

Do What You Can Do

a sermon based on Ezekiel 34:11-46

Matthew 25:31-46

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Some time ago, I heard a preacher on television preach a sermon on divine judgment. He may have been sincere. I don't know. I do know he is fairly clever at using words and manipulating the emotions of his audience. He is charming, witty, and entertaining. But his understanding of God's judgment is very different from mine.

He drew a picture of God that made my heart sad because many, many people are frightened into accepting his view that God's judgement is based solely on punishment. This televangelist would have us believe that those of us who don't agree with him will burn forever in hell.

I reject his image of a vengeful God because I believe it is a misinterpretation of the testimony recorded in the Bible. By that I mean, the testimony of the whole Bible, not just selected passages that confirm a certain point of view. And there are many other theologians who also reject the image of a condemning, unforgiving God.

It is true that there are passages in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God is reported to have condemned those who disobeyed his commandments. Those who followed after other gods were warned that they would be cast into hell. And, it is true, the Christian Scriptures also quote Jesus warning people that those who disobey God will spend eternity in a "lake of fire."

It is not commonly known that when Jesus spoke of hell, he used a word picture to help them form an image of what he was describing. In the Hebrew language, one of the words for hell is *Hinnom*. The Greek word for hell is *Gehenna*. From the time of King David up through Jesus' day, hell was thought of in literal terms as the Valley of *Hinnom* or the Valley of *Gehenna* which lay on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

In ancient times, those who worshiped the heathen god, Moloch lived in the Valley of *Hinnom* or *Gehenna*. These people sacrificed children, many times their own children, but also they sacrificed captured Jewish children to Moloch by throwing them into a blazing fire. To the Jews, this valley was cursed by the child sacrifices conducted there. And when the Jews seized control of the Valley of *Gehenna*, they turned the desecrated Valley of *Gehenna* into a huge garbage dump where the residents of Jerusalem took their refuse. Fires smoldered continuously in the Valley. At the same time, a particularly loathsome species of worm bred and multiplied prolifically in this disgusting environment. It was for this reason that the most heinous of criminals, after they were executed, were thrown into this valley. In fact, the worst fate for any Jew was not to have a place to be buried because then, his body would be thrown into the fires in the *Valley of Gehenna*. Therefore, it is understandable why Jesus would use a word picture like *Gehenna* as an image of God's judgment on those who disobeyed God's law. Another Hebrew picture word for hell was *Sheol*, which meant the pit of meaninglessness and despair. In either case, *Sheol* or *Gehenna*, hell was meant to evoke images of eternal flames and despair.

When Jesus used these terms, he was more concerned with conveying what happens to a person when he turns his back on

God, when he ignores the plight of others and is only concerned with himself. As evidence for this conclusion, you will recall that when he was asked what is the greatest commandment? He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Then, rather than recite the familiar second commandment that we find in both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy which was, “You shall not make a graven image and bow down and worship it,” he gave them a new commandment. He said, “And a second commandment is like the first. You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

So, if we take Jesus seriously, when we do not care about our **neighbor**, when we do not love our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters whoever and wherever they may be, we are in a living hell. We are in our own personal Gehenna....consumed by the fire of our self-absorption, not realizing that we are rejecting the one thing we desperately need – the love of God and, by extension, the love of others.

In today’s passage from Ezekiel, the prophet declares God’s intention to watch over and save the weak and downtrodden and, at the same time, bring about the downfall of those who take advantage of and benefit from the suffering of the weak and downtrodden. Speaking for God, the prophet declares:

{15} I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. {16} I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

As God’s messenger, Ezekiel declared a warning to those who ignored the suffering of their fellow human beings. For example, although the economy and the war in Iraq are the top

two issues that people are concerned about in this election year, there is the nagging problem of illegal immigration, which is estimated to be between 300 to 500 people everyday crossing over into the U.S.

The reality is that these are, for the most part, people who are desperate to survive and desperate to support their families, many of whom remain in Mexico. The President has supported the construction of a huge fence that spans several hundred miles along the US - Mexican border, but this fence, now only partly built, is no more than a minor impediment to the immigrants illegally coming into our country. Another option that's been proposed is to increase the number of border patrol agents but that is also impractical given the huge distance each one would still have to cover.

The problem is that these illegal immigrants are willing to risk death because they have no other option. Since they cannot survive in Mexico, they will go anywhere they think they can survive. These illegals have caused a tremendous backlash among Americans who fear that our country will soon be overrun. However, these same illegals are taking jobs that most Americans will not accept, even if they're dead broke, because they feel that such jobs are beneath them. Immigrants, illegal or legal, will do the dirty and objectionable jobs that most Americans wouldn't think of doing.

Now, the hatred and prejudice that many Americans have for illegal immigrants poses a problem for Americans in general but American Christians in particular because of the admonition in the passage we heard today from Matthew where Jesus told his

followers what kind of person would be welcomed into the kingdom of God: ³⁴ *Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

⁴⁰ *And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

The problem of illegal immigration is a real one and a serious one. We can be concerned about illegal immigration and still have compassion for those who risk their lives to come here because they have nothing left to lose.

I have a story

Once upon a time there was a mayor of a village who was advised that his majesty the king was going to be making a visit to their humble little village. With great fanfare the mayor began to make the appropriate arrangements. On the day of the arrival the mayor, dressed in his finery, waited in joyful

anticipation. The hours slowly ticked away but no one ventured into the village. No one, that is, except a lonely lame beggar who asked the mayor for a drink to quench his thirst. Irritated at this beggar's intrusion into his day, the mayor brushed him aside. He had no time for dredges such as this, for he was waiting for the King. Yet, at the end of the day the mayor stood alone; the King had never arrived. Furiously he wrote the King's aide asking what had gone wrong, only to be told that the King had indeed passed through his village that day. The aide said, "He was traveling incognito. He came in the disguise of a lonely lame beggar."

Jesus was more concerned with compassion than judgment. He knew that those who do not have compassion for their fellow human beings have lost touch with their own humanity.

It's been said that we are not so much punished **for** our sins as we are punished **by** our sins. The mayor of that small village was so focused on his own image that he refused to acknowledge the need of those around him. He stood judged by his own lack of compassion. Perhaps you have heard the expression: The smallest package in the world is the man who's all wrapped up in himself.

Jesus does not expect us to be perfect. Jesus merely asks that we walk humbly before our God, love our neighbor as ourselves and..... do what we can and let God do the rest. And let the people say, "Amen."