

# *An Alternate View of Hell*

Matthew 5:21-22 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’<sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

## I

Today I’m going to talk about hell. If you were here two weeks ago, you’ll remember a sermon on what happens to Christians after they die. After that sermon, the college class suggested I do something on hell.

So I’m going to talk a little about hell today, but I want you to know that heaven and hell are complex topics. Therefore I brought two books with me today that I suggest you read if you want to think more carefully about heaven and hell. The first book is by N.T. Wright and is called *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*.<sup>1</sup> Most of what I said two weeks ago about paradise and heaven came from this book. The book on hell that I suggest is by Sharon Baker, called *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment*.<sup>2</sup> Both authors are conservative New Testament scholars and theologians. They are not fundamentalists or liberals, so I think many of you will find their thought processes appealing. Today I’m using ideas from Baker’s book. She has the added appeal of teaching at Messiah College, a Brethren in Christ school, and she’s passionately committed to peace and justice. I’m happy to lend these books out. If there’s enough interest I can also work with our librarians to get copies for our church library.

## II

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<sup>1</sup> (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

The traditional view of hell goes something like this. Hell is a pit of fire, a place where evil people burn and suffer for eternity. Demons with bad breath devour sinners as human blood drips from their fangs and human entrails hang from their claws. In hell there is no relief for sinners, who will suffer torment forever. In hell sinners scream and groan in anguish, without getting any relief. Hell is a horrible, terrible, no good, very bad place.

In this traditional view, God is angry. God is so angry that God actually gloats over the eternal suffering of sinners. God delights in watching people squirm in pain. Richard Baxter, an English Puritan from the 17th century, said that God will “laugh” at the people in hell, “mock” them, and “rejoice” over their calamity.<sup>3</sup>

There are a bunch of problems with this traditional view of hell.<sup>4</sup> I’ll mention just three.

First, this traditional view of hell turns God into a violent monster. We shudder to think of all the suffering that Adolf Hitler inflicted on the Jews during World War II. But the traditional view of hell makes God into someone worse than Hitler. Hitler caused millions of people to suffer for a relatively short period of time in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Compare that to the traditional view of hell, which wants us to believe that God will make billions of sinners suffer for eternity. The traditional view turns God into a violent, sadistic monster.

By contrast, we Anabaptists believe God is about peace and love. That means the traditional view of hell is a big problem. How could we possibly reconcile a God of peace and love with a God who supposedly inflicts sadistic, eternal torture?

Second, the traditional view emphasizes retribution and retaliation. In this view, hell is a way for God to punish sinners and get even with them.

By contrast, the Bible emphasizes restoration, reconciliation, and healing. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them,” says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19. “While we were enemies, we were reconciled to

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<sup>3</sup> Baker, 5-8.

<sup>4</sup> Baker lists seven problems, 11-18.

God,” he continues in Romans 5:10. God’s character, person, and mission pursue restoration, not retribution. God wants restorative justice, not retributive justice.

Third, the traditional view says that in hell God will forever punish people who commit even the smallest sins. For example, a tax cheater will burn for eternity. With their sharp teeth, demons will gnaw away for eternity at people who tell one little lie.

This doesn’t seem fair. One small slip-up and you get tormented forever? Most countries try to find a proportional punishment that fits the crime. A tax cheater might get a few years in jail, but then his debt to society is considered paid and he’s a free man again. Most liars never go to jail. So it’s a problem to insist that when petty sinners make a small mistake they get punished forever.

### III

If the traditional view of hell has problems, then what alternative view of hell might make more sense? What would be consistent with the Bible, especially with the New Testament? For this alternative view of hell, we want to emphasize two characteristics of God. First, God cares very much about justice. And second, God cares very much about forgiveness. Let’s take each of these in turn.

The first thing we want to affirm is that God is passionate about justice. The world has had a lot of tyrants. Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Augusto Pinochet, Pol Pot, and many more despots have caused massive suffering in the world. Their victims cry out for justice. Child molesters, rapists, and murderers—their victims also cry out for justice. Slave owners and pimps—their victims cry for justice too. Given that God cares about justice, hell should somehow satisfy these cries for justice.

In the very next breath we also want to affirm that God is passionate about forgiveness and mercy. I’m hugely grateful for the forgiveness God has extended to me for the various sins I’ve committed in my lifetime. As a church we believe God is willing to extend forgiveness to anyone and everyone if they repent. We say there’s no crime too big, no sin too awful, for God to forgive. Moreover, we remember that Jesus asks us to

forgive not only once or twice, but 70 times 7 times (Matt. 18:21-22). Hell should somehow satisfy the invitation to forgiveness.

So we want to give justice and forgiveness equal weight, because that's what the Bible does. The goal of justice is to forgive and to reconcile. Similarly, the goal of forgiveness is to repair the past and arrive at justice. In the Bible justice and forgiveness are actually complementary. Justice and forgiveness work hand-in-hand to accomplish God's purposes in the world.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

At this point we're ready to consider an alternate way of understanding hell which is hopefully more consistent with the Bible than the traditional view. Admittedly, it's a bit hypothetical, a bit imaginary. Yet it's based on many scripture passages and tries to value both God's justice and God's forgiveness. And for us in the Anabaptist tradition, it's a view of hell that preserves God's peaceful, nonviolent nature. I will share this alternate view of hell in the form of a story. The story is emotionally intense, at least for me, and in the telling of it I may need to cry. When I'm done with the story, I will simply sit down and we will be silent for a minute or so, then Deb will lead us in the song that follows.

#### V

Let us imagine a sinner named Otto. During his lifetime, Otto was an evil man. He was an international leader who started wars and terrorized other nations. He killed thousands of men, women, and children. All his life, he rejected God.

Otto died and now is required to enter the throne room of God. Otto knows he's in trouble because of the life he lived. He's feeling angry, rebellious, and scared spitless. In the throne room of God there are fires burning so hot and bright that Otto can't see God. As he moves closer to the flames, he realizes the fierce fires are God. But strangely, the closer he gets to the living flames that are God, he feels God's love, not hatred or judgment. It is a love of such greatness that it judges Otto for his evil and depravity. The

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<sup>5</sup> Baker, 95-99.

fire is hell. Yet that same fiery love also starts to purify him. The love and mercy of God convict him. From inside the fire, Otto hears a voice, but the voice does not say: “You evil, vile murderer! I am going to get you now. Revenge, punishment, and torture forever!” No. Instead Otto hears these words uttered in sorrow tinged with love: “Otto, I have loved you with an everlasting love. But look at your life; what have you done?”

Otto is totally undone by God’s unorthodox approach. He falls to his face afraid, but with his hatred toward God now replaced by remorse. His life flashes before his eyes. He sees all his victims, mothers crying for lost sons, children begging for their murdered fathers, soldiers dying alone on the battlefield. Otto hears their screams, listens as they cry for mercy. He knows he gave no mercy during his life. Yet here he stands in front of God, receiving the mercy he never gave. God makes Otto walk over to each of his victims and lay his hand on each of their hearts. This takes a long time because Otto had a lot of victims. Otto is made to feel all their pain, their disappointment, their fear—and he knows he caused it all.

The last person in the crowd Otto who has to touch is Jesus. When he places his hand on Jesus, he feels all the pain and sorrow he caused Jesus. But he also feels the unconditional love Jesus has for him. Meanwhile the fire of God keeps burning, burning away Otto’s wickedness and evil. Lest you think Otto is getting off easy, know that this is hell for him. With gnashing teeth and uncontrollable weeping, his heart breaks and he cries out in utter remorse and repentance, knowing he can never reverse all the damage he’s done.

Otto’s victims are watching all this. They see his deep sorrow, his thorough repentance, his pain of burning in God’s purifying fire. His victims watch and feel vindicated. They see that Otto now understands what they experienced. They see he’s sorry.

Otto does not get away with murder. He burns in God’s holy and eternal fire. And the more he burns, the closer he gets to God, until finally he stands next to God, purified, free from sin, and ready to hear God’s words.

God says: “Otto, I forgive you. Will you be reconciled to me and to those you have wronged?” Otto nods his head in utter disbelief. This is not what he expected. Much to his astonishment, God now asks each of Otto’s victims to put their hands on his heart. Again, this takes a while because there are so many of them. As they touch him, each of them feels his pain, his fears, his disappointments, his cries as a child. They know his shame as an adult and understand who he was as an evil ruler. Because they themselves have been forgiven by God, they extend that same forgiveness to Otto.

The last person to lay his hand on Otto is Jesus. Jesus says: “Otto, I have loved you with an everlasting love, and I forgive you. Will you enter my kingdom and be restored to God?”

And Otto decides to accept the invitation. He has been judged by the fire of love. He has walked through the fire of God’s wrath. He has been purified by the fire of God’s mercy. He receives forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. He enters the kingdom of God, tested by fire and forgiven by grace.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I’ve adapted this story of Otto from Baker, 115-117.