

John on Jesus - What about those who don't believe in Jesus?

Sign title: What about those who don't believe in Jesus?

July 8, 2012

Good morning Faith family. I also want to say a special "Hello" to those connecting through the Internet. It is great to have you studying the Gospel of John with us. One of the things we learned about this Gospel is the Holy Spirit inspired John to use strong contrasts. This morning, we have another contrast. Last week, we studied the greatest verse in the Bible. John 3:16 tells us about God's incredible love for us. Just two verses later is our contrast. John 3:18 says some one of the most fought-against and controversial statements in the Bible. Listen very carefully. What we are about to cover is some extremely important material. Today, we live in a world where pluralism is the air we breathe. Our culture believes there is no such thing as absolute truth. We don't just believe everyone has a right to their own opinion, we believe all opinions should be considered equally right.

Listen to me! That is a lie from the pit of hell! My estimate is 60 percent of American church-goers are what I call open pluralists. That means they openly say Jesus is one of many ways to God. Of the remaining 40 percent, 30 to 35 percent them are what I call closet pluralists. That means they say Jesus is the only way to God, but they don't truly believe it. Rather, they are not sure God limited himself to Christ as the exclusive way to heaven. I believe only 5 to 10 percent of the American church believe what John 3:18 teaches. If you are younger than age 30, because pluralism is such a strong influence in our culture, it is highly unlikely that you will believe what John 3:18 says.

Since the lie of pluralism is so pervasive in our culture, I know that some things I am about to say you will not agree with. You will get in the car and talk about what you did not agree with in this sermon. People promised never to return to Faith Church last time I taught on some of the material I am about to teach this morning. When they left, they went because they said they couldn't believe what I taught was true. In reality, they weren't disagreeing with me. They were disagreeing with this book. This morning, there is a lot of Scripture in the outline because I want you to see that what we are talking about is right out of the Bible. If you keep your finger in this book, this is what you find.

Let the Bible define reality for you, don't try to rewrite the Bible because you think you know better. Let's pray before we set sail in rough waters.

Jesus, this morning, we are about to look at some radical stuff in your world. I ask that you keep our spirits humble. Help us to be teachable. As we see the state of the world apart from Christ, may it fire us up for worship and witness.

Let's start with good news in verse 17.

God sent his son to save us, not condemn us.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:17 (ESV)

Sometimes it is helpful to know motives. This verse gives us God's motive for sending his son into the world. God's didn't send Jesus to punish us but to save us. As we learned last week, God loves us. If God didn't passionately love us, he wouldn't have given the most precious possession of his heart for us, his only son. Jesus died on the cross because God loves you, not because he came to punish you. Before we look at the next verse, keep God's love for us as the North Star that guides us.

Those who do not believe in Jesus are still condemned.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. John 3:18 (ESV)

To make sure this sinks in, at the end of this section John said it again.

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. John 3:35–36 (ESV)

John did not stutter. He knew what he was saying. Since this is so important, John 3:18 is your memory verse for the week. I want you to know John 3:18 as well as you know John 3:16. There is no good news in John 3:16 until you understand the bad news of John 3:18.

(Call someone up from the audience to illustrate.) This is _____. How would you feel if I told you the results of your yearly physical check-up are in? The doctor gives you a clean bill of health. You should live a long life.

That is not impressive because you are a healthy guy! If you are healthy, a clean bill of health from the doctor doesn't mean much. Let's try something different.

Pretend my friend was diagnosed with stage four cancer a year ago. For a year, his life has hung in the balance between chemo treatments. He already made funeral arrangements because his death was imminent.

Let's try those same words again. The results of your physical check-up is in. The doctor gives you a clean bill of health. You should live a long life. Now how do you respond? We have a reason to party! When the state of affairs is bad news, good news is *really good news*.

According to God, we are terminal with the sickness of sin.

This is our problem. When we look at ourselves and others around us, we don't see a terminal disease. We think everyone has a clean bill of health. Last week I talked with a man that didn't like all the talk he heard in church about sin. He believes we are basically good people, not evil people. That is not true. According to the Bible, we are sinful at the core. We are terminal with the disease of sin. The consequences of sin is not just earthly death but eternal separation from God and every good thing.

...as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Romans 3:10–18 (ESV)

For the wages of sin is death,... Romans 6:23 (ESV)

The Bible says we are sinful. Let me clarify. Everyone is not as sinful as they could be, that is called utter depravity. We all have room for more sin in our lives. Can I get agreement on that? We are not utterly depraved but we are totally depraved. That means sin has spread to every area of our life. It is in our physical bodies. That is why we die. Its deep roots have spread into our thinking, our will, our motives, and even our unconscious desires. There is nothing about us unstained by sin.

The problem is sin controls us. We can try to manage it. Some of us do a better job than others when it comes to managing sinful thoughts, desires, and actions, but ultimately sin always rules over us.

One way to prove to yourself that sin is alive and well inside is to ask yourself if you have ever promised to swear off a sinful habit such as anger or sexual addiction and not found the power to do it. Have you promised you would never give into something sinful again but only hours, days or weeks later, you are drawn right back to your sinful desires? The reason that happens is because sin is controlling us. The Bible says the control of sin upon our lives is the proof that sin is alive and well in our lives.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!** Romans 7:15–25 (ESV)

Has anyone ever felt this battle raging inside your life? You know the right thing to do but over time you give in to the wrong thing anyway. That is our battle with sin. The only solution is Jesus. When you are tempted, the answer is to get in the habit of constantly reading God's Word, praying to Jesus and letting your mind be more satisfied in God than in sin. That is the only way to beat the power of sin in your life.

According to Scripture, everyone is sinful. That leaves us condemned and under God's wrath for our sin.

What is condemnation?

Condemnation begins with consequences for sinful choices.

The Bible says condemnation for sin has a beginning aspect and an ultimate aspect.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. Romans 1:26–27 (ESV)

This verse is clear that homosexuality is against God's will. The verse is also clear that sin contains within it part of the penalty for it. In the homosexual lifestyle, there are built-in penalties for that sin. The point I want to make is simply that consequences for sin are not just part of the sin of homosexuality, it is true for all sin. Every sin contains within it a measure of penalty. Remind yourself that there is never a winner when you choose to be a sinner.

Condemnation is completed by an eternity in hell.

Much worse than temporal consequences are the ultimate consequences of sin called condemnation. That is experiencing God's justified wrath. Apart from Jesus, everyone on planet Earth is slated for an eternity in ultimate condemnation for their sins. That is called hell.

What is hell like?

Hell is bad news, but it doesn't sound that bad to many of us. We are not accustomed to the horrors of hell. When I read a T-shirt that says, "I can't wait to die so I can go to hell to be with my friends." It shows me that as a culture, we

do not understand hell. Let me give you some of the descriptions of what final condemnation in hell looks like according to the Bible.

Hell is described as a hideous garbage dump.

So people could comprehend ultimate condemnation in hell, the Bible uses some graphic images. One of my favorites is Gehenna. In most of your New Testaments, Gehenna is simply translated as the word hell in the English. It is very descriptive in the Greek. In the ancient world, it brought horrifying pictures to people's minds. What is called Gehenna in the New Testament was called the Valley of Hinnom in the Old Testament. That is a ravine on the South side of Jerusalem. In Israel's past, it was a place of idolatrous worship. It was where people burned their children alive in worship to the demon Molech. The nasty memories of this valley caused New Testament Israel to turn it into a garbage dump. It was a place where fires burned continually. In the heat, the rot of the garbage smelled hideous. The corpses of criminals were also thrown into this deep valley. They were not buried. In the hot sun they swelled until they burst open and the smell of rotting human flesh permeated the air. It was a place that made most want to vomit because it was so putrid. During the intertestamental period, to help people understand the horror of hell, rabbis began describing hell like the Gehenna garbage dump. Jesus continued using that description. The reason Jesus and the rabbis described hell like Gehenna was because it made the horror of God's wrath real to people. Look how Jesus described the horrors of Gehenna to help people understand the hideousness of hell.

And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell (Gehenna), to the unquenchable fire. Mark 9:43 (ESV)

You know hell is a hideous place if you should be willing to lose a body part to avoid going there.

Hell is described as a lake of fire.

The Book of Revelation describes hell as a lake of fire. This is something we might be able to connect with, especially if we had a raging campfire on the Fourth of July.

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:14–15 (ESV)

A few quick things to note. Hades in the New Testament and Sheol in the Old Testament are the same thing. They are terms for the temporary holding places of the dead before judgment. For those apart from Christ, Hades is a place of torment. For those with faith in God, it was a place of comfort. After the resurrection of Christ, the Old Testament saints were taken out of Hades and brought to be with Christ in heaven. This is why Paul says in Philippians 1 that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. To die as a Christian is not to go to a place of torment in Hades, it is to be with Christ in heaven.

Those who die apart from Christ, go to Hades until final judgment when they are ultimately sent to the lake of fire, also known as hell. If you want to learn more about Hades read Luke 16 or go to the www.christ2Rculture.com website and look under the Mysteries of Heaven series. In that series, I explain Hades in greater detail.

The second thing to note is only those whose names are written in the book of life avoid the lake of fire. How do you get your name written in the book of life? You believe Jesus is the son of God. That was what we learned last week in John 3:16. You receive Christ's death in your place to be the payment for your sin. That is how your name is written in the book of life.

Something else to learn about the lake of fire is that it was not originally created for us. It was created for the devil.

...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Matthew 25:41 (ESV)

The reason all humans apart from Christ will spend eternity in the lake of fire is because, as a race, we joined Satan in his rebellion against God through Adam and Eve's sin. We confirm our sinful nature every day in the sinful choices we make. Eternal torment in the lake of fire is the just response to Satan's rebellion against God. That also makes it the just response to our rebellion against God. It is what we deserve.

Incidentally, some of you thought Satan did the tormenting in hell. God does that. Satan is the tormented one.

...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

Hell, which is described as a hideous garbage dump and a lake of fire, is the just response to our sin. It is eternal. It is torment forever and ever. When I preach this, people don't like it. People say it isn't fair. People don't feel this is

what they deserve because they thought they were basically good people, or at least better than most people.

The reality is that the just response to all sin against God is horrifying punishment. I didn't write the rules. I just read the book. I let this book define reality for me. I don't try to rewrite the book and neither should you.

Since hell is so horrifyingly bad and it feels like God is overreacting to our sin, many people try to tone hell down. They try to take the hellishness out of hell. Let me show you two ways this is happening today.

What are distortions of hell?

Hell is not forever - Annihilationism.

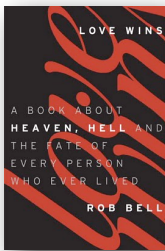
There is a trend among some conservative Christians to say hell is not forever. They latch onto the word *destruction* that is used in many of the passages that describe hell. They reason that when you destroy something, it eventually ceases to exist. They reason that since hell involves destruction, eventually hell itself will be destroyed. They picture hell eventually snuffed out like a candle.

The problem with this is that the term *destruction* is often accompanied by another term. That is the word *eternal*. In other words, destruction describes the agony of continually being destroyed. It doesn't mean that hell will eventually cease to exist.

...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,... 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9 (ESV)

How do we get brilliant people, who know their Bible, to come to the conclusion that hell will eventually snuff out of existence? I am greatly simplifying this but I studied this extensively. The reason some conservative theologians have a problem with the eternity of hell is because they say thinking about hell from an eternal perspective is enough to drive someone insane. I think they have a point. Final condemnation in the lake of fire for all apart from Christ should drive us to the edge of insanity if we ponder the ramifications of the Bible's words. But that is the reality. I didn't write the book. My job is just to keep my finger in the book and to teach you what it says. It says hell is eternal. That is not just one passage, but it is all over the Bible. That is how some conservatives tone down hell. The liberals are doing the same but they try to tone hell down a different way.

Everybody eventually goes to heaven - Universalism.



Rob Bell recently wrote a book called "Love Wins." I read it the day it was released. In the past, I have talked with Rob. I hoped he wasn't going to say the thing reviews claimed he would.

In the book, Rob does a great job of asking questions. He does a bad job of keeping his finger in this book. Rob's book is hard to interact with because he doesn't make many statements. He just keeps asking questions. He does state that he views hell like a temporary reform school. He says eventually people in hell will repent of rejecting Christ and get promoted to heaven. In fact, he says you don't even need to believe in Christ to be in heaven.

Jesus forgives them all, without their asking for it.¹

I wish it was true that God forgives everyone apart from faith in Christ but that isn't what John 3:18 says.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. John 3:18 (ESV)

Rob also makes an argument that eternal hell is not eternal but he believes eternal is just a period of time. There is a problem with that. Look at Matthew 25.

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Matthew 25:46 (ESV)

It is the same word in the Greek used for eternal in both instances. If punishment is not eternal, then eternal life is not eternal. You cannot have one without the other. I wish everyone eventually went to heaven without their asking for it but it just isn't what the Bible says.

What should I remember when hell doesn't seem fair?

Now, I know the punishment of hell appears to exceed the crime of unbelief. Before you write off hell as unfair, we need to understand the purpose of God's wrath being displayed in hell is justice.

God is all about justice.

And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!” Revelation 16:7 (ESV)

God is merciful and loving. He is also fair. That is why Jesus suffered for our sins rather than God just ignoring them. Sin must be paid for. Those who do

¹ Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, (iBook edition), pg.418.

not accept Christ's gift of payment for their sins in fairness must face God's justice in hell.

Hell isn't the same for everyone.

We need to realize the experience of hell is not the same for everyone. I know this sounds weird. Last time I said this, I had people leave the church because they didn't put their finger in the text. Hell is still hell, but the torment of a mass murderer in hell is more severe than the punishment of a kind and generous man apart from Christ in hell. They are both in hell because they are sinners in rebellion against God, but their experience of punishment in hell is different.

Why this sounds heretical to us is because many of us grew up hearing that big-time sinners and small-time sinners are equally in need of salvation and can both be completely forgiven by Christ. That is true. But don't mistake your understanding of the forgiveness we receive from Christ with the judgment we deserve apart from Christ.

According to the Bible, there are two basis upon which the intensity of hell is determined.

Judgment based upon light received.

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." Matthew 11:20–24 (ESV)

The inhabitants of the religious cities who saw Christ's miracles, but rejected Christ, will receive greater eternal punishment than wicked cities who never had the chance to see Christ's miracles. So while Chorazin and Bethsaida looked godlier than Tyre and Sodom --- because Bethsaida and Chorazin were exposed so clearly to Jesus --- they rejected him and they faced greater eternal punishment.

This is sobering for those who grow up in the church but walk away from Christ. If they don't return to Christ, they will experience greater condemnation for rejecting him than those who have never known him. The greater the opportunity to know Christ, the more severe the judgment for rejecting him.

Judgment based upon works done in this life.

The Bible also teaches that the actions of people will be taken into account at the final judgment.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done... they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Revelation 20:12–13 (ESV)

The Bible says no one will be in heaven based on the actions they did in life. We are only in heaven because of God's grace to us through Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

Apart from Christ people will be judged by the life they lived to determine the severity, not the longevity, of their experiences in hell.

For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:14 (ESV)

Why is God so insistent that faith in Jesus the *only way*?

We have come full circle to where we began with pluralism. The Bible says everything about us is sinful. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves other than call out to God and ask Jesus to pay for our sins and save us. Every other religion tells you that you can be your own savior. You can earn your way into heaven. The Bible tells us we are too sinful to behave. Only Jesus lived a life without sin. We do not behave, rather we believe in what Jesus has done for us.

God only has one son. He only made one way. That is why every other religion is a dead-end street. Everyone apart from Christ is justly condemned.

Applications

1. **Get pluralism out of your head.** Stop believing that all religions are essentially the same thing. They are not. Jesus is the only way and apart from believing in him everyone is slated for eternal condemnation. Even those who have never heard. Will they be judged fairly? Of course! They will not be in heaven apart from faith in Jesus. That may not be the way we feel is fair but that is what the Bible says is true.
2. **Let this drive you to worship.** As we talked about in the beginning with our imaginary cancer diagnosis, good news is not really good news until you understand the bad news. When we look at what the Bible says we deserve and what God extends to us in Jesus, it causes your heart to emotionally quiver. It should drive us to worship. On Sunday mornings, I sometimes look around to watch people singing. Some of you sing to Jesus like your dog just

died. You have no smile on your face, no thankfulness in your heart, no coffee in your blood. We were slated for eternal punishment but God loves us so much he paid the highest cost that could ever be paid to give us eternal life. God loves us. Get amped about it.

3. **Let this drive you to witness.** Christ is the only way to escape condemnation. I know how it is when it comes to talking about religion and politics. Those topics are off limits. There are some things we need to talk about even if they are uncomfortable because they are important.

Let me close with a story to illustrate. We live in a nice neighborhood. At night, I sometimes enjoy looking out the window to watch the snow, the lights and see what is happening with the neighbors. We have seen some interesting happenings in our neighborhood during the last four years.

Imagine that late one night in the middle of the winter on the outside corner of one of our neighbor's houses, I saw a small fire that started in the electric box licking the edge of the siding. It was late. The neighborhood is asleep. It is cold out. What thoughts come to mind to keep you from warning your neighbors?

- **I don't want to make them uncomfortable.** It is the middle of the night. They will be annoyed if I get them out of bed.
- **Somebody else can tell them.** We live in a neighborhood. Warning them is something another neighbor can do.
- **I don't want to be uncomfortable.** It is cold out. I don't want to go outside in the winter storm. It would be uncomfortable for me.

Aren't those the same excuses we use for not telling people how much God loves them? The reality is there is a fire burning on the edge of many of the houses in our neighborhood. It is flame from the lake of fire. Most of us have bought so deeply into pluralism, that we think everyone goes to heaven. That is why we don't care enough to warn our neighbors that apart from Christ everyone is eternally condemned!

Prayer

Jesus, forgive us for buying into pluralism and not talking about you with our friends and neighbors. Forgive us for the times we are passionless, pathetic worshipers because we lost sight of our sinfulness and the grace of Christ. Help us to just simply tell people how much you love them. Help us also believe the truth of the Bible about the depth of our sinfulness and what we deserve. Amen.



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