

July 7<sup>th</sup> 2013 "The Jesus The World Sees" #4 "Jesus: Judgment and Love"  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The concept of 'Hell fire preaching' has become in the last several decades, something that many people outside and even inside of the church frown at. Suggesting that it is a worn out relic of a past age some pour out such derision on those who dare preach about judgment and hell that even preachers like myself, who are hardly heard of outside their own congregations, are at times just a little less than eager to emphasise the reality of hell, although we seek to do so.

Rob Bell, a well known and successful evangelical Pastor in America who has done a great job in producing videos that truly express the love of God as Father and encourage Christians to share the story of Jesus, wrote a book recently declaring that there was no place such as hell. Hell, he says, goes right against the claim that God is a loving God, and in his book he asks the same questions that most of us have struggled with at times. Such a question as:- **"Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?"**

Yet though we may struggle with such questions the point that I sense many may miss is that the Bible has no problems with presenting God as light and therefore the ultimate Judge of all that is not totally light, and also as Love, which accounts for the amazing rescue package that He provides in Christ Jesus.

And Jesus Himself never apologized for God's judgment. He presented it often as the appropriate response of a holy God to sin and evil in whatever form it was found. Indeed we only have to look at some of the preaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels to discover that Jesus Himself could easily have been labeled a hell fire preacher.

Over the last several days my set Bible reading has taken me into the book of Matthew and because I have been preparing this sermon I was particularly on the lookout for the topic of Judgment and hell. And I found it, again and again, mentioned by Jesus. The parable I read to you from Matthew 13 followed by the explanation given by Jesus to His disciples clearly presents a climatic time still to come when God will judge the earth

and all its people. A time when there will be a separation between the righteous and the evil.

And from later on in the Bible we see that the difference between the two groups has nothing to do with being good or being bad because as far as God's perfect standard is concerned all are in the bad group for all have done wrong in this lifetime. It's the difference of choosing by faith in Jesus to be part of God's Kingdom, or choosing to stay as we by our human nature are, without seeking Christ's righteousness and protection.

When Jesus lived on earth He spoke clearly about His Kingdom as a coming rule that would see the end of all evil and the triumph of righteousness, and in doing so He spoke about something that the Jewish people had always been yearning for. John Dickson writes in his book(p56)..

***"The idea at the core of the Jewish hope for the kingdom was the establishment of God's will on earth, proving Him to be 'King'.....If you have ever found yourself wishing the Almighty would do something about the mess in the world, then you have, in a sense, hoped for what the Jews called the kingdom of God."***

But the flip side of this is that the coming kingdom of God removes all that is contrary to the divine will. So its arrival will entail the display of God's judgment against all evil. And Jesus emphasized that in His preaching. He never hid the future for those who rejected Him. It was either follow me or take your chance with the coming judgment and the hell that follows it.

So clearly, Jesus taught on hell, and He did so to warn people not to go there. In fact the urgency of Jesus' warning of divine punishment was matched only by the intensity of His promise of divine forgiveness. The OT theme of judgment for rebellion against God still stood. Jesus' coming did not change that and neither did it change the existence of hell. But what it did change was the way of avoiding both. In His coming Jesus provided the one way to escape judgment as a free gift which comes straight from the heart of the God who so loves the world and yearns for our trust and love in return.

And it's this topic of love that became the other key factor in Jesus' teaching. God's love for us and our love for God and for others is God's will for all who become part of His kingdom. Jesus said in Mark 12:29-31

***"The most important [commandment]," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."***

Dickson writes: **"Jesus' call for these twin loves of God and neighbor left no room either for the neighbourly agnostic or for the spiritually minded hypocrite. The one may care for human beings but neglect the Creator; the other may be devoted to God but is careless towards the neighbor."**

To love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength is my goal in life, and I know that I will still be reaching after that until I enter heaven. For I am still working out what it means to love God in such a total manner and you should be too. It's what Jesus expects of us.

And as far as the other half of our calling—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—well that could be reasonably easy except for the broad way Jesus defined our neighbor.

Think about the Jewish listeners of Jesus' day. They already knew that they should love their neighbor as part of their commitment to God. Their problem was that they restricted the term neighbor to their Jewish neighbor. As far as they were concerned a Samaritan was not their neighbor and neither was any non-Jewish person. Indeed, even a fellow Jew lost the right to be seen as a neighbor to be loved, if they hurt the Jewish nation by their acts through being a tax collector, or abandoned God's way by becoming an obvious sinner such as a prostitute or a Roman sympathizer. And of course, anyone who became your own personal enemy immediately lost the right to be a neighbor whom you should love.

Jesus' response which angered some, was that your neighbor is anyone made in the image of God, whatever their nationality, religion, standing, or attitude towards you. Your responsibility once you become children of His kingdom is to love those who you like and are similar to you, and also to love those who are different to you, those who hate you and even those who constantly annoy you and deliberately make life hard for you.

Jesus' words about loving all, even your enemies were hard & revolutionary then and still are today. In those days the Jews hated the Romans with an intensity, and they had reason to do so. There had been plenty of uprisings

against the hated invader of their land and each one had been put down with massive acts of violence against whole communities. John Dickson writes:-

***"The words 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you' suggested more than just being nice to the annoying neighbor over the back fence. It implied showing compassion towards those who would crush you, and the Romans must have been partly in mind."***

The amazing truth from history is that those first Christians after Christ's resurrection began to do just that. They sought to truly love God with their whole lives and their love for one another and especially for their many enemies built a flourishing worldwide church in a matter of decades.

One non-religious historian writes about the ultimate factor in the incredible rise of Christianity in the following way:- (Prof Stark in Dickson: Jesus A Short Life page 63)

***"The simple phrase 'For God so loved the world....' would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd...This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful...This was revolutionary stuff."***

Unfortunately the church through the ages has not always shown such love, but that is past history. Today we as the church need to love others. I've got to and so have you. And we must do so not just because God has commanded us to do so, but because God will still use our love as a backdoor into the hearts of those around us. People who without Jesus are facing the reality of judgment and hell.

And Love is possibly our greatest weapon. It gives us the opportunity to point towards Jesus. And those that are hardest to love are often also those whom we end up sharing the most with about Jesus.

There is an ancient Indian parable about a holy man who was engaged in his morning meditation under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank when he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him.

A passerby said to the holy man, 'Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?' To which the holy man replied,

'That may well be, but it is my nature to save, and must I change my nature because the scorpion does not change its nature?

It is the nature of God to save us from hell and judgment. That's why He came to earth. That's why Jesus' main teaching was about Judgment and Love. And that's why He persevered with our stubborn hearts.

But it is also His nature to save others by His Spirit through us. And that's why He calls us to love others including those who are so hard to love. Those who are determined not to change their nature.

He calls us to find ways of showing them love because our new nature in Christ is love. And because He will use our persistent love to challenge them, and maybe, draw them into the safety of His kingdom.