

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

March 26, 2017

That Hideous Doctrine

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your love, your care, your goodness as reflected in the fact that we have this place that we can come and corporately offer worship to you. Father, that's not the case throughout much of the world, and Lord, we are just incredibly grateful for this opportunity. We pray again as we are going to be looking at a difficult subject this morning. Again, I just, I thank you for your word, I thank you for your Holy Spirit, and I pray that your Spirit would come alongside us, that you would guide us, that you would open our eyes and ears and that we would accept and acknowledge and understand your truth and again, make it of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Twelve years ago, 10-year-old Tillie Smith was walking on Mai Khao Beach in front of her hotel on a beach resort in Phuket, Thailand. And as she stared at the water, something began to catch her eye. She said this: "The sea was high on the sand and I noticed waves were coming in but not going out. The sea was 'fizzing,' and there was froth on the waves. I kept thinking, 'I've seen this, I've

seen this somewhere.' I felt something terrible was going to happen." Tillie's geography class had recently seen a devastating video about the effects of a tsunami that had hit Hawaii in 1946, and she began to put two and two together and she started screaming for everyone to leave. She was so convinced of the consequences of staying there that she literally threw a fit. This little 10-year-old girl was so exercised that she wound up convincing everybody on that beach to leave. And minutes later when the tsunami hit, everyone who had heeded that passionate warning was saved while over 200,000 were lost. Those people survived because one little 10-year-old girl understood and communicated consequences.

Now this morning I want to speak to you about the ultimate consequence. I want to examine that hideous doctrine. It's the doctrine of hell. Hell by definition is the final place of God's retributive judgment. It's the final place of his retributive punishment. It's a place that Jesus spoke frequently of. In fact, Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about heaven. He referred to it in Matthew 25 as the outer darkness. He said: *"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* He said it was a place so awful that *"if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out*

and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." Randy Alcorn says this of Christ's description of hell in Luke 19, he says: "The wicked suffer terribly, remain conscious, retain their memories, long for relief, cannot find comfort, cannot leave their torment, and have no hope." That's from Luke 16:19-31, and this is from the mouth of Jesus.

Now Jonathan Edwards is considered by most to be one of America's greatest theologians. He was a student at Yale University at the age of 14. At the end of his life he wound up being the president of Princeton University and he died in 1758. Two and a half centuries ago on a very warm July Sunday in Enfield, Connecticut, Edwards preached one of the most famous summons about hell ever delivered. As an English major in college, I was a non-Christian but at that time we had to study that particular sermon. You can find it still today in many anthologies of American literature. The sermon was called: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." I want to give you just a taste of what it was, what it consisted of. This is what Edwards wrote. He says: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes

than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful, wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, to burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do,

to induce God to spare you one moment."

That's a small fraction of a sermon that doesn't let up one tiny bit. You know, one commentator at the time said the congregation sat transfixed gripping their pews lest they should lose their grip and slip instantly directly into hell. Well, fast forward a couple of centuries. Edwards is now seen as some kind of sadistic psychopath with obvious anger issues. Let me tell you what he was really like. What he was really like, he was Tillie Smith. He was Tillie Smith and he saw a tsunami coming and he clearly saw the consequences of hell and he was determined to use every ounce of his considerable skill to warn those people that he loved about what was coming. There are very few Jonathan Edward types today.

Now I want to contrast Edwards' message with another message that was developed and publicized through another very godly man who died only a few years ago. The man was Bill Bright and his organization was Campus Crusade for Christ. They produced a tract called The Four Spiritual Laws and it was reprinted over 1.5 billion -- that's with a "B" -- billion times in hundreds of different languages. Now the tract posits that there are four cosmic laws governing the universe. Law one, God loves you and has a perfect plan for your life. Law two, man is sinful and separated from God, therefore he cannot know and experience God's love and

plan for his life. Law three, Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life. Law four, we must individually receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. Jonathan Edwards and Bill Bright were two very godly men. They were from two different eras with two different cultures and two different messages but they both were coming from the same Bible. One said God has a wonderful plan for your life; the other one said God has wrath and destruction and fury and anger. And so we ask, okay, who is right? Was it both or was it neither? Well, perhaps they were both overreactions, one to the other. We know Edwards' congregation was said to be hard-hearted, they were said to be lax. We also know that most of today's gospel is a reaction to the previous century's "fire and brimstone," and the one thing that we can say is that each approach basically gives only half of the story. I mean Edwards emphasized the wrath of God but he seemed to ignore that Jesus wept over Jerusalem, that he had this lengthy conversation with the deeply flawed woman at a well, and that he was known and he was deeply criticized for fellowshiping with tax collectors and prostitutes. Campus Crusade, on the other hand, emphasizes the love of God, but on the other hand they seem to ignore that Jesus once said, *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because*

narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." Or Luke 12 which says: "I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear him!" You know who Jesus is talking about there? He's talking about his Father and he's talking about hell and he is saying be afraid. Those words don't play very well today. Most of us in this room have lived our entire lives on the "love" half of who God is. And the idea that God might be dreadfully provoked, deeply offended and full of wrath and that hell might actually present a real present and future danger simply never occurs to us. This goes right back to our enemy's playbook. I mean, whatever message it is that Bill Bright or Jonathan Edwards might preach, you can rest assured that the enemy of our souls is going to work up a counterpoint designed to exploit its weakness. Believe it or not, Bill Bright and Jonathan Edwards were saying essentially the same thing. If you strip the four spiritual laws of its cultural trappings, it says God is love, that man is sinful and separated from God and that Jesus Christ is God's only provision for sin and that we need to individually receive him as Savior. I couldn't disagree with that at all. I agree with that a hundred percent. But what's missing from these four laws is the one thing that Jonathan Edwards insisted on

highlighting and that is consequences. The consequence of rejecting God's only provision for sin is to be eternally separated from God, and that is by definition, hell. We are an entire generation raised up with no consciousness whatsoever of that consequence. And as believers, that lack of consequence has affected our concern, our passion, and most definitely our witness, and it's not new. You know, God saw that attitude in the priests of ancient Israel in Jeremiah 6 and he said this in *Jeremiah 6:13*, he said: *"Everyone deals falsely. They have also healed the hurt of my people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? No! They were not at all ashamed; nor did they know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time I punish them, they shall be cast down," says the LORD.* You see, God is highly exercised when his spokesmen reduce the consequence of hell down to nothing and replace it with "don't worry, be happy." See, that's the exact message that many churches are proclaiming today.

When was the last time you even heard hell mentioned? It's a critical part of the will of God and we just leave it out because it is so problematic. But when Paul gave his final farewell to the church at Ephesus, this is what he said in *Acts 20*, he said: *Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood*

of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. The whole counsel of God includes consequences, and the ultimate consequence is hell. I mean it's something we just don't like to think about any more. The god of this world has waged an eternal campaign to bring hell to the status of myth, and by all practical appearances he's been wildly successful. Our culture is now virtually blind to the existence of hell. I mean we're blind to its duration, to its intensity and its horror and that is all by design. God says in *2 Corinthians 4:4*: *The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* I mean hell's a doctrine that's just fallen off the radar of Christian consciousness. It is by definition now an anachronism. That's something from another era, another epoch, another time. It's almost like polio or smallpox. Those were two diseases that I got inoculated for or from and nobody even thinks about them any more. But there was a time when those two words, "polio" and "smallpox," they struck fear into people's hearts. Well, there was a time when hell was a terrifyingly real possibility but that time has long since passed. Polio and smallpox was eradicated by good science, good medicine and good public health policies. Hell's been eliminated by simply wishing it away. By a combined effort of our culture, of the entertainment industry and the church, we have willed the doctrine of hell into

absolute obscurity. And it's not just for unbelievers but also for the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians. And our culture, our Christian culture has much to do with it.

Just last week the movie version of the book *The Shack* opened up all around the country. How many of you have ever heard of that book? Raise your hand if you've heard of the book. I mean it's a very popular book. Sold over 20 million copies. It's a fictional novel about a man named Mack who loses his eight-year-old daughter under tragic circumstances and then he gets invited by God for a weekend meeting to the very shack where he lost his daughter. And during the course of this weekend Mack comes face-to-face with Papa who is God the Father, represented by a black woman. He meets God the Holy Spirit represented by an Asian woman named Sarayu and Jesus represented by a Jewish carpenter. Now to be fair, there's some very good parts in *The Shack* particularly when it comes to dealing with God's compassion for those who are suffering. But there's also some very bad parts, parts that champion the idea that everybody everywhere, regardless of what they believe, they're all going to a good place. In essence it denies the existence of hell.

Albert Mohler is the president of Southern Baptist Seminary and he wrote an article entitled "*The Shack. The Missing Art of Evangelical Discernment.*" He says this: "The most controversial

aspects of *The Shack*'s message have revolved around questions of universalism, universal redemption, and ultimate reconciliation. In the book Jesus tells Mack: 'Those who love me come from every system that exists. They were Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions.' Jesus adds, 'I have no desires to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in the transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, my beloved.' Mack then asks the obvious question, he says, 'Well then do all roads lead to Christ? And Jesus responds, 'Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you.' Mohler concludes: 'Given the context, it is impossible not to draw essentially universalistic or inclusivistic conclusions about Young's meaning. 'Papa' chides Mack that he's now reconciled to the whole world. And Mack retorts, 'The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?' 'Papa' responds, 'The whole world, Mack.'"

One of the reasons why the book sold 20 million copies is that it paints a picture of God as all inclusive love that excludes no one. But that's not the God of the Bible. You see, the God of the Bible is not just a God of love, it's a God whose holiness and love compelled him to become one of us, compelled him to live the same kind of life you and I are living but living it perfectly and then

to offer that life up as a sacrifice to satisfy God's own sense of retributive justice. That is a view the author of *The Shack* completely rejects.

Owen Strachan writing in the Gospel Coalition states this, he says: "The doctrine of atonement for sin is -- or at least has been -- at the center of Christian faith and practice since Jesus's earthly ministry. But in recent days, various voices have raised objections to the cross. Musician Michael Gungor called the atonement 'evil' and 'horrific' on Twitter, decrying a God who would mandate blood sacrifice for sin. William Paul Young, author of the 20-million-copy-selling *The Shack* concurs. In his new *Lies We Believe About God*, Young says of Christ's death this, he says: 'Who originated the cross? If God did, then we worship a cosmic abuser, who in Divine Wisdom created a means to torture humans beings in the most painful and abhorrent manner. Frankly, it is often to this very cruel and monstrous God that the atheist refuses to acknowledge or grant credibility in any sense. And rightly so. Better no God at all than this one.'" Strachan concludes, he says "Don't miss this: The most popular Christian writer of in our time labels the biblical God a 'cosmic abuser'. He says 'ancient false teaching returns.'"

See, in terms of popular culture, the church is now surrounded by

views that suggest that God's judgment for sin at the cross is false, that the doctrine of hell no longer applies. Now some of that attitude can be attributed to the efforts of Pastor Rob Bell. I don't know if you remember him, but he's an evangelical pastor who a few years back made the cover of *Time* magazine. He has since left the pastorate in order to move on, he's moved on to Hollywood to become a writer, he's become a favorite of folks like Oprah Winfrey. But he wrote this runaway best seller that challenged the idea of hell itself. Let me just read you the blurb that accompanies his book. It says: "Fans flock to his Facebook page, his NOOMA videos have been viewed by millions, and his Sunday sermons are attended by 10,000 parishioners -- with a downloadable podcast reaching 50,000 more. An electrifying, unconventional pastor whom *Time* magazine calls "a singular rock star in the church world," Rob Bell is the most vibrant, central religious leaders of the millennial generation. Now, in *Love Wins: Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, Bell addresses one of the most controversial issues of faith -- the afterlife -- arguing that a loving God would never sentence human souls to eternal suffering. With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial, and his message is decidedly optimistic -- eternal life doesn't start when we die; it starts right now. And ultimately, Love Wins."

See, the good news in the gospel according to Bell is that in the

gospel there is no bad news. Although he never comes out and says so, the prevailing theme of *Love Wins* is in the end the love of God will overwhelm and change the heart of virtually every human who has ever lived. In essence what he is saying is that everyone who has ever lived is going to heaven because love. I mean, we've taken that one attribute of who God is, that is his love, and we have blown it way, way out of proportion so that it now overwhelms his other attributes including his holiness, his justice, and his mercy. Our culture now demands that God's love without distinction or limits saves everyone including those who actively reject it.

Sally Quinn at *The Washington Post* asked Pastor Bell: "What if you're wrong about hell?" Now I want you to listen carefully to his answer. It's very important that you get it. This is what Bell said. He said, "If" -- and then he paused, he said, "If billions and billions and billions of people; if God is going to torture them, in hell, forever -- people who have never heard about Jesus -- are going to suffer in eternal agony, because they didn't believe in the Jesus they've never heard of, then at that point we will (have) a far bigger problem than a book by a pastor in Grand Rapids." Now did you hear that answer? You have to listen very carefully. The reason why you have to listen very carefully, because it is a classic bait and switch straw man argument. It's an argument that on the surface looks very reasonable. I mean Rob

suggests that a truly just God would never send people to hell for denying a Jesus they never heard of. Who wouldn't agree with that? Does God throw billions and billions of people into hell forever because they don't believe in a Jesus they never even had the opportunity to reject? Well, the answer is a resounding no. Does that mean that Rob Bell is right, that the people who have never heard of Jesus are in no danger whatsoever of going to hell? Well, the answer to that question is a resounding "no" as well. What Rob is really suggesting is that ignorance of the gospel is all you need to escape hell. But think through what he's saying. In fact, if simply being ignorant of Jesus was a way for you to get into heaven, then the worse possible thing you could do to anyone is what? Is share the gospel with them. I mean then the great commission becomes a curse instead of a blessing. You see, if ignorance of Jesus gets you into heaven, then telling folks about Jesus would remove the ignorance that would guarantee them heaven and replace it instead with the brand new opportunity to reject Jesus which just might put them in hell. So if ignorance of Jesus is a safe way to get to heaven, then the most loving thing that Jesus could have ever done would be to reveal himself only to a select few disciples telling them never, never, never under any circumstances tell anybody I ever existed, because their ignorance of me will automatically get them into heaven, and while their new choice of now having heard the gospel just might send them to hell.

We all know Jesus said the exact opposite. In Matthew 28 he said, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

And so we ask, okay, so who is right in this? Well, when Rob Bell says it's a terrible thing to imagine God sending billions of people to hell for rejecting a Jesus they've ever heard of, he's 100 percent correct. But he's also knowingly being disingenuous. God won't send anyone to hell for rejecting a Jesus they never heard of. But he will send all to hell for rejecting the light about God that they could have known but refused to. This is what God says in *Romans 1:18*. He says: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Hear what God is saying here. What God is saying is just go outside, just go breathe his air, stand on his earth clothed in his grass, look up at his trees, look at his birds chasing his insects while they're underneath the canopy in his blue*

sky and his clouds and then wait for night to come and then gaze out at his stars, and then come up with a scenario that cuts him out of that picture and God will hold you responsible. He will hold you responsible whether you live in New York City or the deepest darkest jungles of the Amazon. Understand, there is no one in hell for the sin of rejecting a Jesus they never heard of, but there are legions in hell for the sin of rejecting the truth about God's eternal power and divine nature even though they *"have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made"* because that truth is available to everyone. So they are without excuse. Rob Bell is no dummy. I'm sure he knows Romans 1. My guess is he apparently chose to gloss it over or hide it in the interests of promoting a god that is much more palatable to 21st century sensibilities. And I can certainly understand Rob Bell not wanting hell to exist, but wanting it doesn't make it so. The fact is the Bible is quite clear that hell is a place of extreme suffering, that it is a place of extreme fear and terror and that it is also a place of extreme separation from all that is good.

We see extreme suffering in the story of the rich man sent to hell in Luke 16. It says: *"And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'" Whether*

this represents physical, mental or spiritual torment, we don't know. What we do know is that it represents extreme suffering. *Matthew 13:40* says: *"Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* The term "gnashing of teeth," it represents a combination of rage, pain, misery and disappointment. It is physical pain and emotional regret combined. Add to extreme suffering the second notion, and that is extreme terror often described as darkness. It stands to reason if God is light itself, then God's complete absence would have to be absolute darkness.

You know, I once heard someone give a description of what it was like to go to Carlsbad Caverns, and if you go there, apparently you can go down and they descend a number of stories down below and they put you in this room and they tell you we're going to shut off the lights for a minute. This person was describing it and they said they shut off the light and the darkness was so thick you couldn't see your hand an inch in front of your face and instantly you felt this sense of isolation and panic welling up inside you. Well, speaking of the fate of false prophets, *2 Peter* says: *For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. Jude 13*

describes the fate of the lost by saying: *They are wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.* Matthew 8:12 says: *"The sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* One of Job's miserable counselors described, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the fate of the Godless after death in terrifying detail, again, in terms of darkness. This is what he said, he said: *"Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine. The light is dark in his tent, and his lamp above him is put out. Terrors frighten him on every side, and chase him at his heels. His strength is famished, and calamity is ready for his stumbling. He is thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world. Surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous, such is the place of him who knows not God."*

Understand, there is no joy whatsoever in uncovering the horror that awaits the unsaved. This stuff is awful. I mean if anything, it should stir in us a determination to do whatever we can to keep people from going to such a terrible fate. And as awful and as extreme suffering and extreme fear and terror are, however, they pale in comparison to the third aspect of hell, that is complete separation from God. Luke 13:28 says: *"There will be weeping and*

gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out."

These are not the words of some angry crackpot. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one knows more about hell than Jesus; Jesus created hell. *Colossians 1:16: All things were created through Him and for Him.* The Lord Jesus not only created hell, he experienced every single bit of its horror. First he experienced extreme physical suffering through the flogging, the crown, the nails and the cross, and he suffered all of that in absolute silence. Secondly, he experienced extreme fear and terror as we've seen in *Psalm 22* which takes us literally into the mind of Christ. There in verse 11, he says: *Be not as far from Me, for trouble is near; for there is none to help. Many bulls have surrounded Me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. They gape at Me with their mouths, like a raging and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me.* Those words represent absolute terror. But again, it's terror suffered in silence.

The third aspect though is separation from all that is good. It is being thrust out from God himself. And it was that separation that caused the Lord Jesus himself to cry out in agony, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me and from the words of My groaning?"* We have a term that we throw

around rather cavalierly, it's a term that we use to describe absolute and complete rejection, we say, "God forsaken." Well, the bottom line for us is we have never known for a millisecond what that separation is really like. Jesus discovered that at the cross. It was so awful, so agonizing physically, mentally and spiritually that God himself had to cry out in agony. And furthermore, if you're separated from all that is good, that has to mean you have now an eternal identification with the only thing that's left and that is evil itself. I mean, just imagine an eternity with no light, no life, and no love at all, just mutual intense hatred waiting for opportunity. You know, we live in an existence surrounded by the common grace of God, and only occasionally we get little glimpses of what it's like when God withdraws that common grace. Hitler's Germany, we have Pol Pot's Cambodia, we have Rwanda, we have Sudan, we have ISIS. They're all little tastes of what we see when humanity is thrust out from God's goodness. Imagine being eternally thrust out along with weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. We've lost the sense of that consequence. I mean it's a consequence that makes a tsunami seem like a picnic. You know, the tsunami was a consequence of the laws of physics, it didn't care what you or I thought. And hell is a consequence of an even greater law than physics and it doesn't change and doesn't diminish simply because we refuse to acknowledge it. Jonathan Edwards was trying to snap people back to a

consequence they thought they could wish away, and he's largely vilified today as a psychologically damaged sadist because his warnings were spiritual and not physical. Such is the world's reaction to being warned.

You know, I once was listening to a talk show and I heard a person on a talk show describe what a hideously evil man Pat Robertson was. I'm not a huge fan of Pat Robertson but I would hardly put him in the category of hideously evil. The host said, "Why?" And the guy said, "Do you know what that man says?" He says, "Well, no." And he says, "If you don't share his narrow minded bigoted views about Jesus and God and religion," and then he spat this out, he says, "you're -- you're -- he says you're going to hell!" You see, when it comes to the message of hell, the messenger very quickly becomes the message. And there's usually hell to pay. Mr. Robertson tells folks who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus that they're going to hell and people say, "How dare you." I mean they say that because they assume no one has the right to make that judgment and they're partially right. I mean no one but God can pronounce ultimate judgment but that's not what Robertson was saying. He was warning them of consequences, and for that he was pilloried as judgmental. I mean if I tell you you're going to fall off the Empire State Building you're going to be absolutely dead, am I becoming gravitationally judgmental? If I

tell you that 440 volts of electricity is going to kill you, is my electric bigotry being shoved down your throat? You see, in our culture we are free to talk about the warnings we need about our bodies. And do we ever. I mean, we warn folks about alcohol and tobacco and cholesterol and fat and salt and stress and microwaves and gluten and everything else. But mention a fear for your soul or a warning about eternity and brother or sister, you just stepped in it.

Jesus said, *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."* What Jesus is saying is don't be afraid but if you're going to fear something, fear that which is truly worthy of fear. That's a person and a place, and the person is God and the place is hell. We fear the loss of our bodies. We are absolutely fearless about the loss of our souls. I've said it many, many times, today's gospel consists of the good news of the love of God minus the bad news of the consequences of rejecting God. And when you subtract the bad news from the good news, what do you have left? You have the nice news. God becomes this insipid one-dimensional God who's word sounds more like a hallmark greeting card than the word of truth. But that's not the gospel. I mean everybody loves *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not*

perish but have everlasting life." Everybody knows that but few keep on reading. And it says: *"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but He who does not believe is condemned already, because He has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."* Condemned already? What is that supposed to mean? That means that every single person outside of those who are in the family of God stands condemned already. I mean who hears that today? I mean the good news minus the bad news heals the wound lightly. It proclaims, it shouts peace, peace when there is no peace. So how do we keep people from going to hell? Well, the first answer is we don't. God alone can do that. He's the end of the gospel. We are simply the means to that end. I mean you and I cannot argue or reason or convince anyone out of hell on our own. It is God's word and God's Holy Spirit alone that saves us.

At the end of the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we read the rich man has been cast into hell itself and he's in hell and he's begging the spirit of Abraham to save his brothers because they're still there on earth, they're still alive and there's still hope for them. This is *Luke 16:27*. He says: *"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they*

also come to this place of torment.' Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to them, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'" Do you get what Abraham is saying here? The rich man says surely they're going to listen to the words of a dead guy. A guy that's just risen out of the grave and you miraculously send to them and you know what Abraham says? He says, no, no, they won't. "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." What he's saying is that outside of God and the power of his words, not even a resurrected messenger can convince fallen man of his need to escape hell. The bottom line is you cannot scare people out of hell. But God can. The disciples once asked Jesus who then can be saved and Jesus put it very simply in Matthew 19, he said -- he looked at them and said to them: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." All of us are commanded to love our neighbor. And the ultimate expression of that love is the presentation of the good news of the gospel which must include in some way, manner or form the bad news as well. Take away the doctrine of hell and life instantly becomes much easier for believers who have bought into this culture's Kool-Aid and we can literally watch our friends, our relatives and acquaintances walk off a cliff and still sleep at

night knowing it's only temporary, because in the end Rob Bell was right in *Love Does Win*. But if heading over a cliff actually leads to a bottomless pit, then maybe I risk everything to plead with you not to fall. I mean, if you're headed only for a temporary setback with lots of open options and the promise of eventual happy landings for virtually everyone, then why should I bother? I mean J.I. Packer said it best. He said this: "The doctrine of hell creates a traumatic pain that only a proclamation of the gospel can relieve." You see, the stark, grim reality of eternal retribution in a place of unspeakable torment is one of the most powerful incentives there are for representing the real gospel. There's not a single person that I met that that does not affect me. Every single person I run into, I think in my own mind where is this person headed? I mean, do you think that? The gospel presentation starts first and foremost in your heart. And it starts with prayer. Listen to the condition of Paul's heart in *Romans 9:2*. He says this: *That I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh.* See, Paul's great sorrow, Paul's continual grief for the lost was the direct result of his intense awareness of the fate of those who would be forever cursed and cut off from Christ, and that awareness only comes with a genuine understanding of the doctrine of hell.

And so my question for us this morning is this: What great sorrow and continual grief do you have for those folks that you know are marching off a cliff? Does God bring the gospel through you or around you? Does the concept of hell and judgment move you to pray for the lost, to seek opportunities that the Holy Spirit provides? See, the more you understand that hideous doctrine, the more you will be to others what someone once was to you, and that's the bearer of good news, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring that good news. Let's pray.

Father, this is an awful sermon about an awful topic. It's one that I just, I hesitate to do it and I just, I don't like doing this but I feel it's absolutely necessary. It's necessary because we all hate this topic. We are frightened of it. We realize that it's there and we think if we ignore it, somehow it will go away. It will not. I pray that you would give each and every one of us a sense of the reality of hell and that it would empower us and that it would create a traumatic pain that only the proclamation of the gospel will be able to relieve in our lives. And I pray that you would send us out of here determined by the power of your gospel to affect the lives of those around us. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.