

What the Children Deserve

It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children... (Luke 1:17)

Lately, I heard someone give voice to an all-too-familiar phrase in the Christian lexicon. One that sounds piously self-defacing and is, I'm sure, intended to exalt God. However, on closer examination I believe it ends up doing just the opposite, stealing from God a goodly part of the glory of his Fatherhood!

The unfortunate expression is this: *We deserve hell*. It is put forward in such a way as it seems, at least to me, that the speaker is claiming that hell is everyone's default destination, one they most surely *deserve*.

Such a claim is troublesome in what it implies concerning the character of God. Instead of creating sons and daughters from his great heart of love, destined to return home to that same heart from whence they sprang and only *not* doing so because of a conscious preference on their part to choose hell because it suits them better, the whole scheme is reversed. It takes the Fatherhood of God and turns it on its head!

Interpreting Scripture

Crucial it is when interpreting Scripture to do so through the lens of the four Gospels as Jesus came to show us what God is really like. As he said to Philip, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." (John 14.9) Is Jesus not the very image of the invisible God? (Col 1:15)

Clearly, Jesus shocked his audience by the things he said. They were expecting a Savior of a different sort, one more in keeping with their impressions of God as conjured up in their minds from the Old Testament Scriptures. John the Baptist didn't recognize Jesus and needed to rely on God's sign of Christ's authenticity to make the connection. (John 1:31-32) What is known as The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapter 5) provides us with another illustration of the deep disconnect between what was thought to be God-like and what was truly his heart. Jesus' teaching contrasts "You have heard..." with "But I say to you..." His words were utterly bewildering to the Pharisees who knew the letter of Scripture inside and out but failed to know God's heart.

Unless we use the Gospels to help us understand the rest of the Bible it is all too easy for us to misunderstand what we're reading. We must constantly compare our

impression of what we are reading with what we know about God from the life and words of Jesus Christ. Any disconnect should encourage us to dig deeper until we find the sweet harmony of the Spirit.

With this Gospel-centric interpretive approach in mind, we never find Jesus telling someone (or even insinuating) that they *deserve* hell. It is warnings of *attitudes that can lead a person to hell* that fell from our Lord's lips.

The Nature of Fatherhood

Human fatherhood derives its name and meaning from the fatherhood of God. (Eph 3:14-15) As God is the truest of fathers, what is found imperfect in human fatherhood finds its perfection in him. In other words, God is not *less* a father than his human counterparts but all the more a father, the very essence of what a father is meant to be. With this in mind, we can set ourselves a revealing test.

Do we not believe that human fathers bear a responsibility for the children they bring into the world, an obligation they choose to take upon themselves as an acknowledged part of what it is to be a father? Do we not look with dismay on those so-called fathers that biologically contribute to the creation of offspring but abandon their progeny without so much as a thought as to their welfare? It is plain to see that we all recognize something inherent in fatherhood that bestows upon a child a valid claim upon his or her father. This claim is so strong that hints of it are expressed in the closing verses of the Old Testament and underscored again in the New:

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)

And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:16-17)

Imagine a father whose son or daughter was born with a serious physical or mental defect of some kind who was overheard exclaiming to their child, "You were born defective and deserve nothing more than life in an institution! But I am merciful and gracious and am going to help you though, again, you don't deserve it."

Would such words not chill your very heart and fill you with dismay? Would you consider such a father truly merciful and gracious? I doubt it. I suspect you would feel that just the opposite were true!

The Inherited Virus

You and I are the child in the example just given, the one born with a serious defect: sin. We were born sinners. It is a deadly malady, a virus of the worse sort, inherent in the entire human race, passed down from generation to generation since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. But it is a defect that, far from eliciting a pronouncement of deserved abandonment by our Creator to the torments of hell, has generated in our Heavenly Father the uttermost expression of compassion in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, the living antidote for what befell us.

As God's children by the choice of his will God has taken upon himself all the responsibilities of divine Fatherhood. As blasphemous as it may sound, we *deserve* his help for we are his workmanship, his precious children. He is no father who, finding his child in dire need of help that only he can give, casts him aside!

Don't mistake what I'm saying. Our *deserving* is all one-sided. It is not the sort of deserving that comes from having been earned as if God had a debt to repay. It is the deserving that comes as the rightful claim of any child to the aid of his or her father, an obligation God gladly took on himself in creating us after first counting the cost. Our claim upon him is to his glory!

Humanity's Default Destination

Heaven, not hell, is humanity's default destination for it is the home we were created for. This theme is echoed countless times throughout the pages of the New Testament. For example:

*The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God **who takes away the sin of the world!**" (John 1:29)*

*For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, **but that the world might be saved through Him.** (John 3:17)*

*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, **will draw all men to Myself.** (John 12:32)*

*For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, **and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself**, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:19-20)*

I am not saying that hell is going to be empty of occupants! In sorrow, I'm sure it will have its share but as George MacDonald has so wonderfully expressed it:

For hell is God's and not the devil's. Hell is on the side of God and man, to free the child of God from the corruption of death. Not one soul will ever be redeemed from

hell but by being saved from his sins, from the evil in him. If hell be needful to save him, hell will blaze, and the worm will writhe and bite, until he takes refuge in the will of the Father. Salvation from hell, is salvation as conceived by such to whom hell and not evil is the terror. But if even for dread of hell a poor soul seek the Father, he will be heard of him in his terror, and, taught of him to seek the immeasurably greater gift, will in the greater receive the less. (Salvation from Sin)

I realize that in presenting these arguments I open up a cascade of related and much debated issues! Suffice it to say that, at present, I have chosen to confine myself to the matter which served as our beginning: to explain why I believe it amiss to say, *carte blanche*, that men and women *deserve* hell. Such a declaration is at odds with all we know of Jesus Christ and, through him, his Father and ours.

What the children deserve is what we have gotten, a Father whose love and goodness surpasses our wildest imagination...

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