righteous in to eternal life."

Let's pray as we come to God's Word tonight. Father as we come to Your Word tonight and we hear these things said by our Lord Himself regarding the end for those who reject the Savior, for those who are wicked, for those who are not born again. These are hard things to hear, these are difficult things to grasp, I pray Lord that you help us tonight, that You will give us understanding, and more than understanding that this truth would have its intended impact on each one of our hearts. So Lord we commit this time to You and we thank You for it, in our Saviors name. Amen.

A question that unbelievers often ask Bible believing Christians is "how can a loving God send people to Hell?" Have you heard that one? How can a loving god send people to Hell? Often this question is offered up as a reason for why they will not accept the God of the Bible. Today however there is a variation of this old question that is being asked by Bible believing Christians. This is the question they are asking. How can a loving God punish people eternally? How can a loving God punish people eternally?

Now, neither one of those questions should be dismissed lightly. In fact they are questions that do raise a very difficult subject. And as a result, teaching on Hell and or teaching on eternal punishment is very rare, especially in our market driven church age. It's hard to successfully market a church that talks about Hell. We live in a day when we don't want to be perceived as being negative in any way at all. And you can't get more negative than talking about Hell. At least as far as some people think. But these issues are out there, and they need to be addressed, especially the questions that are being asked within the church. And while the belief in the eternal conscious torment of the lost in Hell has been an almost unbroken testimony of the church, along with the immortality of the soul that says we go on forever, it is clear that there is a growing uneasiness about this with the present generation of evangelicals. They are very uncomfortable with the whole idea of eternal damnation.

And in our post modern way of thinking we believe what we like, rather than what the Bible teaches as truth. And admittedly it's very hard to get real excited about the doctrine of eternal punishment. That is

not one you are just going to get all goose pimply over. So what is taking the place of this doctrine if they don't like this doctrine? What is taking the place of this doctrine if Bible believing Christians do not like the idea of eternal punishment? What are they offering up in its place? We're seeing a growing trend towards what is known as annihilationism or also known as conditional immortality.

Now, annihilationism has been around for quite a while. It's the position of the Jehovah's Witnesses, it's the position of the Seventh Day Adventists. This is the view that when the wicked die they simply go out of existence. They are annihilated. They cease to exist. So when the wicked die that's it. It's all over.

Conditional Immortality is the view of a growing number of Evangelicals, including a number of really formidable scholars. And this view will become more and more common. This view says that man does not inherently possess immortality. That immortality is a gift that is given to those who come to Christ. Hence it's conditional immortality. You don't get it just by being alive, you get it only in Christ. This view commonly believes that the wicked will suffer to some degree; they will suffer some degree of punishment after death but that is only going to be temporary. At the final judgment, then, these will be cast into the lake of fire where they will be destroyed or annihilated.

Now, there are some maybe a small number of those who hold this view, this conditional immortality view, who believe in what is also called postmortem evangelism. That is that upon death some are given a chance to respond to the gospel, especially those who never heard it in their lifetime. This is an outgrowth, this belief is an outgrowth of the belief that God loves everyone and wants everyone to be saved so those who don't get a chance to hear the gospel in their life are given that opportunity upon death. Be that as it may, that little side part there, the view of annihilationism or conditional immortality is growing among Christians. If you have not encountered it yet, you will. You will run in to somebody who holds this view. And it is important that you understand this as we will make clear tonight. Now here at Believer's Fellowship, we hold the Orthodox historic doctrines of Christianity, one of those being eternal punishment for the wicked. How do other Christians, Christians who also claim to believe the Bible, how do they come up with this other view, this annihilationism, this conditional immortality? Well, that is what we want to look at tonight and give some answers to their position, and I want to give a series of questions and provide answers that will help you understand what the Bible teaches about this. These questions I want to ask are: how do believers arrive at this alternate view? What are the theological implications of all of this? And then lastly, why is this so important?

Pastor Blakey, why are you taking up a nice Sunday night to talk about this? Well, hopefully you will understand why by the time we're all done.

So let's begin with that first question: How do believers arrive at this alternate view? There are number of ways, there are a number of reasons why they come to this view. And one reason is an emotional reason. It's an emotional issue. One notable scholar put it quite simply like this, he said, "emotionally I find the concept of eternal punishment intolerable."

Another scholar says "the traditional view of Hell is a very disturbing concept that needs reconsideration." So you can see that they are having an emotional reaction to this doctrine. Some find this doctrine very disturbing and even intolerable, in fact, one of these scholars went on to say "I do not

understand how people can live with it, this idea of eternal punishment without cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain.” And you can understand what he is saying. I mean, you don’t spend an awful lot of time thinking about eternal punishment. Am I right? And why don’t you? It is not a fun thing to think about! And he is saying if you hold to this belief I don’t know how you do it. And you might be able to understand why he might even say that. So how do they come to this view? Well, one reason is because there are strong emotions that are driving it. But there is more than just an emotional reason. There are moral reasons.

One of them said “everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a blood thirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz,” which was a German concentration camp where they killed Jews, “an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die.” How can one love a God like that?

They say that the traditional view of Hell suggests that God is a cruel and sadistic torturer. So they have moral issues with this view that God just tortures people forever. So they have emotional reasons why they come up with their alternate view, they have moral issues that drive them to this view, there is also justice issues.

One of these scholars says that this view of eternal punishment “offends our sense of natural justice. It is too heavy a sentence and cannot be successfully defended as a just action on God’s part.” In other words he’s saying, eternal punishment, that is too big a penalty. It offends our sense of justice. So there are emotional reasons behind this view, there are moral issues they are trying to wrestle with, there are justice questions they are raising, and that makes some of these Bible believers think that the concept of eternal punishment is inconsistent with the character of God.

So how do we respond to these issues, emotional, moral and justice issues? Well first of all let me tell you, you absolutely should have an emotional response to the idea of Hell. Absolutely, you should have an emotional response to that truth. It should be an absolutely fearful thing to think about: Hell. In fact, that is what Jesus said in Luke chapter 12 and verse 5. “But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast in to Hell, yes I tell you, fear Him.” The very idea that you can be cast in to Hell should cause you to fear.

Jonathan Edwards, who was a pretty notable scholar, said this, “this doctrine, this doctrine of eternal punishment, is indeed awful and dreadful. It is dreadful to think of it. But yet tis what God, the eternal God who made us, and who has a soul and body in His hands has abundantly declared to us. So that so sure as God is, there will absolutely be no end to the misery in Hell.” He believed in eternal punishment. He said it is a dreadful thing. It should cause an emotional response. You can’t talk about Hell and be laughing about it.

What about the moral issue that they raise? Can I give you a news flash? Our sense of morality is skewed in our favor. And you know we could raise this question on many issues, this moral issue, whether this is in keeping with God’s character. You could raise that question about a lot of other things besides the eternal punishment and Hell. You remember that event known as the Flood? What about God ruthlessly drowning the whole population of the earth except for eight people? I suppose that some people told

Noah that a loving God would never do what Noah says He's going to do. They would have found this morally repulsive. What are you talking about Noah? God's going to send a flood and kill all of us? They could have found that morally repulsive. So, if you are going to raise the moral issue, what about all these other things? And if they are saying we don't know about eternal punishment, well, we do know about a flood. And we do know that God did that. And drowning is no fun way to die.

What about the justice issue? Doesn't it seem like the punishment way exceeds the crime? That is their question. Even if a man lives 70 years as a sinner, an eternity of punishment does seem to be over the top. That is their argument. Well, you could raise that question about other incidences that are recorded in Scripture, things that we know happened. Remember Lot's wife. Her sin was turning around and looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah. What did God do to her? He turned her in to a pillar of salt. You might say that seems a little over the top. How about Nadab and Abihu? They did something they shouldn't have done. Fire came out of the tent and consumed them both. Aaron's sons, priests. What about Achan? When they took Jericho they were told not to take anything for themselves. Achan did and when it was found out, Achan and his whole family were stoned to death. You might have justice questions about that. What about Uzzah? They are taking the ark, David is transporting the ark to Jerusalem, they have it on a cart, it hits a bump in the road and the ark starts to topple. Uzzah, I mean, he doesn't want to see the ark fall on the ground, that kind of ruins their celebration. So he reaches out to steady the ark and God struck him dead on the spot. You might have justice questions about that. Was that punishment that met the crime? How about Annanias and Sapphira? They did give money to the church. They apparently gave quite a bit of money to the church, but they didn't give what they said they were giving. They said they were giving everything and they didn't. But they still gave quite a bit. I mean, that's got to be pretty good. God struck them dead on the spot. You might raise some justice questions about that.

How about thinking about it this way: Those in Hell are going to spend eternity hating God. They will hate Him for all eternity. So they will be punished for all eternity. There is no repentance in Hell. So it's not just 70 years of sinning, it's an eternity of hating God. And the bottom line regarding people going to Hell, people go to Hell because that's where they want to go. They go to hell because that is what they decided to do.

Now there is one more line of reasoning followed by those who reject the historic view. Remember this issue is being raised by Bible believers so they turn to the bible to support their view. What is interesting about this in turning to the Bible you will find that Jesus spoke about the fate of the wicked more than anybody else in the Bible.

So what are some of the Biblical issues that they address? One has to do with the language that the Bible uses because the Bible often talks about the wicked suffering destruction or they will perish. Have you ever heard that? John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life." Perish. Words like that: destruction, perish, destroy, sounds like annihilationism. They perish, they are destroyed, they are put out of existence. One writer put it this way: "Nevertheless, the Bible does leave us a strong general impression in regard to the nature of Hell: the impression of final irreversible destruction of closure with God."

Based on those kinds of words, that is the conclusion this man is coming to. He said “one receives the impression that eternal punishment refers to a divine judgment whose results cannot be reversed, rather than to the experience of endless torment.” So eternal punishment means God makes a decision, an irreversible decision; it’s an eternal decision.

So how do we answer that? I mean does the word destruction, sounds like that’s it, right? They are destroyed. They go in to destruction. Well, let me just show you something. Turn with me to Revelation chapter 17. You might remember last week we talked about how to study the Bible and we talked about common errors. One of the most common errors is the misuse of word studies. People think they get the definition of a word and carry that definition everywhere it’s used. That is one of the biggest mistakes in studying the Bible. A word only means what it means in its context. So you can’t take the meaning of a word in this passage and transfer the meaning of that word used in this context over to this context unless you study that context and say, yes, the word has the same meaning here. It takes a whole lot more than just tracing around the use of the word. This is one of the biggest errors people make in studying the Bible all the time, and they come up with all kinds of wrong doctrine as a result. Look at this in Revelation Chapter 17 verse 8. It’s talking about the beast. “The beast you saw was and is not and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to [where?] destruction.” This beast is going to go to destruction. In case you didn’t get that, verse 11 says “the beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to [where?] destruction.” So twice we’re told the beast is headed for destruction. Okay, well what does that mean? Well turn over to chapter 19. Chapter 19 talks about the return of Christ to the earth and verse 20 says “and the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image; these two were thrown alive in to the lake of fire which burns with brimstone.” Okay, so they are headed towards destruction. Where do they go? They go to the Lake of fire, so is that the end of it? Are they done? Are they destroyed? Do they perish? Is that the end of the beast? Is he annihilated? Does he go out of existence? Well, turn over to chapter 20.

Chapter 20 talks about Satan being bound for a period of 1000 years. And then verse seven says, “when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison.” So this is now 1000 years later and verse 10 says “and the devil who deceived them was thrown in to the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are also, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” So what does destruction mean? The beast is headed for destruction. What does that mean? It means he is cast in to the lake of fire. And 1000 years later he is still there. And he’s going to be there forever and ever being tormented in that place. So destruction doesn’t mean what you and I would normally think it might mean. We have to understand what it means in this context. By the way, in Matthew 26:8 we’re told about Jesus being anointed by the very expensive perfume, and the disciples complain about what a waste that is, they use exactly the same word translated destruction. So it doesn’t always mean destruction in the sense you might think that word is used.

So those words destruction, perish, destroy, they cause a problem but they are not really a problem. They also raise the issue of the word fire. It’s a fire that they are put in to and they will say that the main function of fire is not to cause pain but to secure destruction as all the world’s incinerators bear witness.

That sounds pretty convincing doesn't it? Throw someone in fire and find out what happens. They are destroyed, they are annihilated. Well, we just saw in Revelation 20 that statement about suffering forever in the lake of fire. Now they are not destroyed, they are not incinerated, they are tortured. But let's look at another example. This one is in Luke chapter 16. This is a familiar account. It's the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus went to be with Abraham. He went to paradise. The rich man went to Hell. And in verse 23 of Luke 16 it says "in Hades he lifted up his eyes being in torment and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom and he cried out 'father Abraham have mercy on me and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in agony in this flame'"; this fire. What do the people who hold this alternate view, how do they explain that one. Well first of all they tell you this refers to the intermediate state. You understand that, for example in this case, a wicked person dies they go to Hades, there is a final judgment which is a lake of fire which is their final spot. But there is a spot that they go in the mean time. And they will say that is what this is talking about and I would agree with them on that, but the point is here is a man who is in flame, he is in the fire, he's not being consumed, he says I am in agony and in torment. So when the Bible talks about them being cast in to an eternal fire it's saying they are going to be cast in to a place of eternal torment and agony, not a place they are going to be consumed. This man was not consumed, and by the way, this man in that flame, recognizing he was in agony and torment does not repent. He says 'I don't want my brothers to come here', but he doesn't repent.

Matthew 25:41, we read it earlier, it's an eternal fire. They are put in to this place of agony and torment and it is eternal. In Revelation chapter 14, just to read you another passage, Revelation chapter 14 verses 9-11, "then another angel, a third one, followed them saying with a loud voice 'if anyone worships the beast in his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger, and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the Holy angels and the presence of the Lamb and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. They have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast in his image and whoever received the mark of his name'". Now they are going to feel the fury of God's anger and wrath, they will be tormented forever and ever, no rest day and night.

Hell is a place of absolutely no hope. It is torment and agony with no hope of it ever ending. You can be taken as a prisoner of war and you can endure suffering, torture, agony, with the hope that eventually the cavalry is going to ride over the hill and rescue you. There is no hope like that in Hell. They face torment day and night forever and ever. It is never going to end.

Jesus said it is eternal punishment. Going out of existence is not the nature of punishment. Suffering is. Punishment means suffering. So you can see how some are coming to this position of conditional immortality or annihilationism. They are coming at it from every angle; they are coming at it from an emotional angle, from a moral angle, from a justice angle, and from the Bible. They are asking hard questions. But they are not questions for which the Bible does not have an answer. The fact though that there is a growing number of evangelicals adopting this position forces us to consider it, and to consider it seriously, and to consider it theologically.

So let's move on to the second question. What are the theological implications? You have to understand that this growing position of annihilationism, it isn't an isolated deviation from orthodoxy, but it's only a part of a larger theological breakdown. Let me just briefly show you how other significant theological issues are related to this one. For example, the very nature of God; the annihilationist view of God reduces His nature to love. Their big thing is God is a loving God, and how can a loving God eternally punish somebody? So they reduce the nature of God down to one attribute; He's a loving God. We will talk more about this in a minute, but what about God's other attributes? What about things like holiness, justice, righteousness? How about His anger, which we just read about? Or, His wrath? He is a God of love. But that is not all He is. The annihilationist view presents an unbalanced view of God. That's a serious theological issue.

Let's talk about how it relates to the nature of man. They say that man is not immortal, that he doesn't go on forever, and the annihilationists will point to 1 Tim 6:16 which says that God alone possesses immortality. Now that seems like a formidable defense of their position. But they are making it say more than what it says. The point is that God alone in and of Himself possesses immortality. We don't possess immortality in and of ourselves. We have a derived immortality given by the Creator. Just like, by the way, angels do. Angels are created beings that go on forever. To say that man is not immortal is to say that I am no different than my dog. Buddy is not going to live on forever. His soul is not... he doesn't even have a soul. His soul is not immortal. When he dies, that's it. Bye-bye Buddy. To say that man is not immortal is to say I am really no different than my dog, which elevates the view of him, but it shows a wrong view of man.

Let's talk about the nature of sin related to this. The annihilationist view seriously devalues the nature of our sin. To them human sin is not wicked enough to be punished eternally. We have to remember that sin against God is at its core an act of hateful rebellion by the creation against the Creator. It's far more serious than sins committed against me. Again, this is an area where we are skewed towards ourselves. We don't want to see our sin for as bad as it is. It would be fair to say that, measured by Biblical standards, few of us take sin seriously.

Let's talk about how this relates to the nature of Christ's atonement. We talked about that this morning; the glory of Christ demonstrated is His work at the cross. The annihilationist view severely reduces the glory to Christ's atoning work because in this view He only paid for temporary punishment, not eternal punishment. That greatly reduces the scope of Christ's atoning work and takes glory away from Christ's death on the cross. He didn't pay for the eternal punishment that you deserve, only the temporary punishment. So you can see this isn't a minor aberration, this has serious theological implications. But more than that, it has real practical implications.

Let's talk about that. The third question: why is this so important? To put it as simply as possible, this is important because this view seriously undercuts the good news of the gospel. This is a serious error. It leads unrepentant sinners to underestimate their fate. The unsaved would probably like for annihilationism to be true, because compared to suffering in Hell forever, it simply is not so bad to just cease to exist. In fact, there is probably a lot of unsaved people hoping that this is true so they can live any way they want now with no consequences beyond the grave. And if you and I don't believe in the

endless punishment of the unsaved, then the zeal with which we present the gospel will be affected. If I really believe that the people I know who aren't saved are going to go to an eternal Hell where they will suffer torment and agony forever, that's got to affect me. So even though this might not be your favorite subject, in fact I tried to think of a clever title to put in the bulletin to kind of disguise what I am talking about tonight. This might not be your favorite subject, but studying Hell does increase your appreciation of your Savior's work. He saved me from eternal punishment which I totally deserve. That's what He saved me from. He saved me from what I deserve and what I deserve is to be thrown in to Hell where I am tormented day and night forever and ever. That is exactly what I deserve for my hateful, rebellious sin against my Creator. That's what He saved me from. And a desire to see people spared from such a fate has got to produce within me a greater boldness to tell them the good news. My concern has got to start outweighing my own desires for my own comfort. This has got to push me beyond my comfort zone because I know where people are headed. Anyone who cares about the lost will want to warn them about Hell. Isn't that what Jesus said? He said I'll tell you who you ought to fear, you ought to fear the One who can kill you and then once He kills you casts you in to hell. You need to fear Him. That is what we need to tell people. I told you a few weeks ago about our encounter with the Mormon missionaries in the parking lot. That's exactly what I told them. They had a bogus view of Christ and they were headed down a path that would land them straight in Hell. They need to hear that. They need to be warned by that.

Here is my concern for Believer's Fellowship: Because we are committed to Scripture, we can't simply just discard what the Bible teaches about eternal punishment, but we could ignore it, we could walk around it and never really talk much about it. That would be a huge mistake. A huge mistake, because others are not ignoring this subject. And they are promoting this erroneous view of annihilationism and that view is growing. Like I said, if you haven't run in to somebody yet who holds this view, you will. Just to help you understand how this is growing, as far back as 1989 the National Association of Evangelicals and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School co-sponsored a consultation of Evangelical affirmations. And after much discussion and debate, this group of people, and this is not an insignificant group, this group of people would not label annihilationism as an unacceptable doctrine for Evangelicals. This is 20 years ago. And it's been growing in acceptance ever since. This is what they are getting exposed to at a level of the seminary, this is what is going to be preached from the pulpits, this is what is going to be believed in the pew, these are the people you are going to be talking to in the parking lot of Walmart, or wherever.

Let me close with this. The question that gets asked is: What kind of a loving God would send people to an eternal Hell? That's the question. That's the bottom line issue. How can a loving God send people to Hell? That's the unbeliever's question. The believer's question is: How can a loving God send people to an eternal punishment? That's the question. Well, let's turn it around and ask a different question. What kind of a loving God would send His son to die in the place of, and take the wrath for, rebellious, wicked, ungrateful sinners who deserve eternal punishment? What kind of a loving God is that? That's the kind of God the Bible talks about. That's the loving God the Bible tells us about; a loving God who sends His own Son to die in the place of wicked, rebellious sinners like all of us. And that elevates the level of God's love far above the love of the God of the annihilationist. This is a far greater loving God demonstrated by the fact that He sent His Son to die for sinners. That's what kind of loving God the Bible

talks about; a God who loved us by saving us through His own Son. And He saved us from eternal punishment. To Him belongs all the glory.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You that we do know a God of love as You portray Yourself in the Scriptures; a God who loves, who demonstrates His love by sending His Son to die for sinners. Not a kind of a mushy love God who goes soft on sinners, but a God who has a genuine love, a demonstrated love for sinners so that He sends His Son to die in our place so that we could be saved from the eternal punishment that we deserve. Lord, I am thankful for this time we had tonight to raise these questions. These are bottom-line serious questions. These are questions that people all around us are asking. People all around us are trying to suppress the truth about God and they are wanting to take away the hard things. Lord, help us to show them they don't need to do that. God has taken away the hard things by sending His son. We just need to trust in His Son. Lord, I pray that our understanding of eternal punishment would help us to grown in our love for our Savior. I pray Lord that it would severely humble us. Help us to realize the magnitude of our sin. Help us, Lord, not to fool ourselves, not to deceive ourselves. Help us, Lord, not to think better of ourselves than what we should. Help us, Lord, to see ourselves for who we really are. And help us to love our Savior more. And help us to love the lost more, because we see where they are headed. It's not that they just go out of existence, they go in to a place of eternal torment; a place where they will suffer forever and ever; a place where there is no hope of any release. They are eternally sealed in judgment. Lord, I pray that this would affect the way we look at people around us. Not that we would look down on them, not that we would judge them, but that we would recognize they need a Savior, just like we do; that they are sinners just like we are. And there is only one way out of that eternal punishment and it is through Jesus Christ. Lord, help us to be true to Your word, help us to present it accurately, clearly, help us to proclaim it lovingly but straight forwardly, warning people of the wrath to come. Lord, I just pray that You would work within each one of our hearts that as we have walked through these issues, Lord, and we've understood the questions, that our hearts would be impacted by, again, looking at this truth. So Lord, we give You thanks for this time we have had tonight. We pray that You work in each one of our hearts, and we pray this in our Saviors name. Amen.