

Review: What is a “Defeater Belief”?

- A **defeater belief** is an assumption which, if it were true, would make Christianity impossible or repulsive. They are “beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive.”¹
- How to discern defeater beliefs:
 - Ask: “What makes it hard for you to believe in Christianity?”
“Do you wish Christianity were true? ...Why not?”
 - Remember: the real defeater belief may be something completely different from the hard question or philosophical objection your friend is raising. One thing you can do to figure this out is simply to ask:
“Okay, so if we can find a reasonable answer to this hard question, are you saying you would be willing to believe in Jesus?”
 - Observe: Person A is living unmarried with his girlfriend.
Person B has a family that would shun her if she believed.
Person C is too invested in sports or work to go to church.
- Goal: knowing that only God can change a person’s heart (Jn. 6:44), and that God especially uses the Word to change hearts (Rom. 10:17), we seek to bring our friends to a point of willingness to read the Bible with a sincere, teachable spirit:
 - See the wonderful testimony of Emile Cailliet, “The Book That Understands Me.” (<https://tinyurl.com/BookThatUnderstandsMe>)
 - See also the story of Nabeel Qureshi – *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*.
 - “What if the stories about Jesus are actually true?”

¹ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle ed., loc 3298

Defeater Belief #2: “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?”²

- Rule: Behind every forceful objection lies a hidden assumption.
- Method: *When you encounter a forceful objection to the gospel, ask yourself...*
 - “Why does this objection feel powerful?”
 - “What must one assume in order for it to resonate?”
- What is assumed by those who object that belief in a loving God is incompatible with a belief in everlasting judgment and hell?
 - A God who feels wrath cannot be a God of love,
 - God’s judgment is too harsh,
 - God sends people to hell against their wish, *and*
 - Belief in hell makes a person hateful toward non-believers.

Assumption 1: A God who feels wrath cannot be a God of love

- Of course there is such a thing as sinful, uncontrolled anger (Jas. 1:20).
- But there is also such a thing as righteous, controlled anger (Jn. 2:15-16).
- What type of anger is God’s wrath?

Anger isn’t the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.... God’s wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer...which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.³

- If we see a person we love destroying themselves or others... do we affirm them, or do we feel angry?
- How much more should God feel angry toward sin... the cancer of creation? How should a being of love feel toward things like genocide, rape, etc.? If these all flow from self-centeredness (sin), should he be okay with any sin?
- **God’s wrath toward sin is not the opposite of love, but the outflow of his love toward humanity.** God hates sin because sin is bad and ruins people!

² Much of what we will discuss today can be found in chapter 5, “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 68-83.

³ Rebecca Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, cited in Keller, *ibid.*, 73.

Assumption 2: God's judgment is too harsh

- This assumption comes in two subspecies:
 - God is too *mean* – “No sin is so bad as to deserve eternal damnation!”
 - God is too *strict* – “The Bible forbids some things that are harmless.”
- “No sin is so bad as to deserve eternal damnation.”
 - “As long as a person is sincere... does it matter what they believe?”
 - “I’m not religious, but I’m a good person... is God so hung up on himself that he will send me to hell simply for not going to church?”
 - “Even a monster like Hitler was finite and committed a finite amount of evil. Does that really deserve infinite punishment?”
- “The Bible forbids some things that are harmless.”
 - “Is drunkenness really a big deal... as long as you don’t hurt others?”
 - “Homosexuality or premarital sex... what’s the big deal?”
- **Notice the arrogance in this assumption:**
 - Can a finite human being (or society) claim to understand evil, or measure it, better than the infinite God?
 - *Personally* – Can any of us really know how even a “small sin” may snowball in our lives and relationships into an avalanche of wrong?
Can we really measure the amount of wrong done in any sin?
If not, can we really say what is or is not an appropriate and just punishment?
 - *Socially* – Human history shows that even advanced societies are capable of radical blindness toward evil: slavery, the Holocaust, racism, abortion.
Can we claim to know better than God what’s ‘harmless’?
 - Do creatures have a right to redefine reality against their Creator?

In ancient times it was understood that there was a transcendent moral order outside the self, built in to the fabric of the universe. If you violated that metaphysical order there were consequences just as severe as if you violated physical reality by placing your hand in a fire. The path of wisdom was to learn to live in conformity with this unyielding reality... Modernity reversed this. Ultimate reality was seen not so much as a supernatural order but as the natural world, and that was malleable. Instead of trying to shape our desires to fit reality, we now seek to control and shape reality to fit our desires.⁴
- **No human being or society has the wisdom to judge God’s standards of morality and punishment, or the right to change them.**

⁴ Keller, *Reason for God*, 71.

Assumption 3: God sends people to hell against their wishes

- Here we would do well to read from Luke 16:19-31:

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴And 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.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

- Note three things:
 - 1) The rich man never asks to leave hell. Instead,
 - 2) He blames heaven for his family’s impending doom,
 - 3) He is telling heaven what to do!
- **Point: There is no such thing as a penitent sinner in hell against their will.**

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desire joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.⁵

These things are, no doubt, unimaginably dreadful... but they are not arbitrary inflictions; they represent, rather, a conscious growing into the state in which one has chosen to be. The unbeliever has preferred to be by himself, without God, defying God, having God against him, and he shall have his preference. Nobody stands under the wrath of God except those who have chosen to do so. The essence of God’s action in wrath is to give men what they choose, in all its implications: nothing more, and equally nothing less. God’s readiness to respect human choice to this extent may appear disconcerting and even terrifying, but it is plain that his attitude here is supremely just – and is poles apart from the wanton and irresponsible inflicting of pain which is what we mean by cruelty.⁶

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 69.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), 153

- **What many people really want is a heaven without God** – a private paradise for themselves (and their friends) where they are still in control!
 - But there is no such place. There is only “Abraham’s side” (v. 22) and “Hades... torment” (v. 23), with a “great chasm” in between (v. 26).
 - Thus there are only two eternal destinies available:
 - God’s presence (heaven)
 - God’s absence (hell)
- **In eternity, God gives us exactly what we want – with 100% consistency!**
 - In this life, Christians want God but cannot escape sin. In heaven, they will get their deepest desire with perfect consistency – perfect communion with God in a world without sin. Christians know there can be no heaven but God’s, and **Christians want no heaven without God.**
 - In this life, non-Christians reject God but cannot escape his gifts. In hell, they will get their deepest desire with perfect consistency – separation from God. But since God is the source of all good (Psa. 16:2, Jas. 1:17), **separation from God requires separation from all God’s gifts.** These gifts include life, light, love, and all the common grace which in this life restrains his wrath. The result is hell – the lake of fire and outer darkness (Rev. 20:15, Mat. 8:12), a place of unending death and wrath.

Assumption 4: Belief in hell makes a person hateful toward non-believers

- Critics of the doctrine of hell sometimes suggest “that any Christian who thinks that there are people bound for hell must perceive such people as unequal in dignity and worth... That belief, they contend, leads to exclusion, abuse, division, and even violence.”⁷
- Sadly, this claim is not without evidence in the history of the church in the way so-called Christians have sometimes treated non-believing neighbors.
- However, it must be insisted that this is directly contrary to the teaching of Jesus (Mat. 5:44-48, 7:12), the call to propagate the gospel without violence (Mat. 26:52, 2 Cor. 10:2-3), and early church history.
- **In these matters, Christians should quick to repent – while inviting others to investigate for themselves what Jesus really said and did.**

⁷ Keller, *Reason for God*, 69.