

SMOKING OR NON-SMOKING? Part II

Last week we started our sermon series on the two destinations to which all human beings are headed. When you die, you will go to one place or the other. Like the restaurants of yesteryear, you'll either be heading to the *smoking section* (the one called Hell) or to the *non-smoking section* in Heaven to be with God. The Bible clearly teaches that there is a Hell, and that it is a very real place of eternal (not temporary) punishment for the wicked. And the torment that is administered there is beyond our most horrible nightmares—combining the horrors of burning fires with the fears and anxieties brought on by utter darkness. And, we noted the many Scriptures that tell us that this is so. Now, despite all of this overwhelming evidence in God's Word describing the reality of Hell, there are many people who still deny its existence. In fact, some even claim to believe in God. So, why do they deny Hell's existence? On what possible grounds do they contend that there is no such place as Hell?

Well, their denial is based on a question that they pose and the false answer that they offer in response to that question. The question they offer is this: "*How could a loving God ever send anyone to such a terrible place of eternal punishment as Hell?*" That's the question they like to ask simply to be able to give their own desired response, which is

this: They'll start out by saying (usually in a pious manner): *"I know that God is an all loving God."* And then they will come to their punchline and add: *"There is no way that an all loving God would do send somebody to such a terrible place like Hell. He just loves people too much to do something like that."*

Now admittedly, other people will take a slightly different approach, and technically acknowledge there's a Hell, but think that it's a place only for the very most wicked people in the world. They could imagine someone like a Hitler, or one of their personal enemies, being sent there. But, they too are banking on God's loving forgiveness and think that God would not send *them* to Hell. They reason that they are less sinful than most people, and that will be good enough. So hey, God—being a loving God—surely he will give them a break and forgive them even after they have died having lived a life filled with *unrepentant* sin. Or so, they think. But, do you know what's going to happen to them if they don't change their way of thinking—if they don't truly repent and receive forgiveness *during this life*? When they one day stand before God, and they point to the people around them and say, *"But God, I was less sinful than these guys."* You know what God's going to say? Probably something like: *"Oh, so you all were sinful? Looks like you all bought a ticket to Hell."*

You see, the problem is that those who cling to their false notions are bound for the *smoking section*. Both of these erroneous views deny the existence of Hell as it is clearly described in the Bible. These people simply ignore God's Word and deceive themselves by making up their own personal versions as to the way they think things ought to be. It's like they prepare their own little designer wardrobes to wear in eternity, apart from the robe God has prepared for those who are faithful to His Word. All of which tells us what? What it tells us is that they both misunderstand who God is, as well as how depraved and sinful the human condition really is—including their own *prideful* and *sinful* condition.

Well then, how do we address people who take these false positions? You may remember that last week I mentioned that our understanding of Heaven and Hell is so important because it affects our understanding of God and our relationship to Him. That is exactly the case in the circumstance we have here where someone denies Hell based upon their *misunderstanding of God's love*—as great as His love truly is. So, let's first think about God's nature—the things that make up God's character. Then, think about the condition that we are in as human beings. And try to see how all of this fits together—particularly as it relates to the question of Hell. And, I think that you will see that

this is a timely discussion because it is so very relevant to our celebration of the Lord's Supper later this morning.

So what is the nature of God? What are His defining characteristics? Certainly, God is love. The Apostle John says exactly that in one of his letters.¹ A variety of other Scriptures confirm that, yes, God is love.² That is a major characteristic of God—*He is love*. But, that isn't the only thing that defines God's nature. The Bible also tells us some other things about God that are extremely important features of His overall character. Do you know what they are? Listen to what the Scriptures tell us about one of those characteristics. Moses and the people of Israel praised God after He rescued them from the pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea crossing, and they sang out: **"Who is like you among the gods, O LORD— glorious in HOLINESS."** Exodus 15:11 (NLT2)

Hanna, upon dedicating her son, Samuel, to the Lord, cried out in praise: **"No one is HOLY like the LORD! There is no one besides you. . ."**

¹ Samuel 2:2 (NLT2) Turning to God, the Psalmist sang, **"You are HOLY, enthroned on the praises of Israel."** Psalm 22:3 (NLT2) The Virgin Mary, in her song of praise, describes God as follows: **"For the Mighty One is HOLY, and He has done great things for me."** Luke 1:49 (NLT2) And, in the very last book of the Bible, even the heavenly beings sing out: **"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is the Lord God, the Almighty— the one who always was, who is,**

and who is still to come.” Revelation 4:8 (NLT2) So, what do these Scriptures tell us? God is what? God is **HOLY!!!** O.K.—but, exactly what does that mean when we say that **God is Holy**?

When the New Testament describes God as *holy*, the Greek word used is ἅγιος (hagios). It means “morally blameless,” “pure,” “righteous” and “sacred.”³ It conveys a meaning of *separateness* in the sense that God’s holiness is absolutely, supremely pure and matchless and, so, it must remain separated. Separated from what? Impurity? Yes—impurity. Impurity being what? What is the most impure thing, the filthiest thing in this universe from the perspective of a Holy God? It’s a three letter word: “S-I-N”—it’s **sin**, the *most impure thing of all*. The filthiest thing, even in its smallest, most microscopic part, that can never be tolerated in the presence of God is the **evil of our sin**. The prophets of old acknowledged this when they turned to God and proclaimed: **“You are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil.”** Habakkuk 1:13

(NLT2)

And that is the crux of our problem. Because as Paul has rightly noted, all of us **“have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**⁴ And that is a *huge* problem. Since we are all so deeply stained with sin, we could never come into the presence of God with all our sinful baggage in tow. Because God is holy, sin cannot abide in His presence. And if

we cannot abide in His presence because of our sin, then we would be barred from entry into the *non-smoking section*—the place called *Heaven*. And it follows that if our sin continues to keep us separated from God, then it would be our very ticket into the *smoking section* called *Hell*.

Well, can't God just over look our sins? After all, He is God. He's in charge of all the rules—right? Just bend the rules a little and let us into Heaven—what difference would a little sin in Heaven make? Actually, it would make all the difference in the world!—No, all the difference in the universe! Why? Because not only would it violate God's holiness, it would be completely counter to another aspect of God's character. And that characteristic is this: *God is totally JUST*. The Scriptures tell us that again and again. In Deuteronomy 32, it tells us that "[God] is the Rock; His deeds are perfect. Everything He does is JUST and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how JUST and upright He is!" Deuteronomy

32:4 (NLT2) The Psalmist joins in and agrees: "The LORD reigns forever, executing judgment from His throne. ⁸ He will judge the world with JUSTICE and rule the nations with fairness." Psalm 9:7-9 (NLT2) And, God Himself declares the precision of His justice when He declares: "I will test you with the measuring line of justice and the plumb line of righteousness." Isaiah 28:17 (NLT2)

And so, God administers His justice without exception to anyone. Now what does that mean for all of us? Well, being totally just, God metes out to everyone what they deserve. Your deeds will be rewarded tit for tat. You can bet on it, sinners will be justly rewarded. They will get every penny of the wages that they deserve. But, that is the bad news for us, because if we are justly rewarded, Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death.⁵ And the “*death*” that he is speaking of is eternal punishment in Hell. What a hopelessly doomed situation we face. We die and have to face God’s just judgment and accept those deadly, hellish wages. So what would you say to God?—“*I don’t want those wages*”—is that what you’d say? Is that your plan? If so, you better turn to a different plan. You see, under God’s justice system, somebody is going to pay for those sins. The unrepentant sinner pays for them by eternal torment in Hell. So is our situation hopeless?

It would be if God’s nature was comprised solely of His holiness (which cannot stand the presence of sin) and His justness (which always requires that every sin to be paid for in Hell). But, as we saw earlier, *God is also love*. And so, it goes without saying, God’s *holiness* and His *justice* coexist along with His *love*. So, when we think about God, we should *never separate* His HOLINESS and JUSTICE from His LOVE⁶—for it is from God’s love that His great mercy and grace springs forth. And we

can begin to see this when God declares: ²¹ “There is no other God besides Me, a *JUST* God and a *SAVIOR*; There is none besides Me. ²² LOOK TO ME, AND BE SAVED, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” Isaiah 45:21-22 (NKJV) God is just and can swiftly render judgment, but He is “*mighty to save*”⁷ as well.

But, how can this be? If justice must prevail, and our sins must be paid for—and we alone have no capacity to pay for them—how can we possibly be saved? How can all those sins of ours be washed away in order that, upon our demise, we can come into God’s holy presence and reside with Him in Heaven? How can this be if our sins have to be paid for in Hell? Well, in the verse we just read, God tells us how this can be. It can be—and, indeed, is—because God is also our Savior. You see, when we read Paul’s message that the *“wages of sin is death,”* we didn’t read all of that verse, because it goes on to assure us that: “. . . the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23 (NLT2) Elsewhere, in his letter to the Romans, Paul goes on to say that, despite our sinful condition, “God declares us ‘*NOT GUILTY*’ of offending Him *IF* we trust in Jesus Christ, who in His kindness freely takes away our sins.” Romans 3:24 (TLB) Although that *“not guilty”* verdict is a free gift of God’s mercy and grace shown to us, yet someone still had to pay for all of our sins. A mere human couldn’t bare the crushing burden of all

those sins—each and every sin ever committed since the time of Adam to this very moment. Only God could make provision for that. Paul, in Romans 3, explains: ²⁵ “For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they **BELIEVE** that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood.” Romans 3:35 (NLT2)

When Jesus went to the Cross, He took on all of the sins of the world—He paid our *sin-debt*. He absorbed the wages of sin for all of those who believe in Him. But, what does that mean—“to believe in Jesus”? Some people seem to think that if they say that they *believe God exists*, that’s enough. It is not. When the Bible speaks about our need to “*believe in Jesus*,” it demands more than the mere mental acknowledgment that God exists. Even, Satan “*believes in God*” in the sense that he knows that God exists. If that is all there is to one’s commitment to Christ, then it is really no commitment at all. True **FAITH** is not only believing in God’s existence, but also understanding the very characteristics of God’s nature that we have covered this morning, as well as acknowledging our own depraved and sinful state. It is knowing: That God is Holy and, thus, can abide no sin; that we are all sinners and, thus, unacceptable to enter into His presence in His Heavenly Kingdom; that we are unable, by our mere works, to pay for all of our sins; that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to pay for

our sins on the Cross; and, that to prove all of this is true, God raised His Son, Jesus Christ, from the dead. True faith is all of these things plus submitting to the fact that for these reasons, *JESUS IS OUR LORD AND SAVIOR!* That is what “*FAITH*” really is. When a true follower of Jesus says that they “BELIEVE” in Him—those are the things that they believe and have complete confidence in.

But, God does not force you to believe any of those things. In fact, God gives you something amazing—He has given you “free will.” This means that the decision to believe is a choice left wholly up to you—all of which brings us full circle. It brings us back to that question that people raise, who think themselves clever, to deny the existence of Hell: “*How could a loving God send anyone to Hell?*”—they ask. But, you see, there is an inherent fallacy in that question, because the question erroneously assumes that God is the One *who does the sending*. But the truth is *God doesn’t send anyone to Hell*. In fact, the Scriptures affirm that God doesn’t even want anyone to go to Hell.⁸ So, who sends people there? The answer is quite simple: They do. They are the ones who freely send themselves to Hell by the choices that they make. What choices do they have?—the choice to take up their crosses and follow Jesus, or to ungraciously reject Him and the price that He paid for them on the Cross. The Bible plainly states that Jesus is

the way, the truth and the life, no man can come to the Father and reside in His Holy presence except by the cleansing blood of Christ.⁹ But, so very many people deliberately choose to reject Jesus as the way, the truth and the life. They don't want to wear the clean and spotless robe that He offers to them, but insist upon entering Heaven on their own terms—in their own filthy rags. Jesus told a parable about this.

Jesus said: ² “The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. ³ When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come! ⁴ “So he sent other servants to tell them, ‘The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!’ ⁵ But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. ⁶ Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them. ⁷ “The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. ⁸ And he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren’t worthy of the honor. ⁹ Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ ¹⁰ So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ [Now, bear in mind that in ancient times it was sometimes the

custom for the host to provide his guests with spotless wedding robes as they entered the wedding party, as was apparently the case at this banquet.¹⁰ So, listen very carefully to this part:] “But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. [You see, this guy had—of his own free will—rejected the king’s clean, white wedding clothes. Instead, he had decided to wear his own robe—as disgustingly dirty as it was! He wanted to get into the party under his rules, and not in the way the King demanded. So, what happened? Well, let’s see whether he gets into the party—the *“non-smoking”* section, so to speak, or if he is tossed out into the *“smoking”* section. This is the way the parable ends:] ¹² ‘Friend,’ the king asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. ¹³ Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴ “For many are called, but few are chosen.” Matthew 22:2-14 (NLT2)

Now, I tell you—the king didn’t want to throw any of his guests out of the banquet. After all the trouble that he had gone to in preparing the wedding hall and the great feast, after sending his servants out time after time trying to get at least some of the people to accept his invitation—after all that, the king wanted party-goers to celebrate with.

But, so many refused to even come. And even one of those who did come tried to crash the party wearing his own *dirt-stained robe*. And before he was thrown from the party, this disgusting guest may well have said to himself, “Surely a **LOVING** king like this wouldn’t possibly throw anyone out of the party, even if they refuse his free offer of a *clean robe*.” But, he thought wrong. He was just as wrong as those people today who insist that a loving God would never allow anyone to be punished eternally in Hell.

In fact, those people and this man in the parable are so much alike. They try to switch places with God and become the creator themselves. They want to *re-create God* and leave out His holiness and justice, and in the process commit the most common sin of all—the sin of PRIDE. They deliberately try to use God’s own love against God Himself like a bargaining chip and, so, commit the most arrogant deception of themselves and others by denying the existence of Hell. They can’t get into Heaven that way—simply by denying that Hell exists. And they surely can’t get into Heaven in their filthy robes of sin. In the end, those who try this approach are thrown out of God’s holy presence and into the darkness and fires of Hell every time. No man comes to the Father in Heaven except through the Son who offers a clean robe to those who truly surrender their lives to Him. Jesus bids all of those who

are living in the rags of sin¹¹ to take on the white and spotless robe¹² that He offers today—before it's too late.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13 (KJV) **Those who deny that Hell exists demean Christ's love for us when He laid down His life on the Cross—and when they choose to reject His love, they only make their own grimy robes all the more dirtier. But, again, those filthy rags aren't allowed in Heaven—but, in Hell, oh they are quite the fashion statement, and highly flammable down there . . . in that smoking section. And while it may be cold outside now, maybe it's time to think about a wardrobe change . . . before it really gets hot.**

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
February 3, 2019
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¹ 1 John 4:8-10 (NLT2) ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

² Jeremiah 31:3 (NLT2) ³ Long ago the LORD said to Israel: “I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself. Ephesians 2:4 (NLT2) ⁴ But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much. Romans 8:39 (NLT2) ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Deuteronomy 7:8 (NLT2) It was simply that the LORD loves you, and he was keeping the

oath he had sworn to your ancestors. That is why the LORD rescued you with such a strong hand from your slavery and from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

³ James Strong, *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, (Austin, TX: WORDsearch Corp., 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "40".

⁴ Romans 3:23 (NIV) For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

⁵ Romans 6:23 (NLT2) For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

⁶ Steve Wellum, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "GOD," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁷ Isaiah 63:1 (TLB) "It is I, the Lord, announcing your salvation; I, the Lord, the one who is mighty to save!"

⁸ 1 Timothy 2:4 (TEV) [God] wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 (HCSB) The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish [and go to Hell] but all to come to repentance.

Ezekiel 18:23 (HCSB) "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. "Instead, don't I take pleasure when he turns from his ways and lives?"

Ezekiel 18:32 (NLT2) ³² I don't want you to die, says the Sovereign LORD. Turn back and live!

⁹ John 14:6 (KJV) Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., *NIV Study Bible*, 2008 Update ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 22".

¹¹ Isaiah 64:6 (NLT2) We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall, and our sins sweep us away like the wind.

¹² Revelation 6:11 (TEV) Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer, until the complete number of other servants and believers were killed, as they had been.