



## **“Can I Be A Christian If . . . 9. I Don’t Believe In Hell?”**

Text: Matthew 5:38-48

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We’ve come to the final sermon in our summer series, based on questions I have been asked over the course of my ministry. Lots of people have come to me with our question for the day. “Can I Be A Christian If I Don’t Believe in Hell?” And let me tell you, right from the beginning, that a belief in hell is not required to be a Christian. All that is required to be a Christian is to put your trust in Jesus Christ. Period. That’s it.

But, let me keep going with the questions about hell. It may seem a little redundant after the summer we’ve endured in Evansville. Let’s push the question around a little, because I think there are some things we need to consider about this idea of an afterlife that is filled with pain and punishment at the hands of a punitive God.

Where do our ideas about hell come from? How much of our understanding of hell is from the Bible? What does the Bible tell us about God and does that line-up with the other things we say about God?

That’s where we’re headed this morning, so let’s get to it.

A cursory trip through the Scriptures will lend support to the idea of hell. The Bible, in fact, talks about hell. But it does so in a variety of ways.

The Bible talks about hell as a place of torment and pain. In the New Testament alone there are 162 references to hell. The Bible pictures hell as a place at the center of the earth, with extreme temperatures. It is a place where those who have rejected God are sent to be separated from God and everyone else forever. If you take the Bible literally, as did people like Milton and Dante, you’re going to come up with a full-fledged pit of fire with all kinds of people being tortured for eternity.

But, if you go a bit deeper, you may discover yourself asking more questions than finding answers.

What if, instead of talking about temperature and location, we simply talked about hell as separation? To be completely honest, I've known people throughout my life – and you probably do too – who live disconnected lives – lives of choosing to go it alone – lives lived without anyone – human or divine. There are those people who go through life without focus, without meaning, without purpose. There are those people who go through life without a connection with God and without a connection with their neighbors.

This is a hell of our own creation. When we choose to live anything less than the life God created us to live, we live in hell. Hell can be the result of our rejection of God, but in the here-and-now.

Take, for instance, the famous statement, attributed to William Tecumseh Sherman, "War is hell." Though I've never been on a battle field, I can't imagine a more true statement. Surrounded by death and destruction, the absence of compassion and understanding, the uncontained violence – what could be more like hell than that? War is the rejection by us of all that God wants for us. War is the refusal to live the life God created us to live.

So, perhaps, hell is less of God's creation and more of our own creation.

And among those who spend a lot of time thinking about and talking about hell, I'm always interested in who they say will be going to hell. Hell seems to be full of people we don't like here-and-now and would rather not spend any more time with in the world to come. We seem to consign all kinds of people we don't like to eternal punishment.

Mark Twain told the story of the man who lived all his life so that he could acquire heaven and the first person he met when he got there was a person who he had been hoping all that time was in hell. He was so disappointed and outraged that he picked up his satchel and inquired the way to hell and left. Twain added, "So there you have it: heaven for climate, hell for society."

Let us not underestimate our human propensity for vengeance. Much of what we say about hell we say to assure ourselves that the very people we don't like now won't be a bother to us forever. We judge them as undeserving of our love therefore they must be undeserving of God's love. Since we are on such familiar terms with God, we believe – and would prefer – that, in certain cases, we can speak for God and are quite willing to sit on the judgment seat and give God the day off.

So, perhaps, we have created hell as a response to the people who have hurt us and caused us pain.

Then, we must consider what, in our haste to construct a whole theology of hell, we have inadvertently said about God. In creating this whole system of punishment for wrong-doers and ne'er-do-wells, what have we ended up saying about God?

Well, first off, we have said that our God is a God of limited compassion and mercy. By a persistent belief in the punishment of an eternal hell, have we inadvertently said that grace is not quite as amazing as what we sing about? By insisting on an eternal hell of chastisement, are we saying that

God is less than caring, less than compassionate, less than merciful?

And, by our insistence on hell, do we say that God does not act on the basis of grace and mercy, but on a system of punishment and reward? When we do right – when we live as God calls us to live – when we keep the commandments, tell the truth, vote the right way, use the correct fork for the salad – whatever we judge to be of supreme importance – then we will be rewarded with heaven. But, when we fail to do the right thing, then we are bound for hell. Is that what we really want to say about God?

Take it a little further. By persisting in our belief in a hell of punishment and penalty, are we saying that Jesus really didn't know what he was talking about? You see, not only did Jesus talk about hell, he also talked a lot about the compassion and mercy of God and how that compassion and mercy was to be demonstrated by God's people.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:38-

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If we are to be people who do not live by the credo of “an eye for an eye,” doesn't that seem to indicate that God does not live by “an eye for an eye?” If that kind of retributive justice is to have no place among God's people, doesn't that seem to suggest that God is not a God of paying back for faults and failures?

But, don't stop there. Keep going and look at all of the passages in Scripture that tell us that God is with us always. The psalmist declared:

Where can I go then from your Spirit?  
where can I flee from your presence?  
If I climb up to heaven, you are there;  
if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand will lead me  
and your right hand hold me fast.

Psalm 139:7-10

Did the Psalmist get it wrong? Is there a place where we can escape God's presence? Is there a place where we are completely and utterly alone? Is there a place where God's presence is nonexistent and void?

The Apostle Paul famously wrote to the Romans,

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to

come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 8:38-39

Now, did Paul really mean that, or was he being dramatic? Did Paul really mean to suggest that there is absolutely nothing – nothing – that can separate us from God’s love – including what we have done and what we have left undone? Be careful, if you push that idea to its logical limits, you are left with the ashes of hell in your hands. Hell cannot stand in the presence of such love.

We could keep going, but, do you get it? The Bible seems to be of two minds on the subject of hell. On the one hand, the Bible seems to say that hell is real and ready for all those who fail to live as God commands and requires. On the other hand, the Bible seems to say that the mercy and compassion of God is never-ending and without limit, welcoming even the most grievous of sinners. Even Jesus seems to be of two minds, promising the condemnation of those who are opposed to the Kingdom of God and promising the mercy and compassion of God.

So, what are we to believe? If you are beginning to think that Christianity has no easy answers, you’re beginning to get it! Beware of those who come in the name of the Lord who know everything and have every solution and remedy to every question and situation.

This much I think we can say without fear. God created this life to be good and wonderful and filled with delight and satisfaction. The way that is best achieved is to live in peace with God and with neighbor, giving of ourselves, especially to those who are in deeper need. This is God’s way.

Second, we need not judge the motives and actions of others. We do not need to cast some into hell so that our heaven may be bettered. We simply entrust them to the mercy and compassion of God, who enlightens every life and reveals a better way of living than we can discover on our own.

And finally, we leave whatever is to be in the hands of God. We entrust the future, unseen and unknowable, to the care and keeping of the God who calls us out of darkness, and who promises that nothing in all creation can separate us from that eternal and all-encompassing love that brought forth all creation. We leave what is to be in the limitless love and mercy of the God who was and is and is to be. Which is to say, that we leave it all to God, who is for now and evermore. Amen.



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