

Road Blocks to Faith

Luke 16: 19-25 – the doctrine of Hell

One of the most important business principles these days ...is to make it as easy as possible for people to use your service, to get your product.

So you have drive through take away. Don't even have to get out of the car.

So you can buy stuff just by picking up the phone and your credit card. Just ten easy payments! Or you can go online. But even then you have to be able to get what you need in one or two clicks. Or the customer will give up and go elsewhere.

Any sort of roadblock is a big problem.

Of course the reverse is also true. And don't Centrelink know it. You know what I mean. They make you jump through more hoops than a circus performer. Road block after road block after road block. Until you just give up.

But what about when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ? Do we make it easy for people....or do we put road blocks in the way? And I'd suggest and I'm sure you'd agree...within our means. Without watering down what we believe. We'd want to make it as easy as possible.

And there are all sorts of churches doing things like having church in a pub. Trying to make it easier for people who'd feel uncomfortable in a church. And that's commendable.

And that's a helpful thing to think through when you're thinking about church and how we do it. But today and next week. And a bit later on the year I want us to think about some roadblocks to faith.

Not so much the things we do at church. Which are definitely worth thinking about. But I'm talking about core things about what we believe. I'm talking about some central things about the Christian faith....that tend to be roadblocks for people. Things that maybe we tend to avoid. Because they're hard.

For example....things like the doctrine of hell. Which we'll look at today. Things like that. That people just can't get past....they're road blocks to faith.

Christianity is exclusive. That's another one. Or the idea that it's arrogant for anyone to say they've got the truth....there's 8 or 9 significant things that trouble people – maybe trouble you..... about the Christian faith. And for some they're roadblocks to faith. For Christians they can be roadblocks to growth in faith. Or roadblocks to assurance in their faith. They're weak links in the chain of belief.

So it's worth having a look at them.

And as we look at the doctrine of hell this morning. I guess it goes without saying – that it's a problem for people.

I read an essay online by someone called Charlotte. And her essay was entitled *why I am NOT a Christian*. And she lists off all 27 of her roadblocks to faith.

And for Charlotte. And I'm guessing for a lot of people. Hell. Comes in as the clear winner. Listen to her first words.

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Hell, of course, is the mother of all of my problems with the bible.

Now that shouldn't be a surprise to you.

In fact, you might even agree. Forget quantum physics.....The concept of hell....is as difficult a thing to get your head around as there is. So hard in fact that even Christians hedge at the idea. Even deny it.

And I have to say. It's been a trembling experience putting my thoughts together this week. And I'm someone with lots of family who wouldn't call themselves Christian people. And so it's with sobriety and with that reality in mind that I approach this.

And you'll see the point number 1 on your sheet there is thy mythical god of love. And we'll start there.

See, this is how the objection to hell is summed up in a nutshell. You'll say...how could a loving God, how could a God of love and compassion.....send people to hell?

And it's a reasonable question.

But let start by asking the question....where do we get the notion of this loving God in the first place? Where does that idea come from? Because..... you don't get it from looking at a sunrise. A sunrise might be beautiful. Might be awe inspiring. But it can't tell you whether God's loving or not. So that's not where it comes from . And it doesn't come from the major world religions either. For Buddhists God's neither personal or loving. And the God of the Quran might have some mercy. But he's not the loving, personal God of the Christian bible. And I'd suggest. That the Christian bible's where the idea comes from in the first place.

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^{NIV} **Exodus 34:6** And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness

And that's a repeated idea through both the old and new testaments.

^{NIV} **Psalms 103:8** The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

Jesus' story of the prodigal son is a revelation about the loving and compassionate Dad. It's a parable about what God's like.

So the idea of the loving God comes from the bible.

But here's the problem. Because the same bible that says God is love. Also says God judges. And the same bible also says. God punishes. And God's a God of wrath.

So to refer to the God of love that doesn't judge, to speak about a God that lets you do whatever you want without consequences. Is theoretical. Because there's no evidence that this God exists. And if this God does exist...he hasn't made himself known...which presumably he would have. So it's important at the start I think..to just note that point. We're constructing a straw man argument here. It's the mythical God of love some would prefer ...over against the God of the Old and New Testaments as he's revealed himself.

And you'll say the loving God wouldn't do certain things. And there's other things he would do. Which takes us to point 2 there on your sheet. The mythical God of apathy.

The mythical God of apathy

The biblical doctrine of hell is closely tied to God's judgment, It's tied to the fact that there are consequences attached to wrong thinking, and attitudes and actions.

But you'll say the mythical God of love would just accept everyone.

And wouldn't judge anyone. And wouldn't get angry. And I guess if you're prepared to immerse yourself deep into the theology of a Disney movie. That theory might stand up. But in the real world -----with all due respect.....it just

doesn't. Because in the real world. There's so many real occasions where you can see the motive of love that's driving judgment.

When you see someone you care about being hurt in some way. Anger is a natural response. And it stems from love. You're angry because you care about them. And it's not that much of a stretch to see punishment in the same light.

I mean what sort of parent would I be if I let my kids do anything they wanted without consequence. Would I be a loving dad? I don't think so. I'd be the dead beat dad on A current affair.

And what sort of society lets crime go unpunished? A loving society? Can you really say a loving government would find Jayant Patel guilty of 3 counts of manslaughter, and pat him on the back and say. Off you go, no harm done. It just doesn't ring true.

It's not that hard to see the link between a right and proper anger and love.

On the other hand the mythical God of non-judgment. Is really the God of apathy in disguise. And a God who is indifferent. Has a lot to answer for.

But the God of compassion judges.

And in the end hell is the logical outworking of that. Ultimately the God who loves his good creation. Who rightly hates the wickedness that degrades it and destroys it. Must put an end to it. Must in the end overcome it.

Which brings us to the next point.

The mythical God who delights in sending.

See if you want to paint God in a bad light. You paint the picture of the God who arbitrarily picks off innocent people who really haven't done anything wrong. And as they scream out for mercy ...he sends them to hell with a maniacal sort of pleasure. And you'll say the God of love wouldn't do that.

And the truth is. He doesn't.

In Romans 1 Paul says God's discernable from the creation itself. So we're without excuse. But more than that. The whole point of the bible.

Is the creator, revealing himself to his creation. To call people to faith. The whole point of the bible...is that God speaks to people who've turned away from him. So they'll turn back.

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And here's one example of God's attitude spelled out.

Ezekiel 33:11 ¹¹ Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

If you want God's attitude towards people. There it is. Turn and live.

And Jonah's got it dead right. You might remember. God sends Jonah off to the wicked city of Nineveh in the Old Testament, with the message that the city's going to be destroyed in a number of days. And you might say there he is. There's the awful non-loving God of the bible. There he goes again with his punishment. But what's the point of sending the messenger? Why not just destroy Nineveh? And the point is. We've just heard. And here's an example. God would rather they turn and live. And Jonah knows it, which is why he runs 100 miles an hour in the opposite direction. And gets swallowed by the fish.

And in the last chapter. As Jonah has a massive dummy spit...he's mad at God. And he's got it dead right. Listen to what he says to God.

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^{NIV} **Jonah 4:2** He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

And Jonah might be throwing his hat down on the ground and jumping up and down on it in a fit. And he's angry because he's dead right. God relents, and he's compassionate. And even the wicked people of Nineveh are saved.

So jump up and down if you want. But in his compassion. His call to you is. Turn to him. Turn to him through his Son. And live.

The whole point of the incarnation. Is that in the person of Jesus God speaks to us in the flesh. He's the word made flesh.

1 Timothy 1:15-16 ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

God delights in saving rebels.

But at the same time. In his sovereignty. He's given us choice. Real choice. And you can decide to ignore what you see in the world. You can decide to ignore the words of the bible. And you might say God sends. But that's not really right. I mean...You choose. Every day you choose. Is God God or am I? And in a way. Hell's just the trajectory of your day by day and year by year choice, that continues on after you die.

And again it rings true with reality. Because choices have consequences. Some little ones, some bigger.

Interesting that the story of Lazarus we heard earlier. Even in the reality of the afterlife...the rich man hasn't really had a change of heart.

There's a rich man and a poor beggar called Lazarus. And presumably the rich man treated everyone like he treated Lazarus. Presumably the trajectory of his attitude meant he wouldn't let God be God. And it's interesting because there he

is in hell. And there's the big chasm between him and Lazarus. But from his side of the chasm his still barking orders. He's telling Abraham to send over Lazarus the water boy....to him. Send him over here he says....I need a drink he says.

It seems like his attitude in life....continues in his afterlife. And there's even the hint of an accusation...as he asks to go back to warn his brothers. As though maybe that's why he's there. There wasn't sufficient proof, he's saying. If you send me back to warn them - they'll believe. But Abraham says even if someone comes back from the dead they won't believe. They won't believe because they won't believe. Because they really have the choice not to, and so do you.

God doesn't delight, and you have a choice.

Let me just really quickly say something about the idea of excessive penalty. And I've got to say for me personally, that's the hardest one. But let me just say two things. Firstly. Number one I think we underestimate the consequences of turning away from God. We minimize it and say Adam and Eve just ate some fruit. So they die. That's excessive punishment. People lack faith...and they end up facing hell. But they didn't just eat fruit. Adam and Eve. They decided that God wouldn't be God. And that's what sin is in essence. And the worst possible crime you can think of is distilled from that. And it seems to me that hell...is just the trajectory of that decision...not just one bad judgment, but that determined, set stand....to not let God be God. It's that day by day choice in life....taken off into eternity. The consequence of Adam and Eve's decision....is separation from God. And what

could be worse than eternal separation from the God who is God. So that's the first thing. Don't underestimate our part.

But secondly. The language Jesus uses. The description of fire sounds terrifying. But you need to keep in mind that it's a bit like the words that get used to describe heaven. It's not a streaming video picture into the place itself...what we get is word pictures. That give you a sense. And if the picture of everlasting fire and awful separation from God sounds dreadful, then maybe that's a good thing. Because the decision to not let God be God is seriously flawed...and has serious consequences.

Here's another picture.

The Son of God hanging on the cross. To save sinners. And ultimately. There's God's answers to your questions. Because ultimately you're asking – is God good? That's what you really want to know. In the absence of knowing everything there is to know about hell - You're asking – is God just, and fair...and good?

And the cross is where you need to go to answer those questions.

There's a picture of the reality of judgment. But at the same time...it's the evidence of God's compassion. John 15 says..

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John 15:13 ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

It's the best warning you'll ever get. Because the God of love would prefer that you turn and live.

And you'll say but what about people who haven't heard...or what about this or what about that. And you might have some good questionsbut maybe you're just looking for an excuse to opt out of calling God God.

Because in the end...the best answer to the questions that aren't spelled out for you. Is to take account of what you do know....and deduce it from there. I mean if God's just. What will he do? He'll do what's just. He'll do what's right.

When you think about it... If we're saying God's the one who made us. And we're trying to inform him of how a loving God should act....we're sort of telling him how to suck eggs aren't we. We're telling the one who made us and gave us our sense of right. We're telling him what's right and just. If we're trying to tell God that the reality of hell's a bit inconsistent....then what you've got...is the finite telling the infinite he's overlooked something. In the end...you might not like it, but if God's God, who are you to take the moral high ground over the one who gave you your morals in the first place? Do you think you're helpfully pointing out something to God that he didn't know? Is he answerable to you?

The one who's the definition of good. Who gave you your sense of good. Will do good. And if he hasn't put an appendix in the bible that answers every question for every given situation. Then he didn't mean to. And I take it..he's given you enough proof of his goodness for enough to be enough. And I take it. That this

side of heaven. His fullest revelation of himself in the person of Jesus is where he'd have us look.