**Foundations (59 of 60) Eternal Punishment - RC Sproul**

The doctrine of hell is unpopular in today's culture. After all, how can a good and loving God condemn anyone to endless suffering? That's our topic today on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to Renewing Your Mind, featuring the teaching of Dr. R. C. Sproul.

The notion of eternal punishment in hell is troubling to many people. It seems to go against our sense of what's right and fair. Justice means that punishment should fit the crime, but what sin would warrant an infinite penalty? And is everyone in hell equally guilty? Today Dr. Sproul explains the justice of God's judgments and helps us think biblically about the doctrine of hell.

This lesson is from the series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. In our last session we looked at the idea of the last judgment as it was set forth in the New Testament, specifically from the lips of Jesus Himself. And we realized that in that last judgment it would not simply be a casual evaluation of people to get their grades at the end of the term, but that this final judgment would be in the context of a heavenly courtroom where the judge of all of the earth would take into account everything that a person has done.

And at the end of that trial there would be a verdict, and the verdict would either be guilty or not guilty by virtue of being covered by the righteousness of Christ. And for those who belong to Christ there will be reward, but for those who do not the verdict was a verdict of punishment. Now, of course, this last judgment will be administered by a judge who is perfectly just and perfectly righteous.

And we are told that that judgment will be according to righteousness, so there will be nothing arbitrary, nothing unjust, nothing unfair about it. In fact, that's the thing that scares me the most, is that if we encounter a judgment according to righteousness and if we have to face God according to His standard of justice, we're in serious trouble. That's why I say that every person will face the judgment of God.

You either face it on the basis of your works or you face it on the basis of Christ's work. And I hear people frequently say to me, you know, if Jesus is meaningful to you, that's fine, but I don't need Jesus. And I want to say to that person, if you've committed one sin in your lifetime, one offense against the holiness of God, then there's nothing on this earth that you need more desperately than Christ, because if you don't have Christ, you don't have hope, because without Christ you'll have to stand before a holy God by yourself on your own.

And as David asked so many centuries ago, if the Lord should mark iniquities, who would stand? It's a rhetorical question that the answer is obviously negative. Who would stand? Nobody would stand. But the bad news is the Lord does mark iniquities, and the person who is blessed is the one to whom the Lord does not impute the guilt that he actually has.

That's what the gospel is all about. Now since the judgment will be one that is perfectly just, one of the things that the Scriptures make clear, that this judgment will be rendered according to the light that we have. Now some people breathe a deep sigh of relief when they hear that, because I say, well, what about the person who's never heard the gospel, the person who lives in Africa and never heard of Christ? What happens to that person? And I always answer that question by saying, hey, the innocent person in Africa doesn't need to hear about Christ, doesn't need a missionary.

The innocent person in Africa goes directly to heaven when he dies. He doesn't pass go, he doesn't collect his two hundred dollars, and people gasp. You say, what do you mean? I say, God never punishes innocent people.

The innocent person in Africa, the innocent person in South America, the innocent person in Asia, the innocent person in America has nothing to worry about from the judgment of God. It's the guilty person in Africa, the guilty person in South America and in Asia that has something to worry about. Now the next question obviously is, are there any innocent people in Africa or anywhere else? Not according to the New Testament, and the New Testament says that no one can come before the judgment seat of God and say, I had no light of revelation.

That's the significance of the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul speaks of God's wrath being poured out against evildoers because they have taken the knowledge that God has made clear of Himself through nature and have stifled or repressed or suppressed that knowledge and turned away from that clear evidence of God's existence and refused to honor God as God. So no one can stand at the judgment seat of God and say, I didn't know the gun was loaded. I didn't know that you even existed.

Now people are not going to be punished in the last judgment for rejecting Jesus if they've never heard of Jesus. God is a just God. He judges according to the light that you have.

If you've never been exposed to the gospel, if you've never heard a word about Jesus, how can God hold you responsible for rejecting someone you've never heard? He wouldn't, but don't breathe too easily, too quickly, because remember Jesus came into a world that was already under the universal indictment of God, not for rejecting Him whom they didn't know, but for rejecting the Father whom we do know by the revelation that He gives in nature. Even if we've never picked up a Bible or heard a word of the Bible, the heavens declare His glory, and day unto day uttereth speech and knowledge to us. Indeed, our consciences bear witness to us that we do know who God is and that we have violated His law.

The next thing I want to say is that the destiny to which we are subjective at the last judgment is unalterable. Many people hope for a second chance after death or hope for a mythical purgatory where they can go and spend some time and pay their debts until finally they work their debt off and then they can enter into heaven. I know of nothing in Scripture that gives the slightest hope for that concept.

The Bible tells us that it is appointed for man once to die and then the judgment. Well, the thing that makes us so squeamish, I think, about this last judgment idea is not so much the idea that God is going to distribute rewards among His people. It's the other side of the coin.

The most trembling doctrine that we have is the doctrine of hell. I remember sitting in a classroom in seminary with my professor. We were in a seminar where there were just a few of us sitting around a table with a teacher.

And one of the students raised this question and said to him, Dr. Gerstner, you say that when we go to heaven we're going to be fully happy, we're going to have eternal felicity. But how could I be happy in heaven if I got there and found out that my mother or my husband or my wife or somebody dear to me was in hell? How could I be happy? And Dr. Gerstner answered that student by saying, young man, don't you know that when you get into heaven and receive your final sanctification, that you will be able to see your own mother in hell and rejoice that she's there? Well, there was this collective gasp from the students. I didn't gasp.

I laughed. I laughed out loud. I struck my funny bone.

And he said, looked at me, you know, like, what are you laughing about? And I said, I just can't believe you said that, you know, that just seemed so bizarre, so extreme. But I understood as I reflected upon it what he was saying. He was saying that right now, while we're in this mortal flesh, even though we have some affection for Christ and some appreciation for God, our basic affections are rooted in this world, on this earthly plane.

We care more about the well-being of our friends and neighbors and family in this world than we care about the vindication of the righteousness of God. I've often used an illustration where I'll call people out of their class, and I'll say, suppose we had Jesus standing on this side of the room, and over on this side of the room we had Adolf Hitler, and you can see the gap that exists between Jesus over there and Hitler over here. And then we take the most righteous person apart from Jesus who's ever lived on this earth, and we place them on a scale of righteousness or wickedness between Jesus and Hitler.

Where would we put that righteous person? Would we put them here in the middle? Would we put them over here close to Jesus? I think if we were going to be accurate, we would have to take that person who's the most righteous person that's ever lived and stand him right next to Hitler, almost hugging him, because the gap between Hitler and the most righteous person on this planet is not worthy to be compared between the gap between that righteous person and Jesus. Jesus was sinless. There's not the slightest blemish on the land.

God is impeccable. Don't you see that our concerns are much more focused on people who are like us? I can understand Hitler. It's Jesus that baffles my imagination in terms of His perfect righteousness.

And so it is the hardest thing for us to consider that God would actually, in the execution of His justice, send somebody to hell. No. I think hell is so horrible to contemplate, even for the most sanctified person in this world, that we wouldn't believe it at all, except that almost, almost everything that we know about hell in the New Testament comes directly from the lips of Jesus.

This Jesus who is seen as the Prince of Peace, blessed Jesus, meek and mild, this is the one who spoke so frequently and so earnestly and so passionately about the reality of hell. And were it not that it came from the Lord Himself, I don't think we would be able to accept it. And even when it comes from His lips, we struggle with it.

I can't think of any more ghastly thought than to think of somebody being sent at the end of their life to that place of utter darkness. Now, when the New Testament speaks of hell, it speaks of hell in terms of darkness, in terms of a lake of fire, in terms of a prison house. Let me just read a passage from the book of Revelation.

From the 20th chapter, verse 9, they went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints in the beloved city. Fire came down out of heaven and divided them. To the devil who deceived them, he was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are.

And they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever. And then I saw a great white throne, and him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God. And the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the book of life.

And the dead were judged according to their works by the things that were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one according to his works. Then death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.

This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. Now, people read that highly imaginative language of the book of Revelation, and they come to me and they say, R.C., do you believe that hell is literally a lake of fire? And I respond to them by saying, probably not, maybe, but I doubt it.

And again, this wonderful gasp and sigh of really, oh, because I can't stand the thought of somebody being thrown into a lake that's constantly burning, the worm doesn't die, and so on, the fire never goes out. How horrible. And I say, let me say this, that if hell is not a lake of fire, whatever it is and whoever is there would give everything they had and do everything they could to be in a lake of fire.

Why do you suppose that our Lord, when He describes the reality of hell, uses the most terrifying symbols that the language will bear? Again, a symbol is always exceeded in intensity by the reality to which it points. And so, I take no comfort in the idea that the language about hell in the New Testament is symbolic, if indeed it is. If it is symbolic, then the reality must be worse than the symbols.

And then people will say something like this to me, what do you think hell is, separation from God? And I'll say, yes, hell is separation from God in a certain sense, but not in an absolute sense. And people again take comfort in this. They say, well, all hell is is separation from God, and most people who are separated from God never wanted to be close to Him anyway, so it's no big deal to think about people going off into a place where they're separated from God.

On the one hand, I can't think of anything worse than to be totally separated from the presence of God, because to be totally separated from the presence of God would be to be bereft of every benefit that proceeds from Him. Sometimes I'll hear people say, war is hell, or they'll say, my life is a hell on earth. But that's hyperbole, because as terrible as warfare is, it's not worthy to be compared with hell.

And whoever that person is right now as I speak who's in the most abysmal state of suffering on this planet, that person who's the worst sufferer that we have at this moment still enjoys some benefits of the common grace of Almighty God, which benefits would be removed entirely if they moved to hell, because there are no benefits of God. Now what about this business about, well, separation from God? No, it means separation from the grace of God, separation from the care of God, separation from the love of God, separation from the benevolence of God, but not separation from God. The biggest problem the person has in hell is not the devil, it's God.

God is in hell actively punishing the wicked. I mean, again, the sinner in hell would do everything he could, give everything he had to get God out of hell, because the terror that men face in the judgment is God Himself. I've told you that a few years ago I spoke at a convention for the Christian booksellers on the meaning of salvation, and I was afraid that I was going to insult the intelligence of this people, because I raised this question in the sermon, the Bible says we're saved.

I said, saved from what? And the answer to that question is that salvation means to be saved from God, from being exposed to His fierce wrath and punishment. And people had never heard that, they never thought about that, I couldn't believe it, but that was what… I said, well, where do you think we're saved from? And the only thing, the greatest calamity that could ever befall anyone would be to fall into the hands of the living God and to be exposed to His wrath. But we are saved, the apostle tells us, from the wrath that is to come.

We are spared from His judgment, spared from His wrath. Now, when we look at the New Testament and what it teaches concerning hell, another principle about hell that I find is often overlooked among people is that there are degrees of punishment. Just as in the last judgment, there will be degrees of reward distributed to people in heaven.

You know, somebody once said that everybody's cup will be full in heaven, but not everybody can have the same size cup. And again, it shocks people to say, I thought you either just went to heaven or you went to hell, you know, what's the difference? I said, well, in heaven, Jesus frequently speaks about those whose reward will be great in distinction from those that will barely make it by the skin of their teeth. And then in hell, the apostle tells us when he calls people to repent from their wickedness in this world, that people have a tendency to think, well, if they've sinned once, that's enough to send them to hell forever, and that's true.

So it doesn't matter if they keep sinning, if they have multiple offenses. Now, in our judicial system, in our criminal justice system, if somebody's a multiple murderer, that person can be sentenced to five or six or seven consecutive life sentences, and we laugh at that because we say, how many lives do they have to serve? They only have one life. How can he be sentenced to six or seven life sentences? Well, what the law is trying to do there is to say that each count is a separate offense guilty of a separate punishment, and that principle applies eternally.

We may not be able to punish criminals seven times for seven murders, but God can. And the person who murders one person will receive a punishment seven times less than the person who murders seven, because God's punitive, retributive justice will be perfect, so that the punishment will always fit the crime. And that's why the apostle warns us against heaping up or piling up or treasuring up wrath.

Interesting metaphor, isn't it? Because Jesus calls us to store up treasures in heaven. And Paul says, by contrast, people, if they're not storing up treasures in heaven, are storing something else up in hell. They're storing up, they're mounting up the degree of judgment that they will receive.

Finally, in the time that is remaining, one of the things that has surprised me greatly in my lifetime is the revival within evangelical circles of a doctrine that has always been considered heretical within the universal confines of Christianity, and that is the doctrine that is called annihilationism. It says that the last judgment, what happens is that the believers are raised from the dead and receive this reward and live forever in the presence of God, but that the wicked are annihilated. That is, they cease to exist, and that is their punishment, the loss of life, the loss of the benefit of living.

And they just are annihilated, go into a state of nothingness where they're not conscious again, where historically the Christian community has always believed that the Bible is clear that the punishment of hell is conscious and unending. And again, the mercy for which the sinner in hell would yearn is to be annihilated, to pass out of existence, because anything would be better than standing daily before the punishment of God. Now, there's a part of me, my heart, that really hopes that the annihilationists, as heretical as they are, are right, because I'd still like to believe that nobody is going to be punished forever indefinitely.

It just seems so hard to understand. And again, people object against that and say, how can there be an infinite punishment to a finite person? And the answer, of course, is because that finite person has made an infinite offense because he has violated an infinitely good being in God. Well, in the final analysis, I don't know the details of what hell will be like.

Frankly, I don't want to know what the details are like. But if I'm going to take Jesus seriously and the apostolic testimony seriously, I need to take hell seriously, far more seriously than I ever have, because I'm afraid that if I really believed it, and if you really believed it, it would change not only the way we live, but the way we work in terms of the mission of the church. A sobering reminder of the reality of hell and the urgent need for Christians to live out the Great Commission.

You're listening to Renewing Your Mind and a lesson titled, Eternal Punishment, from the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. You know, the doctrine of hell is difficult for many people to accept, especially when it's taken out of context. Today's study is one portion of a 60-part series titled, Foundations, an Overview of Systematic Theology.

In fact, it comes near the end of this comprehensive series. Over the last few months, Dr. Sproul built a framework of God's goodness and mercy, His boundless love, and His holy justice. Those pieces, along with today's on the topic of hell, fit together to give a comprehensive look at God as described in Scripture.

You're invited to request this entire series today when you contact this ministry. We'll send you all 60 messages on DVD when you give your donation. Simply call 1-800-435-4343.

And as I mentioned, this lesson comes near the end of the series. We'll hear the conclusion of Foundations next weekend. And after that, this exclusive offer will end.

So give your donation and request the DVD series titled, Foundations, an Overview of Systematic Theology, online at rymoffer.com. R.C. Sproul has called this series the most comprehensive teaching tool we've ever produced. And he's right. Foundations covers the spectrum of Christian doctrine.

And as you watch the 60 lessons in this series, you'll learn about the holiness of God, the origin of the Bible, the atonement, prophecy, even miracles. Systematic theology doesn't have to be complicated or boring. You'll enjoy this series whether you view it at home or with your Sunday school class at church.

When you give your donation and request the DVDs, you'll also receive a CD-ROM with the audio messages from Dr. Sproul and printable study notes. So give your financial gift and request your copy of Foundations right now. The number to call is 1-800-435-4343 or look for the Substantial Resource Kit online at rymoffer.com. Renewing your mind is the radio outreach of Ligonier Ministries.

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I'm Lee Webb. Today we focused on the destiny of the unregenerate. But next weekend, Dr. Sproul shares an encouraging message about the believer's final rest.

Join us for the final message in the series, Foundations. Next weekend on Renewing Your Mind.