



1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Part 3

Your beliefs determine your behavior. For example, why has no one at Grace Church ever robbed a bank? Don't laugh. A man in my former church attempted a bank robbery. So I am making some assumptions that none of us have robbed a bank. 😊 We haven't robbed a bank because that would be stealing and stealing would break God's commandment. We also don't want to go to prison. So our beliefs about robbing banks determine our behavior.

But a more reliable way to say this is that our behaviors demonstrate our beliefs. For example, we can say that we believe that exercise is really good for you but if we rarely exercise, our behavior—or lack thereof—demonstrates that we really don't believe in exercise all that much. Right? Our beliefs determine our behavior in an idealistic sense but in a practical sense, our behaviors demonstrate our beliefs. What we do or don't do demonstrates what we believe.

STRUCTURE OF EPHESIANS

Doctrine CHAPTERS 1-3 **Worship: AWE** →

SEE who you are IN CHRIST

Application CHAPTERS 4-6 **Worship: SERVE** →

BE who you are IN CHRIST

This highlights the absolute necessity of right beliefs. If what we believe determines our behavior, then our beliefs better be the right ones. Which is why Paul has a regular pattern in his letters of first establishing the truth and then applying the truth. I have told you probably twenty times how this works in the book of Ephesians. Who remembers the first half of Ephesians? The first three chapters is seeing who we are in Christ. These are the

core beliefs. And the second half is being who you are in Christ. Those are behaviors. First discover what you believe and then behave in such a way that demonstrates that you actually believe it. Beliefs determine behavior and our behavior demonstrates what we believe.

The same is true in this passage in 1 Thessalonians chapter five. Of course this belief/behavior pattern is not perfectly precise, but it largely holds true. Let's try something. As I read the first eleven verses, I would like you to raise your hand when you see the transition between beliefs and behavior. Alright? Let's give it a shot.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴ But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵ For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶ So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Did you see it? The transition happens in verse six with the key phrase—*so then*. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Believers will not be surprised because we are children of the day. So then...Almost everything that follows after that phrase is application—behaviors to do in light of the beliefs that were just presented. See—isn't this Christianity thing a snap? Verses 6-11 are the application which, as I have been saying, I believe are summarized in our statement of faith—especially the last part.

9. Christ's Return

We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, *as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.*

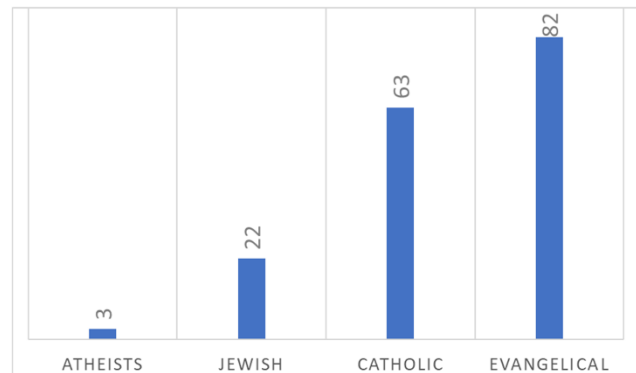
If we get nothing else out of this look at the last days, it should be this. Jesus is coming and that ought to motivate us to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission. To start us off this morning I want to pick up where we left off last week to highlight a growing error in churches. If you recall, I only had one point last Sunday.

6. The Day of the Lord will bring inescapable destruction for unbelievers.

In this point lies the growing error of what is called annihilationism. Annihilationism teaches that no one spends eternity in hell. There are two basic options within this belief. Either the unbeliever is annihilated—that is, they just cease to exist—there is not such thing as an eternal soul. Or else they are sent to hell for a certain time to be punished for their sins and then they are annihilated. This is the official of Seven Day Adventists.

You may have never heard of annihilationism but it's not that surprising when you look at those who believe in hell in general. It's surprising that 3% of atheists believe in hell but it's even more surprising that only 82% of evangelicals believe in hell. So when you add in the evangelicals who don't believe in hell with those who have a wrong view of hell, it probably at least 25% of evangelicals.

Belief in Hell Among US Adults, 2014



The fact that believers are confused about hell relates to our passage primarily through verse three. *While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.* The person who holds to annihilationism would say that destruction literally means destruction. In other words, they are annihilated. They cease to exist.

First, let me tell you why it matters. What is at stake here. I'll fill in the details later but here are the results of holding to annihilationism.

Annihilationism...

1. Denies the gospel by teaching a doctrine of salvation by works
2. Sets a dangerous pattern by ignoring the clearest teaching of Scripture.
3. Creates a false God made in man's own image.
4. It eliminates energetic mission of the believer

This belief is in direct contradiction to the last point in our statement of faith.

10. Response and Eternal Destiny

We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

The part that is under attack is this one: eternal conscious punishment. Opponents to this belief say that God would never do this and the Bible certainly does not teach it. I am guessing some of you are shaking your heads and thinking, "Come on, Maurer. Do people actually believe this? And how common is it?" Again, about 25% of evangelicals either deny the existence of hell or twist its meaning.

Writing in, of all places, National Geographic magazine, Preston Sprinkle—who wrote the book, *Easing Hell*—made the following prediction.

My prediction is that, even within conservative evangelical circles, the annihilation view of hell will be the dominant view in 10 or 15 years. I base that on how many well-known pastors secretly hold that view. I think that we are at a time and place when there is a growing suspicion of adopting tradition for the sake of tradition.¹

He wrote that in 2011 so we are over halfway in his predicted timeline and I see little evidence of this becoming the predominant view. But I do agree that many people secretly hold to this belief. There are no reliable statistics on the popularity of this belief but the fact that it is gaining traction at all is a cause for great concern. If you don't understand that concern, hopefully you will by the end of this message.

How can they teach such a doctrine? There are three basic premises to which they adhere along with representative quotes from those who deny eternal conscious punishment.

1. Eternal conscious punishment makes God into a “bloodthirsty monster.”
“Everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die.”²

2. For the unbeliever, death means death and a ceasing to exist.
“The Bible says the wages of sin is death, that death of life is the ultimate end of those who don't embrace Jesus. It seems to be a pretty dominant narrative in the Scripture.”³

3. Eternity does not mean eternity
“I question whether ‘eternal conscious torment’ is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity.”⁴

Let me give you a sampling of relevant Scriptures and why they are important.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

The 1 Thessalonians 5 uses the word “destruction” to define the fate of the unbeliever but here the term is eternal destruction. The result is not merely death or destruction but rather eternal destruction. Moreover, the purpose of eternal destruction is “the righteous judgment of God.” This gets to the core of God's character. God is pure holiness and righteousness and has every

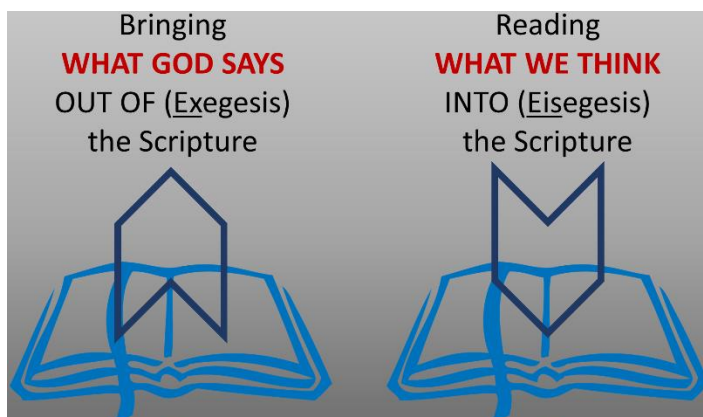
right to execute judgment and mercy as he sees fit. Eternal destruction is based on the righteous judgment of God. Those two things are inseparable.

Matthew 25:46

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

To make sure I am not putting words into their mouths, here is how a leading proponent of annihilationism understands this verse. The author used to teach at Trinity seminary before he went off the rails.

Jesus does not define the nature of eternal life or eternal death in this text. He just says there will be two destinies and leaves it there. One is free to interpret it to mean either everlasting conscious torment or irreversible destruction. (i.e, annihilation). The text allows for both possibilities and only teaches explicitly the finality of the judgment itself, not its nature. Therefore, one’s interpretation of this verse in respect to our subject here will depend on other considerations. In the light of what has been said so far, I think it is better and wiser to read the text as teaching annihilation.⁵



What do you think of his conclusion? You might recall the difference between exegesis and eisegesis. I think he is seriously reading his own conclusions into the text, and here’s why. This verse speaks to several aspects of this topic. First, it speaks of eternal punishment which matches the eternal destruction phrase in 2 Thessalonians 1. Second, eternal punishment and eternal life are laid side by side. This is very important because remember that annihilationists

teach that eternity doesn’t always mean eternity. It just means an age or period of time. I’m sure you see where I am going here. If eternal punishment is not eternal than they would have to say that eternal life is also not eternal. No one is willing to do that, so they just let this glaring contradiction remain.

Mark 9:47-48

If your eye causes you to sin pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

Here is an actual description of eternal punishment—where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. Sounds like a pretty clear description to me. Charles Spurgeon made an insightful observation on this topic. It is a very remarkable fact that no inspired preacher of whom we have any record ever uttered such terrible words concerning the destiny of the lost as our Lord Jesus Christ.⁶

These next three verses from Revelation need to be addressed together,

Revelation 14:11

And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

Revelation 20:10

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Revelation 21:8

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

We get lots of important details from these verses. The first two verses are very clear about the length of God’s righteous judgment.

- the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night
- and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever

I’m not sure how one could claim that eternity does not mean eternity. Second, we see who is judged in this way. The devil, the beast and the false prophet are all thrown into the lake of fire. Later, all unbelievers are also thrown into the same lake of fire. All of them have the same result—eternal conscious punishment.

That is just a glimpse at some of the most compelling Scriptures on this topic. Now I’d like to get back to why this is so important that I would spend a whole sermon on a few words in our passage.

Annihilationism...

1. Denies the gospel by teaching a doctrine of salvation by works

Most annihilationists don’t flat out deny that hell exists. That would be too much a stretch, so they created this idea that people suffer in hell for various lengths of time based upon their behavior in this life. Some would say that Hitler is still in hell but others have already been released and have been annihilated. It is like the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory but instead of gaining entrance to heaven after a certain length of time paying for your sins, you are annihilated. You cease to exist.

The major problem with this belief is that it is based on the good works of the person under judgment. If measured punishment earns you a shorter time in hell, then that can only be a result of OUR good works. If hell is the righteous judgment of God and if we can escape God’s righteous judgment by our good works, the result is that we can be saved from God’s righteous judgment by our good works. And if we can be saved from God’s righteous judgment by our works, then why did Jesus go to the cross? What is the point of his atoning sacrifice if people can earn their way out of God’s judgment? Granted, they are not earning eternal life but they are

earning their way out of eternal punishment. It is a doctrine of good works and a denial of the gospel.

2. Sets a dangerous pattern by ignoring the clearest teaching of Scripture.

Hopefully this point is very clear to you. The clearest, most plain teaching of Scripture states that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment. Ignoring the clearest teaching of Scripture is always the beginning of going astray into all manner of false teaching. When you read your opinions into the text instead of discerning God's truth from the text, you can make the Scripture say whatever you want it to say. Eternity means eternity whether or not you like it. We must bend our knee to the plainest teaching of Scripture.

3. Creates a false God made in man's own image.

People deny hell because they don't like it, not because it isn't true. This is also the case for most truths in Scripture. If you don't like that Jesus is Creator and Lord of the universe to whom we owe our allegiance, then all you have to do is turn him into a Santa Claus in the sky kind of God. A belief in eternal conscious punishment does not turn God into a monster. It demonstrates his holiness and also his mercy and love. People don't like hell because it doesn't seem fair. Was it fair that a sinless God would give his life for those who could not save themselves? If you demand fairness you also lose the cross.

4. Eliminates energetic mission of the believer.

Matt Slick states this concern very well.

Is annihilationism potentially dangerous when it comes to evangelizing the lost and preaching the gospel to them? Yes, I believe it is. If an unbeliever is told that the worst that could happen to him after he dies is nonexistence, then that can lessen the urgency for him to be saved from God's righteous judgment and receive Christ. I know this is the case because I've talked to many atheists in the presence of universalists who like annihilationists teach there is no eternal conscious torment in the afterlife. Routinely, atheists would state that if they're not going to face punishment in the afterlife, why worry about salvation in this life?⁷

Ten years ago, I stumbled upon this [video of atheist Penn Gillette](#) talking about why Christians should share their faith. I cropped a part of the video and uploaded it to Youtube. I just noticed that it has almost 78,000 views which doesn't surprise me because it is so striking

When false teaching begins to spread we need to call it out for what it is—even if it concerns a very delicate topic like eternal conscious punishment. At the same time, this in no way means that we are to celebrate the reality of hell. Charles Spurgeon again.

“I have felt more at home in using the drawing of mercy than the driving of terror, and I can most honestly plead innocence of any charge of delighting in declaring the torments of the finally impenitent, or of entering upon the discussion of the miseries of the lost with eagerness and enjoyment.”⁸

Our beliefs matter because they will define the way we live. *“as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.”*

Rich Maurer
February 17, 2019

¹ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160513-theology-hell-history-christianity/>

² Clark Pinnock, *Four Views on Hell*, p. 149.

³ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160513-theology-hell-history-christianity/>

⁴ *Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism*, Wipf and Stock (April 15, 2014), p. 54.

⁵ Clark Pinnock, *The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent*,

Clark Pinnock, *The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent*, ©1992, *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Fall 1992, Vol. 2, No.5, p. 256.

⁶ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons12.xv.html>

⁷ <https://carm.org/is-annihilationism-potentially-dangerous-regarding-evangelism>

⁸ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons12.xv.html>