



Scripture seems to paint two contradictory portraits of the Living God—a terrible judge and a loving Father. Which is it? Can he be both?

We read not only that God has prepared hell for the unbelieving, but also that he commanded Joshua to practice ethnic cleansing in Canaan, poured out fire from heaven to consume Sodom and Gomorrah and opened the earth to swallow those who opposed Moses. Unapproachable in his purity, even the most righteous fell on their faces near his presence paralyzed by their unworthiness. He demanded unquestioning obedience and punished with unspeakable anguish those who did not comply.

No wonder we're at least a little confused when he appears in the New Testament telling us how much he loves us and inviting us to be his children. We see Jesus healing the sick, forgiving prostitutes and murderers, going into the houses of sinners. He invited children in his lap and portrayed his Father as so tender that the most wayward sinner could run to his side in absolute safety.

So what happened to God? Did he get saved somewhere between Malachi and Matthew? Had he reinvented himself into a nicer, gentler God? Of course not! He is unchanging, the same throughout all eternity.

So, then is he both? Is he kind and gentle to those who please him, and vengeful toward the

wicked? That's what many of us have been taught to think, which is why we end up playing he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not games. We sift through every event to try and figure out if we are in his favor or out of it. If we think we are in, we can relax and coast through life. If, however, we think our difficulties prove we are out of favor then we have to try harder to please him; a course of action, Paul warns us against. True righteousness cannot come from human effort. There's the problem. I can't please him until I'm certain of his love for me, but he will not love me if I cannot please him. This is an endless loop that offers no resolution. How can he be a mean and vengeful God one moment and a kind and tender one the next. Those portraits don't depict the same God in different circumstances, but rather contradictory portraits that leave us confused and uncertain of God's true nature.

Unless we can glean from Scripture a cohesive view of God's nature we'll never know who he really is or have the confidence to embrace the relationship he desires with us. God did not change between Malachi and Matthew. Our perception of him, however, changed drastically. Before Jesus came we could only see God's actions and assume he was moved by motivations similar to our own. His actions against sin made him appear as if he didn't care for people. His attempts to teach his people to trust him were mis-understood as vengeful punishment.

Jesus changed all of that. By listening to his words and watching how he lived we suddenly see God's motivations. He fully reflected the Father's glory so we might know him as he really is and no longer be victims of our own misinterpretations. Love dwells at the core of God's being, and the Old Testament contains hundreds of pictures of a God who is rich in mercy, willing to forgive, and passionate about setting us free from the sin that diminishes and devours the life he wants us to experience in him.

He allows us the consequences of sin, not because he delights in our anguish, but so that we can see its devastating effects and run to the only one in the universe who can set us free from them. His wrath against sin was not his rejection of us in anger, but only a reflection of the depth of his love that cannot look away unconcerned as sin destroys us. These are not mere philosophical issues. If we aren't certain of God's motives towards us, we will never have confidence to engage his presence in the reality of our lives. We'll keep him at a safe distance and miss what he desires most for us—a friendship with him more real and more powerful than any we've known before.

“DO I HAVE TO?”

Those who seek to follow God only because they don't want to go to hell, never discover how incredible a Father he really is. They see Christianity as an onerous burden and don't want to do one bit more than they absolutely must.

I've heard the question literally hundreds of times. Struggling with sin, or desiring something that Scripture marks out of bounds for the believer, they'll ask what I think they should do. When I tell them what Scripture seems to say, I see the look in their eye—gears turning hoping to find a loophole so they can still have what they desire and not end up in hell.

From the lips of a woman wanting to marry a man who doesn't share her faith, “Do I have to, to be saved?” From the angry man who doesn't want to forgive the person who cheated him, “Do I have to, to be saved?” From the person who wants to justify the habit God wants to free him from, “Do I have to, in order to be saved?”

How does one answer that question? If you say yes, then you emptied the cross of its power by substituting human effort. If you say no, they will use it as an excuse to indulge themselves in a false notion of what it means to live in God.

I finally discovered that the question itself is unfair, and shows how far removed Christianity has become from its central purpose. Instead of desiring to walk in friendship with him, we are only preoccupied with securing his goodies. It's his blessing we want not him! How painful that must be for him.

It would be as if I invited my adult son over to dinner some Friday evening. He hesitates a moment. It's obvious he'd rather not come, but before he answers he wants to know one thing: “Dad, I guess I could come but I've got other things I'd like to do. Will you write me out of your will if I don't come?”

What answer can a father give to that question? None would really suffice, since the question misses the whole point of relationship. True, God has the best goodies in all the universe, but the person who seeks those without desiring to know him misses out on the real life of the kingdom.

That's what people are saying who wonder if they must do something or risk losing their salvation. They don't want one drop more of God's life than the minimum required to escape hell. How tragic! No wonder they missed the best gift God could give them, and why Jesus wanted so desperately to free them from the tyranny of trying to earn eternal life by their own religious efforts.

All this is not to say that hell does not exist, nor that those who refuse God won't end up there. Scripture is remarkably clear on that point. What I am saying is that when we use the threat of hell to motivate people to come to God, we are using it in a way Jesus never did and in a way he never intended. In doing so, we push people further away from God's greatest desire, not invite them closer to it.

His message was not, come to God or you'll burn in hell. His message was that God's kingdom has come near you and you can become a participant in it. You have a Father who loves you like no other father you've ever known in your life and can now discover what it means to have a daily relationship with him. If not, then your own sin will destroy you utterly and completely.

Jesus compared this life to a treasure discovered in a field; something so valuable that you would give up anything to possess it. His life is not something you have to follow. He is worth knowing just because of how incredibly awesome he is. If you only want his gifts without wanting him you cheat yourself out of the best portion.

Here the fear of hell is no use to us at all. The insecurity it breeds only takes us further from him and makes us uncertain about who he is. Jesus wanted us to be very clear about who his Father is because we only grow in him to the degree that we trust his love for us. There will be no one in hell that he did not love with all his heart. His love reaches to every person across every sin and failure, hoping that at some moment they will come to know just how loved they are.

There is nothing more important for you to know.

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

—MATTHEW 13:44

Wayne Jacobsen

Excerpted from the book [He Loves Me](#)

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