

THE JUSTICE OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

by Dave Coke

I. *What is the nature of man?*

A. Man is eternal or never ending (Eccl. 3:11).

1. God breathed into man the breath of life (Gen. 2:7).

a. We have been given creative powers to procreate after the likeness of God (Gen. 1:28).

(1) We create life when we have children. They are as eternal as Adam and Eve or as you and me.

B. Man is moral or able to choose between right and wrong (Eze. 18).

1. God endowed man with His moral likeness (Gen. 1:27).

a. We are finite moral replicas of the infinite God (ability) (Gen. 1:26).

(1) We create moral beings when we have children.

2. God commanded man to be like Him or to use his moral capacity intelligently (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 20:7).

a. We call this responsibility, or to use our ability (free will) to respond to God and His truth (Matt. 25:14-17).

3. God promised consequences for good or evil choices Deut. 30:15-20).

a. We call this accountability, or to have an account kept of the responses of our ability to God and truth (Rom. 14:12).

C. Man is a judicial being, or comprehends law and justice (Rom. 2:1-13).

1. Man has the (moral) law internalized so that he understands certain actions ought to be punished and other actions rewarded (Rom. 2:14-16).

a. We call this natural law, or the rule of action which each individual applies to all activities affecting them (Rom. 2:17-29).

2. Man understands that consequences should be proportional to the action. (Justice demands that the punishment fits the vice and that praise fits the virtue) (Rom. 1:28-32; 1 Pet. 2:13-14).

a. We call this concept 'just desserts,' and understand that as one lessens or alleviates the punishment, one also lessens or alleviates the estimate of the value of right. The effect is that wrong isn't that bad and right isn't that good (Isa. 5:18-23).

D. Man is self-caused, or self-determined, or is the creator of his own motives apart from every influence, good or evil (Isa. 65:2).

1. This incipient quality leaves man without excuse and thus man is to blame for failure to obey the law written on the heart (Rom. 1:18-20).

a. There can be no moral causation, other than self-causation. (We cannot be caused to do something wrong and still be justly condemned.) (Eze. 18:1-3).

Therefore man is naturally capable of obedience, and every action is voluntary or culpable (accountable) (Deut. 30:11-19).

II. *What is the nature of the command?*

A. The command not to sin, or not to live selfishly is based upon love or what is best for us. (Deut. 6:24-25)

1. God is love, and is always interested in what is best for us and all His moral universe. (Deut. 7:12-14)

2. God's moral image in man means that sin is always bad, or wrong in the most violent, extreme sense of the idea of evil. (Prov. 6:16)

a. This must be true because love is always giving, or selfless (it thinks of itself in terms of the comparative value of choice objects) in motive. (1 Cor. 13)

3. We know intuitively that the law is good and ought to be chosen as an end because our intelligence demands that other people treat us righteously, or lawfully. (Luke 10:25-37)

B. The commandments are not difficult. (1 John 5:4)

1. Our expectations, or demands that justice be publicly upheld and all violations of the law be promptly and equitably punished, proves that God's command to love as a fulfillment of the law is not difficult. (We simply ask, would we be willing to suffer happily the personal and governmental consequences of lying, stealing, cheating, adultery, murder, or gambling, and dismiss the misery which these sins caused, as acceptable or all right, because the law is too difficult, and therefore compliance with the law unreasonable. (Psalm 9:1-20)

C. The commandment is, in fact, perfectly suited to our moral nature and endowments. (Psalm 19)

1. The proof of this suitability is the effect of compliance, or obedience upon the individual. Man is sublimely happy and at perfect peace when living under the righteous demands of the law. There is no experience in the moral universe to compare with a clear conscience. (Psalm 119:165)

Therefore, to sin requires real, intelligent, calculated choice (intelligent wickedness). (James 4:17)

III. *How does sin affect man's character?*

A. We are so designed that we function in the following fashion:

Our thoughts (Phil. 4:8)
determine
our actions (Prov. 23:7)
determine
our habits (Rom. 6:15-23)
determine
our nature (Eph. 2:1-3)
determine
our character (2 Pet. 1:1-7)
determine
our destiny. (2 Pet. 1:8-11)

B. Because of the sedimentary quality of personality (layer upon layer), and the tremendous weight of years of selfish choices, sin has the effect of greater and greater bondage (which began as voluntary bondage), or service to self and the purposes that defy God's rule (government) in one's life. Thus the continued commitment to serve the ends of selfishness (the less valuable) brings about a hardness of heart that makes any change appear to be impossible in the moral sense (Jer. 13:23).

C. This voluntary bondage of the character to oppose God and His reign in the life is so heinous and horrible to the individual that the finality is such slavery as to be reprobate, or to be given over to serve the lusts of the flesh (Rom. 1:21-24, 26, 28).

D. God realizes that if selfishness is unchecked or uncontested, that one selfish person would destroy the moral universe if possible. The purpose or goal of the selfish heart is to kill God, and subject every thing to its demands and purposes (Gen. 11:6).

Therefore a man becomes what he chooses and would destroy all good to satisfy himself (Rom. 3:10-18).

IV. What is God's obligation as governor of the moral universe?

A. Because God is love and love demands that the most valuable choice object be chosen in every situation, we conclude that as Governor, God is always obligated to render the best decisions in every situation, all things considered (Gen. 18:25).

1. God has made decisions in response to wickedness that are considered to be "evil," or not what would have been done if man had not sinned, i. e., Nineveh would not have been threatened with destruction (an "evil" in God's sight in a comparative sense [comparing destruction to blessing, which is what God longs to do]) if the wicked deeds of her inhabitants had not been done (Jonah 3:10).

B. As Governor God is obligated to rule in a public way, or in a manner that will support the perception and understanding of the value of righteousness, and of the worthlessness of sin or wickedness. Anything that God might do that would give the public perception that He would accept a scintilla of behavior less than what He considers the highest good or in the best interest of the beings He loves, would be to present Himself as "soft" on sin or to be casual about wickedness. This perception would further undermine His government, which is intended to bring peace and tranquility to all the subjects by expeditiously and equitably dispensing justice. If God does not mete out punishment that fits the crime, then the idea that God loves us and is eternally committed to our good and the good of all moral beings becomes an absurdity (Num. 25:1-9).

Therefore God's rule must never undermine the highest good or the best interest of His subjects, which is not to sin (2 Pet. 2:4-22).

V. Why does God deem sin worthy of eternal death?

A. We know that the severity of the punishment for breaking a law is a reflection of the lawgiver's estimate of the value of the law. God estimates the value of relationship with Him, and the good that that relationship will bring in our lives, the lives of our fellowmen, and in God's life to be such that to live selfishly (to violate the basic rules of relationship) can only be rewarded by a just punishment, or a punishment which is reflective of the vileness of the violation. If the requirements were difficult, or if the agent in any way was naturally incapable of compliance, or if the end or goal was less valuable than some other, then the public perception of severity in inflicting eternal damnation would cry out "Unjust!", and God would appear to be guilty of inequity (Heb. 12:26-31).

B. God understands the problem of character and realizes that not only is the sinner unfit morally for heaven, but he will choose to leave heaven because of the discomfort of incompatible ends (which is the real hell). If God were to welcome the wicked into heaven and make some allowances so that they would choose to stay, he would jeopardize the stability of the inhabitants of the heavenly abode. The goal and purpose of those self-citizens would be at continual odds with those of God's and the loyal citizens, throwing heaven into turmoil and ultimately attempting insurrection and destruction.

Thus, God is obligated by His commitment to a perfect, law-abiding government to confine those who have chosen self as their sole end to a place appropriate to their character. Since sinful men love darkness rather than light, God gives them over to fulfill their lusts in darkness. Since they love themselves supremely, God gives them an eternity to attempt to satisfy themselves. Since they love evil company, He gives them evil companions. Since they hate righteousness, God gives them a place devoid of righteousness. Since they love to abuse and misuse the blessings of God and His love, God gives them a place devoid of Him and His love. Thus God gives sinful men what they deserve, or what they are worthy of (Rev. 6:15-17; 16:11).

C. Natural law also demands that a sinner be confined to hell for all eternity. A rebel against God is one who is committed to impenitence or the refusal to repent or change his mind. This state of impenitence may be defined as the renewing of allegiance to past sin and loyalty to present sin so as to become guilty for those sins all over again. We understand that sin is additive, or that sin always begets more sin. When a person commits a sin, often many more sins are committed to cover up that one sin. Even when only one sin is committed and the offender refuses to admit his wrong action, and renounce his sin, he is renewing his choice of that wrong by not repenting of it, and commits the sin all over again. If you keep a car running for a bank robber, you are as guilty as the bank robber. If you give approval to someone to commit a crime you are as guilty as the criminal. If you withhold evidence, or refuse to expose a criminal, you are guilty of a crime.

Now the rebel against God has a lifetime to repent and forsake his sin. And yet most will not turn away from evil, but continue to renew their blameworthiness with each unrepentant moment. Upon judgment and the entrance into hell, the sinner continues to approve his life of sin by impenitence, and thus renews his blameworthiness, and thus dessert of hell. Due to this commitment of the will to self, the guilt and its resultant condemnation is renewed, yea, strengthened against the sinner, so that if God were to evaluate that sinner in 10 trillion millenniums, He would conclude that the justice of eternal punishment is more valid that day than the day the inhabitants of hell first came there.

Therefore God is loving in confining those rebels to hell because their character creates the conditions there (Rev. 19:1-6).

VI. Could God destroy man after a time in hell appropriate to his crimes?

A. We know the consequences of sin are incalculable (sin is a crime, not a debt to be paid). Not even God could determine how much punishment would be just before final elimination of the spirit.

B. If God finally decided to destroy all the inhabitants of hell just to be "merciful," and because He was so emotionally compassionate, the moral universe would rise up and cry "Unjust!" How could the crimes of a Hitler, Stalin, Attila the Hun, or Satan, be compared to an individual who lived a few short years with a limited impact upon the world.

Therefore God cannot be just to the demand of moral beings and annihilate the residence in hell.

VII. *God can only be just by eternal damnation of every sinner.*

A. Justice is the realization that the law is righteous and the penalty is good, and that the execution of the penalty must be commensurate with the crime. Since sin cannot be paid for, only forgiven, and since every sinner renews his blameworthiness with each impenitent moment, God could only be just to the sinner, to the saint, and to Himself, by confining the wicked in a place which is fitting for their condition.