Hell, Heaven…and a God of Love part 6

Luke 12:42-48

1. Jeffrey Dahmer, who killed and ate several young men, was baptized while in prison. Shortly thereafter, he was beaten to death by other inmates. The question I have is this: is Jeffrey Dahmer in heaven? The answer is: yes. That offends some people but that is because forgiveness IS offensive. It lays aside justice and judgment and replaces it with love and hope.

2. When we look at the words for hell, death, etc. and we find that the eternal hell of our earlier imaginations (and endless sermons) is not what Jesus taught, we immediately begin to call for some kind of justice somewhere. How can Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Genghis Khan…or that guy you don't like make it into heaven?!?!?!

3. Let's back up and start with two facts from scripture. First, God DOES judge and His judgements are real, painful, and something to be avoided. You do NOT want to be judged by God for your sins. That is one reason we will spend our lives and fortunes telling the story of Jesus and living like Jesus on this earth.

4. Second, punishment after death is not a "one size fits all" proposition. Jesus himself says in our scripture reading for today that some will be beaten with many stripes while others will receive few. Note that neither of them receive stripes for eternity; punishment is limited in each case, but that punishment is tailored to the individual involved. What did they know? What was their life like? All the variables that make each person different is factored in.

5. Isaiah 2:11-12 and Galatians 6:7. We can literally quote several dozen passages that sound just like this and none of them are comfortable reading. That said, note something about both of them: they speak of punishment and judgment but NOT eternity. Hebrews 10:31 says "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God" and I believe that with all my heart. Look at Hebrews 12:25-29. God is a consuming fire…but what is being consumed? Those things, those evils, that He wants cleansed from this earth.

6. Let's talk about Hitler for a moment. We are going to enter the world of complete fantasy here and I want to make that clear. There is zero evidence that Hitler believed in the God of the Bible or that he would have ever been open to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Are we clear? Now…fantasy land…let's say that he and Eva Braun and the rest are hiding in that bunker in Berlin as the war falls apart all around them and the sound of Russian tanks entering the center of the city shakes the walls….

7. Suddenly, entering the bunker is a brave German pastor. He has survived the attempts of the Nazi Party and the SS to round up and kill any pastor that refuses to support the National Socialist Party. Startled by this man's bravery, Hitler listens to the Gospel story. The scales fall from his eyes and he finds that he believes. He begs for forgiveness, repents openly of the evil he has done, and then is baptized in the bunker (remember: this is fantasy but we have a point to make that lives in the real world).

8. Then…the Russians enter and kill him. Pop quiz: is Hitler saved? Most of us are very uncomfortable with this story, even knowing it didn't happen and even though we can't imagine that he would ever listen, repent or submit to baptism. We can't let go of our belief that, somehow, this allows Hitler to "get away" with everything. The idea of a heavenly "get out of jail card" offends us and rightly so as we are made in the image of God and justice is a thing that we SHOULD be concerned about.

9. But then, remember, that Jesus gave us the answer in a parable we have already examined. In Matthew 20, he told us the parable of the owner of a field calling workers all throughout the day. The workers who came at the very last hour received the payment for the full day, just like those who actually worked the entire day. If you remember, those who worked the entire day WERE offended and had to be reminded that they had agreed on the payment and that, if the Lord of the field wanted to pay someone else the same amount for less work, that was up to Him, not to them.

10. So…knowing that Hitler committed suicide and did not, as far as we know or can imagine, repent of a single sin, what would his

punishment be? If it isn't eternal torment, bound, falling, burning for trillions of years, what would it be?

11. Let's look at scriptures about punishment and see what they tell us. The story about the unpardonable sin is a troubling one In Mark 3:28-29 we are told that anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come. Matthew phrases it that way, too. Luke just says they will not be forgiven. It has always been assumed, therefore, that whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit is lost forever, without hope.

12. The fact is, though, that although the KJV and a few other versions say it is an eternal sin, the words used don't mean what we mean when we say "eternal." Listen to the translation made by David Bentley Hart, my favorite NT translation so far. "But whoever blasphemes against the Spirit, the Holy One, has no excuse throughout the age, but is answerable for a transgression in the Age to come (or "for an age to come"). Even here, it is a limited punishment.

13. In Matthew 16:26, we are asked "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" The word translated "soul" in this verse is translated "life" in the verse just before this one. There, he says "whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Now read Matthew 16:26 with the same word, substituting "life" for "soul."

14. Why was the word changed? I cannot pretend to enter the mind of the translators of pre-modern English whose choices set the tone and timbre of our translations but I CAN tell you that the word "soul" and "Life" are rather interchangeable. The Bible speaks of animals having souls and souls that go down into the dirt upon death. Our spirits live forever but the life in our lungs and bodies is described as a soul. Remember when God breathed into the dust He had formed and Adam became a living…soul.

15. Jesus is not threatening people with hell in Matthew 16:25. He is warning them that pursuing earthly power, glory and goods is a

futile way to spend your life. You can climb your ladder all the way to the top only to find that you've leaned it on the wrong wall.

16. We all know and love John 3:16 but what do we do with the word "perish" here? Does it mean to be excluded from the love and presence of God forever? No. Once again, this word merely means to die. The idea is not extinction or a painful existence in another world but, instead, ruin, loss. When Jesus tells the parables of the Prodigal Son or the lost sheep of Israel, he refers to those who are lost as "perished" until they are returned (the son by his own decision and his father's love, the sheep by no action of their own).

17. Jesus is telling us that those who die with Christ have eternal life and those who die without him face judgment before God.

18. What about the "few there be that find it?" in Luke 13:23? The question really reads "Lord, are they few in number, those who are being saved?" It is a question about those AT THAT TIME who were accepting Jesus's message, not about how many would ultimately be saved. We often get confused because we do not understand that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God is a present day reality. It is right here, right now and we are called to be an active part of it.

19. In this passage as well as many others used to forecast doom for unbelievers, Jesus is NOT talking about the ultimate end of mankind but the present Kingdom and the joys of being in that Kingdom versus the tragedy of not being in it. For there are, indeed, consequences for not being in it, here and later.

20. Galatians 1:8-9 tells us that someone who brings another Gospel is to be condemned, anathema! The word "anathema" in the Hebrew scriptures generally meant something devoted to God. By the time of the New Testament, it had taken on the meaning of the "Lord's disfavor." Paul is not telling these false teachers to "go to hell." He is delivering them into the hands of God for judgment (not judging them himself as seen in his attitude in Philippians 1).

21. Let's end today with Ezekiel 33:11,14-15. Yes, there are passages about judgment and death and punishment and destruction. And, yes, we have looked at a lot of them and will look at

the rest of them. But nowhere do we see the love of God, the very essence of Who He is, vanish when a person dies. That love is still there and the punishment that awakes – whether few or many stripes – is NOT something to be taken lightly.

22. And while forgiveness can sometimes offend us, let us never forget that the same forgiveness that, given to others, offends us, saves us for “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Those who have confessed Christ and taken his yoke upon them need not fear death or what comes next.