

# Would a loving God send people to hell?

*Tough Questions, Part 1*

Luke 16:19-31

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## Introduction

A few years back the Boston Globe newspaper reported a fascinating story. There was a judge, Judge Cortland Mathers. Before him stood a defendant who was guilty of playing a minor role in a drug case. She was a thirty-one-year-old impoverished mother with a young family. She was remorseful for what she'd done. In the judge's opinion, she deserved a second chance. Justice would be served by giving her probation. The problem was that if Judge Mathers found her guilty of the charge against her, he would have had no choice under Massachusetts law – and a system known as "mandatory sentencing" – but to sentence her to an automatic six-year prison term. He knew prison would scar her forever. More than likely, it would destroy her fragile family. So what did he do? To achieve justice, he broke the law. He declared her guilty of a lesser charge that did not carry a mandatory prison term, and sentenced her to probation with compulsory counselling. When he was asked why, Judge Mathers said, "To impose a mandatory six-year prison term offended my sense of justice."

For many people, the concept of hell offends their sense of justice in exactly the same way. To them, hell is mandatory sentencing taken to the extreme. Step out of line with God – even a little bit, even inadvertently – and you're slapped with an automatic, eternal prison sentence in a place so horrible it makes Alcatraz look like Disneyland. Where's the justice in that? Where's the proportionality between the crime and the punishment? How could a loving God send people to hell? Ever asked that question? Today we're starting a new series called "Tough Questions," based on Jesus' parables in Luke. This is one of the toughest questions: Would a loving God send people to hell? Let's try to uncover some answers by looking at a story that Jesus told in Luke 16:19-31.

## Two men (vv 19-21)

This is a story about two very different men, with two very different destinies. Of the two men, the first was phenomenally wealthy. Jesus tells us that he was dressed in the most fashionable clothes money could buy. Cloth dyed with purple was one of the marks of luxury in the first century. Indeed, the text says he "lived in luxury every day." His residence was extravagant. This "gate" that Jesus mentions here was not the normal sort of gate that we might have at the entrance to one of our properties. It was a huge ornamental portico such as usually adorned palaces or temples. This man was seriously wealthy. He was "rich."

The second man could not have been more different. Jesus says he was "laid" at the rich man's gate. This is too gentle a translation. The original literally says that he was "thrown" or "dumped" at the gate. He was probably a cripple, who was left to beg for help. Unlike the rich man, had no fine clothes. The only things that covered his back were untreated sores, probably some skin disease resulting from chronic malnutrition. Because he was permanently hungry. But Jesus says that no one paid him any attention, except the wild dogs, who roamed the streets and licked his sores. This man had nothing, except for a name: "Lazarus." It's most unusual for Jesus to give the characters in his stories names. In fact, this is the only occasion that he does. Why do you think that is? You only need a name if you are known to somebody. The rich man, for the purpose of this story, doesn't need a name. He spends his money on himself, lives for himself. Other people don't really feature on his agenda. So he doesn't feature on theirs. But this poor man is known personally by somebody. And Jesus chooses the name Lazarus to tell us who that Somebody is. In Hebrew, Lazarus is Eleazar, which means, "He whom God helps." Jesus is saying, "God knows this man. God is fully aware of his struggles. And God will help him." So here, then, are two very different men. And they face two very different destinies.

## Two destinies (vv 22-24)

22"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

How do you interpret these verses, these references to "torment," "fire" and "agony"? We have to be very careful. This is a parable, a story designed to teach spiritual truths by allegorical means. Parables aren't meant to be read like history. Even more importantly, Jesus' story bears a remarkable resemblance to common Jewish folk stories about the afterlife. It appears that Jesus is deliberately using that fable in order to make a point his point. So, for both these reasons, it's highly probable that Jesus' language here is symbolic. He is not giving a literal account of what the afterlife will be like. He's not saying that hell is some kind of torture chamber where God roasts sinners in physical flames. But having said that, it's hard to imagine Jesus casting his story in this form if he didn't intend to endorse at least in outline the picture that it gives us of human destiny. He's warning us that heaven and hell do exist. If that's not true, then the whole point of his story is lost. This is important, because for most of us, the only time we run across any reference to hell is when we're watching a film like *Bedazzled*, or reading one of the *Hell Pizza* billboards, or chuckling over a *Far Side* cartoon. You may have seen some of these... The flames, pitchforks, horns and tails all imply – and may subtly lead us to believe – that hell is just a kind of joke. But it's not. The fire and physical agony might be symbolic, but they symbolise something real, something dreadful, something final.

In this story, the rich man ends up there. Why? What did he do wrong. What was it that got him sent to hell? A good principle when you've got a problem understanding the Bible is to examine more closely the context of the passage. When you do that here, you see that this whole chapter is about money. In the earlier verses Jesus is saying that our material resources are entrusted to us by God. And we're to use them not for ourselves but for the benefit of others. So, in v 13 he says, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." You've got to choose. The rich man in this parable made his choice. He says from hell, "send Lazarus" to help me. He knows about Lazarus. He knew that this poor beggar was lying at his gate every day, longing to eat the crumbs that fell from his table. But he refused to use his wealth to help him. Every time he walked past Lazarus, ignoring this man at his gate, he was in effect saying to God, "It's my money. It's my life. I don't want to do what you say. Leave me alone." And so, ultimately, God does. Hell is just God giving us when we die what we've chosen during our life: separation from him. Separation from the only One who can truly satisfy our souls. So there's a sense in which God doesn't actually send anyone to hell. We send ourselves. As C.S. Lewis said, "The doors of hell are locked from the inside." Hell is not some cosmic torture chamber where God sends good people who just didn't happen to believe the right stuff about him. It's the place where some people choose to be because they don't want God to be the centre of their lives. They want to be the centre of their lives. And because God is loving, he let's them.

But notice how the rich man addresses Abraham as his "father" (vv 24, 27, 30). He is a son of Abraham, a Jew, a member of God's covenant people, at least by birth. And yet he ends up in hell. There's a very solemn warning for us here. A few weeks back Lorraine popped into my office and said, "Could you look after Emma for an hour?" I said, "Sure. I'm a responsible adult. I can look after a three-year-old." So I told Emma she could play with the toys in the crèche while I kept working. When I went to get her, she was gone. I asked Di in the office if she'd seen her. She hadn't. I started to panic. I thought of Emma running out into the car park and getting bowled by a car. Or something worse. I started running around and calling out, "Emma! Emma!" No reply. Eventually I found her. She was in the hall here playing happily inside a doll's house. I was so pleased to see her. She wondered what all the fuss was all about. She didn't know she'd been lost. It's possible to be lost, and not know it. It's possible to be a church-going, Bible-reading "Christian" who believes in God – a "son of Abraham" – and end up in hell. How do you know whether your faith is real or not? According to Jesus in this story one good test is to ask, "What use am I making of my material resources?" If I belong to God, then so does my money, and I'll want to use it in a

way that pleases him. If my heart doesn't belong to God, then I'll see my money as mine, and use it without reference to him or his values.

### **Five brothers (vv 27-31)**

This brings us to the conclusion of the parable. In v 27 the rich man pleads with Abraham, "I beg you ... send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Now who do you think those five brothers represent? People who are still living. People whose eternal destiny has not yet been determined. People like you and me. The rich man wanted to send us some kind of ghostly emissary from the other side to warn us about the reality of hell. Like Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*, he thought that a suitable apparition would transform our Scrooge-like hearts. We often think the same thing, don't we? If God would just do a few miracles, something dramatically supernatural, people would be clamouring to become Christians. Maybe we even say to ourselves, "If God would just do something like that then even a sceptic like me would believe in him and surrender my life to him." Notice what Jesus says in response to that: If people won't listen to "Moses and the Prophets" – to the Bible – then nothing else will work, not even somebody rising from the dead. And Jesus should know, of course, because he did. Only the word of God can awaken faith and repentance. We seal our destiny by our response to the Bible. Every time we open God's word, we stand before the gates of heaven and hell. We face a choice: am I going to live for myself, or for the One who made me, and knows me, and loved me enough to die in my place to save me from an eternity apart from him? God doesn't send anyone to hell. But he does give us the right to choose.

### **Questions**

1. Do you believe in hell? How would you describe it?
2. Do you think Jesus speaks of the "fire" and "torment" of hell in a literal or figurative sense?
3. Mark Twain once quipped, "Heaven for the climate; hell for the companionship." What's your response, in light of this parable?
4. G.K. Chesterton once said, "Hell is God's great compliment to the reality of human freedom and the dignity of human choice." Do you agree? Why? See Ezekiel 33:11 and 2 Peter 3:9.
5. Pick one of the following objections to the doctrine of hell and work out your response: (a) Why does everyone suffer the same in hell? (b) Why are people in hell punished infinitely for finite crimes? (c) Instead of letting people live forever in hell, why doesn't God just snuff them out?
6. Do you believe in "purgatory"? If not, why doesn't God give people a second chance when they die?
7. How would you answer someone who said that this parable suggests that you can earn your way into heaven?