

Thesis: As would be expected from a just God, the Bible teaches degrees of punishment in hell and degrees of reward in heaven.

Support: Matthew 11:20-24; Hebrews 10:26-31; Luke 12:47-48; 2 Peter 2:20-22; Luke 19:12ff; 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.

1. Greeting

- a. Good morning!
- b. Thank you to elders for filling in during my absence.

2. Introduction

- a. A couple of years ago, David Harold Earls was baby-sitting two young children while their mother worked a second job.
 - i. David Earls was not a good man; he was a twice-convicted felon.
 1. He was convicted for shooting a man in 1982.
 2. Some 13 years later, he was again convicted, this time for stabbing a woman.
 3. He served 10 years in prison, but he was not rehabilitated.
 4. He was still a monster.
 - ii. This monster was left watching two young children while their mom worked.
 1. He allegedly sexually abused both children and admitted to raping and sodomizing the 4-year old little girl.
 2. The young girl told her grandmother, "It had hurt a little at first, until I got used to it."
 3. David Earls was charged, but the case never went to trial.
 - a. The children, because of their young ages and the trauma of this experience, were unable to provide consistent testimony.
 4. The prosecutors and defense entered into a plea agreement.
 - a. For rape and sodomy of a young girl, David Harold Earls would spend just one year in prison.
 - i. One year.
 - ii. One year for sexually violating a four-year old girl and her brother.
 - iii. One year for destroying the lives of a little girl and her brother.
 - iv. A sentence of one year is a travesty of justice.
 1. This sentence in no way fits the crime.
 5. David Earls stood before a judge and justice was denied these children and the state of Oklahoma.
 - a. You see, brothers and sisters and friends, human courts can make mistakes.
 - b. Our system does not always render just judgments.
 - b. There is a judge, however, who is always just, and each of us will have an opportunity to appear before him on the Last Day.
 - i. We will all be judged justly.
 - ii. The Palmist declares, "¹⁴ Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne" (**Psalm 89:14a**).



1. God rules righteously and justly, and he will judge us justly.
 2. He will get it right for each and every one of us.
3. **A few weeks ago, we had a discussion during the Wednesday night class regarding degrees of punishment in hell and degrees of reward of heaven. This morning, let us consider these two topics in more detail.**
- a. **We will consider, first, what the Bible says of degrees of punishment in hell.**
 - b. **Then, we will turn our attention to what it says about degrees of reward in heaven.**
 - i. **Get ready! We will be flipping to numerous passages this morning.**
 - ii. **Have your Bibles out and ready.**
4. **First, let us consider degrees of punishment.**
- a. As we ponder the miscarriage of justice in the case of David Earls, it seems reasonable that a just God would have varying degrees of punishment in hell.
 - b. Indeed, this is what the Bible teaches.
 - i. Please notice **Matthew 11:20-24**:
 1. ²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”
 - a. Jesus spent much of his three-year ministry around the Sea of Galilee, in and around the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum.
 - i. He preached there; he taught there; he performed miracles there.
 1. Yet, they wouldn’t believe in him and repent.
 2. So, he pronounces a woe on these cities.
 - a. It would be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon (two evil Gentile cities) than for Chorazin and Bethsaida.
 - b. It would be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom (God rained sulfur and fire on them for their wickedness) than for Capernaum.
 - c. More bearable, more tolerable are comparative terms.
 - i. God is going to take it easier on Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom than



on these three cities in Galilee, since the latter group rejected Jesus himself.

ii. Jesus teaches that all wickedness will be punished; but, the punishment will vary depending on the opportunities one had to hear the gospel.

ii. In **Luke 12**, Jesus talks of a master who takes a trip. While he's gone, he gives his servants varying responsibilities. The servants disobey him.

1. **Luke 12:47-48**, "⁴⁷ And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating."

a. Again, Jesus teaches all disobedience will be punished.

i. That being said, the punishment will depend on culpability – whether one acted in knowledge versus ignorance.

1. Those with few opportunities to hear about Christ, will endure light punishment.

2. Those that could know the truth and willingly disobey will receive severe punishment.

iii. This puts the backsliding Christian in a very precarious position, since he ought to know better. The Hebrew writer states in **Hebrews 10:26-31**:

1. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

a. The apostate puts himself in a horrible position.

i. If the Christian forsakes the assembly (**10:25**) and deliberately lives a sinful lifestyle (**10:26**), there is no sacrifice left for him.

ii. Only judgment, the fury of fire, remains for him.

iii. His punishment will be much worse than those who died under the Law of Moses, since he has trampled underfoot the Son of God and treated his precious and holy blood as common.

iv. Especially for the apostate, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

1. His punishment will be comparatively worse.



iv. Finally, the apostle Peter makes the application to false teachers in **2 Peter 2:20-22:**

1. ²⁰ For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. ²¹ For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²² What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

- a. Peter says that one-time faithful Christians who again become entangled in and overcome with sin are worse off than before they obeyed the gospel.
 - i. Non-Christians will surely be punished.
 - ii. But apostates (including false teachers) will be punished more severely.
 - iii. In fact, teachers will be judged with "greater strictness" than others (**James 3:1**).
 - 1. False teachers have the blood of others on their hands, and they will be held accountable.
 - 2. They will endure more severe punishment.

c. The Bible clearly teaches degrees of punishment in hell; most likely these variations are real, but they may be perceived.

i. In any case, hell is going to be awful

5. Second, let us consider degrees of reward.

a. Here, the evidence isn't quite as compelling or obvious; nevertheless, the Bible seems to indicate varying degrees of reward, whether they be real or perceived.

i. Let me explain perception. There are about 50 people listening to this sermon right now.

1. Some of you are completely absorbed by what God's word has to say on this subject.

a. I can tell by looking at your faces.

2. Others appear mildly interested.

3. Some of you are bored to tears; your brains have already checked out, and you are thinking about what you are going to do this afternoon.

a. I am preaching the same exact lesson the exact same way to all of you, yet your enjoyment of the exact same thing varies considerably.

i. Each of us has a differing appetite for the spiritual.

ii. Each of us has a different capacity for enjoyment.

iii. This is true with everything.

1. Some of us enjoy classical music more than others do.

2. Some of us appreciate art; others do not.



3. Some of us enjoy hunting and fishing. Others are repulsed by it.
 - a. Our capacity for enjoyment varies widely for everything, including the spiritual.
- ii. At a minimum, there will be differing capacities for enjoyment of heaven, and therefore, different degrees of reward. It is also possible the real reward will vary as well.
1. In **Luke 19:11ff**, Jesus gives the parable of the 10 minas.
 - a. Before going away, a nobleman gave ten minas to ten servants (a mina was about 3 months' wages for a laborer).
 - b. After a period of time, the nobleman returned.
 - i. He summoned the servants, so they could give an account.
 1. The first servant gained ten more minas.
 - a. As a reward, he was granted "authority over ten cities" (**19:17**).
 2. The second servant made five minas.
 - a. He was put "over five cities" (**19:19**).
 - i. Both were given a place in the kingdom, yet their rewards were different in degree depending on their results.
 - ii. Both were in heaven, but their reward varied depending on their stewardship.
 2. This notion is probably what Jesus was referring to in **Matthew 16:27**, "²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."
 - a. "According to" translates the Greek word *kata*. Used here *kata* means "the norm according to which a judgment is rendered, or rewards or punishments are given" (BDAG).
 - i. This argues for proportionate rewards in heaven.
 - ii. All faithful Christians will be saved (by faith), yet their rewards seem to vary by their works, their stewardship.
 3. One such task is evangelism. Paul writes in **I Thessalonians 2:19-20**:
 - a. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.
 - i. Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica that they would be his "hope," his "joy," and his "crown of boasting" at the Lord's return.



- I. It seems that those who bring others to Christ will feel a little extra joy when he returns vis-à-vis those who have not evangelized.
 4. Paul reiterates this idea in **I Corinthians 3:10-15**:
 - a. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.
 - i. The building materials mentioned here are not literal – they represent people we bring to the Lord over our lifetime.
 1. Some are like gold, silver, and precious stones.
 - a. These people persevere through testing.
 - b. Those that taught them will receive a reward (**3:14**).
 2. Others are like wood, hay, and straw.
 - a. These do not endure and are burned up.
 - b. Those that taught them will suffer loss, yet they will retain their salvation (**3:15**).
 - i. The loss suffered is the lack of reward – most likely the hope, joy, and crown of boasting Paul talked about in **I Thessalonians 2**.
 - ii. The implication seems clear - the more converts we have that endure and make it to heaven, the greater our reward and joy.
 - b. In heaven, there will be varying degrees of reward, whether they be real or perceived.
 - i. These variations appear to be a function of our spiritual stewardship and activity within the kingdom.
6. **Conclusion**
 - a. From time-to-time, our court system perverts justice.
 - i. David Harold Earls is a case in point.
 - b. God never perverts justice; he is perfectly just.

- i. On the last day, when you stand before him in judgment, he will get it exactly right.
- ii. You will receive a just sentence.
 - 1. If you are a NT Christian, you will inherit eternal life in heaven because of Jesus Christ.
 - a. **Romans 3:26**, “²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”
 - i. Because of who Jesus is, God can grant the Christian eternal life and still be just.
 - b. All NT Christians will receive eternal life in heaven; however, the degree of reward in heaven appears to vary in perception or in reality or both.
 - 2. The non-Christian will receive eternal punishment in hell.
 - a. And the degree of punishment will likewise vary, either in perception or reality or both.

7. Invitation

- a. The implications are clear for everyone in this room.
 - i. If you are not in Christ, you need to be. The Bible teaches you are saved by faith exerted in:
 - 1. Repentance.
 - 2. Confession.
 - 3. Baptism.
 - 4. From that point forward you walk by faith (**2 Corinthians 5:7**).
 - ii. If you are in Christ, and you want to maximize your eternal reward in heaven, you need to start working in the kingdom as much as you possibly can. By doing so:
 - 1. You will grow spiritually.
 - 2. You will lead others to Christ.
 - 3. You will have more appreciation for our God and what he has done for us.
 - 4. You have abundant life here, and you will enjoy heaven even more.
- b. If you are here this morning, and you are ready to put on Christ in baptism, we invite you to come forward while we stand and sing.
- c. Let us stand and sing.

