

PERSPECTIVE

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DISAPPOINTED:

When Those You Love Won't Believe

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Disappointed: When Those You Love Won't Believe

We've all been there. Someone we care about, someone with whom we've shared the gospel clearly—again and again—refuses to submit his or her life to Christ. We're crushed. Is there a more devastating feeling?

Most churches talk a great deal about the gospel—and rightly so. We drive home the importance of evangelism. Faithful pastors urge Christians to make Christ known to family, friends, and anyone who will listen. But not everyone will listen.

A few weeks ago, I challenged Mount Vernon to be more evangelistic. This included three exhortations: 1) share the gospel once a week; 2) spend significant time with an unbeliever once a month; 3) reach out to a distant family member every couple of months. I asked this of our church because, for many of us, evangelism is hard, and a little accountability goes a long way.

But what happens when you have been faithful? You've planted gospel seeds, but you see no growth. What should you do if you've done all you can; yet the person you desperately want to see saved—a mother, a sister, a son—won't repent and believe the Good News?

Recently, I spoke with a dad who raised his three kids in a loving, Christian home. They were faithful to teach their kids the Bible, avoid legalism, and show them the beauty of Christ. Mom and dad were present and involved in ministry. They modeled a love for God. Their kids are in college now. Sadly, not one of them is following Christ.

I had to fight back tears as this father told me his story. He wrestled with self-doubt. *Did we do enough? Did we do something wrong?* He questioned God's will. *How could my God let this happen?* At first, he turned to theology textbooks in order to bone up on the doctrine of God's providence. Then he followed his wife's lead and turned to Psalms. Verses like this: "My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off" (Ps. 38:10–11). This couple, despairing over the state of their children's hearts, can relate to David's grief.

With maybe one exception, I am the only Christian in my extended family. I feel the sting of disappointment every day. Sometimes, in the midst of discouragement, all

we can do is be honest with God and let our tears soak the pages of our Bible.

Can you relate? You probably can. For most of us there is someone we love who doesn't love Christ. Is there anything we can do? How should a mature Christian stand firm in the faith when a loved one refuses to bow the knee to Christ? That's the question I want to answer with a couple don'ts and a couple do's.

DON'T ABANDON GOOD THEOLOGY

When you wrestle with the persistent unbelief of family and friends, it's tempting to hear the voice of Satan ask, "Did God *really* say there is such a thing as hell?" The longer I'm a Christian, the more convinced I am the doctrine of hell is easy to abandon yet crucial to embrace.

God used the doctrine of hell to save me. When I first heard the gospel, I pushed back. My friend said unless I repented of my sins and put my faith in Christ, I would go to hell. I couldn't believe she said this, much less believed it. But her deep conviction and the Holy Spirit made me wrestle with eternity. I came to believe there is a loving and just God. Months later, I put my faith in Christ.

But I don't believe in hell because of a young woman I met in high school who told me about it. I believe in hell because of the Jewish carpenter to whom she introduced me. He preached about it:

- ♦ "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).
- ♦ "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire" (Matt. 18:9).
- ♦ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'" (Matt. 25:41).

I've never understood how people lean into the ethical teaching of Jesus while dismissing his teaching on eternal punishment.¹ Christ is not just a Savior; he is the Judge.

But when we ponder our own loved ones spending an eternity in hell, it is tempting to cast this teaching aside. Historian Kathryn Lin Gum examined American views on hell in the nineteenth century. She observed a

remarkable difference in attitudes on hell before and after the Civil War. “By the end of the war, the sheer scale of death accelerated the trend toward assuming heaven for loved ones and muted the rhetoric of fire and brimstone in the mainstream evangelical denominations.”² In other words, in the face of death for so many soldiers, many Americans decided to put hell to death.

Please don’t abandon good theology because you don’t like the implications. We are either a people of the book or a people of our own inclinations—there is no in between.

DON’T STOP CRYING

If Jesus could cry over the physical (and temporary) death of Lazarus, how much more should we mourn the spiritual state of those we love (John 10:35)?

Paul grieved the fact that so many of his Jewish brothers and sisters rejected Christ. They said they loved the Law and the Prophets, but they hated the One whom both the Law and the Prophets predicted. It tore Paul up on the inside: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:2–3). Paul grieved the unbelief of his Jewish family.

Our theology is useless if it leaves us unfazed by the unbelief of those we love. Don’t stop crying over your lost friends and family. The absence of grief is not the presence of maturity. Far from it! Look at Jesus and Paul—both shed tears over the power of sin.

But maybe you don’t mourn over your loved ones the way you should. If that’s you, what should you do?

- ✦ Pray more. Name your lost friends and family before the throne of God. Don’t neglect asking God’s Spirit to give them life. Plead with God to do whatever it takes to bring them to a saving knowledge of himself.
- ✦ Ponder eternity. There is nothing more sobering than the reality of life without the Lord. To be “cut off from Christ” is to be without hope. Proper meditation on hell will soften our hearts to those who have yet to bow the knee.

DO BACK OFF

If you are confident you have shared the gospel clearly with your family and friends, feel the freedom to back off. In other words, you don’t need to turn every conversation to Christ. They know where you stand. They know where you think *they* stand. It’s time to be quiet and pray.

Does this mean you *never* bring up their spiritual state? Of course not! There may be times when it’s appropriate to say, “Mom, it’s been a while since we talked about Christ. I know what you believe. I just want to remind you if you ever want to talk more about him, I’m always available.”

Some people wonder if we should sever relationships with friends or family members who confidently reject Christ. They might cite Matthew 10:14 where Jesus told the apostles to shake the dust off their feet when they left a town that refused their message. Should we follow their example with our family members who reject Christ?

I don’t think so. Jesus made a point of clarifying this treatment was reserved for the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6). In other words, Jesus first sent the apostles to men and women steeped in the Old Testament Word of God. They were those who identified as God’s people. Shaking the dust off their feet was an act of judgment, much like refusing to eat with a disciplined church member is an act of judgment under the new covenant (1 Cor. 5:11).

Backing off your family member doesn’t mean cutting them out of your life. Rather, it means spending time with them without constantly discussing their spiritual state. What does this look like practically?

- ✦ Praying for them regularly. Where there is life, there is hope.
- ✦ Being yourself. Don’t hide your faith. Continue to talk about things you value, and this will undoubtedly mean talking about your relationship with Christ and your local church.
- ✦ Expressing affection. Let them know you care about them. Remember birthdays and anniversaries. Make it obvious they matter to you not because *they may one day be saved*, but simply because you love them.
- ✦ Giving them space. This may mean you no longer forward them spiritual emails or even invite them to church. Stop getting them Christian books for

Christmas! If you have made the gospel clear, you are free to back off.

DO TRUST THE LORD

One of the hardest sermons I ever read was preached by Jonathan Edwards. He took Romans 3:19 as his text, “that every mouth may be stopped.” The doctrine of this passage, Edwards argued, is simple: “It is *just* with God eternally to cast off and destroy sinners.”³

The key word there is “just.” Because sin is so terrible, so egregious, so wicked, so ugly, so heinous it is “just”—right, fitting, appropriate, righteous—for God to eternally punish sinners.

This is what *I* deserve. I have rebelled against God; I have sought to be my own personal king. Had not the grace of God broken into my life and replaced my heart of stone with a heart of flesh, I would be facing this awful eternity (Ezk. 36:26).

I’ll never forget listening to a sermon preached by my first pastor, Mark Dever, when he said we are to “take God’s side against sin.” When it comes to the sin in my own heart, the sin in the world around me, and the sin in those closest to me, I’m *always* to take God’s side.

This is the heartbeat of Edwards’s sermon on Romans 3:19. His words may be laborious to read, but it’s worth it because he helps us grapple with the reality that hell is what unbelievers actually deserve. If we think people are all basically good, this will make no sense. But if we are convinced that in light of the holiness of God, there is no one holy, not even one, this will make complete sense. You will want to take God’s side, even against the sin of those you love. Carefully read Edwards’s words about the character and worth of God:

God is a being *infinitely* lovely, because he hath infinite excellency and beauty. To have infinite excellency and beauty, is the same thing as to have infinite loveliness. He is a being of infinite greatness, majesty, and glory; and therefore he is infinitely honourable. He is infinitely exalted above the greatest potentates of the earth, and highest angels in heaven; and therefore he is infinitely more honourable than they. His authority over us is infinite; and the ground of his right to our obedience is infinitely strong; for he is infinitely worthy to be obeyed himself, and we have an absolute, universal and infinite dependence upon him.⁴

The language is old, but do you get the point? God is amazing; more beautiful and wonderful than we can even imagine. This truth is found all over the Bible:

- ♦ “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).
- ♦ “Oh taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps. 34:8)
- ♦ “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .” (Ex. 34:6).

But Edwards didn’t stop at describing God’s goodness. He had a larger point to make. The infinite worth of God makes the eternal punishment of sinners just: “Sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous, and so deserving infinite punishment.”⁵ Those who are sinful—and that’s all of us—deserve eternal punishment.

This is a weighty, meaty truth. It leaves us with a hard but simple question: Will you take God’s side against sin? By God’s grace, I want to take God’s side against sin. If I am going to follow him faithfully, I have to trust not only that he is control but that he is good. Even when I’m faced with the possibility of those I love never submitting to Christ, I must believe with Moses that my God is the “Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice” (Deut. 32:4).

When it comes to your unbelieving family and friends, will you trust the Lord?

CONCLUSION

Hell is as awful as heaven is awesome. There is no way around this truth. But as we think about both, let’s remember Christ who bore the wrath of hell so that through him, we could enjoy the wonders of heaven. In heaven, all anxiety will be put to rest. In heaven, we will always and perfectly take God’s side against sin. We will have no regret and no temptations and no fears. Ultimately, the only way to have peace in the face of loved ones who reject Christ is to marvel at the grace of God who, in Christ, accepted us.

– Aaron Menikoff

¹Paul Helm provides a brief and thoughtful critique of annihilationism. He rightly concludes the suffering of those who do not repent is “everlasting, corresponding to the everlasting life enjoyed by the redeemed, as Scripture explicitly teaches (Matt. 25:46).” *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell* (Banner of Truth, 1989), 119.

²Kathryn Lin Gum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America from Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 202.

³Jonathan Edwards, “The Justice of God In the Damnation of Sinners,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 1* (Banner of Truth, 1974), 669.

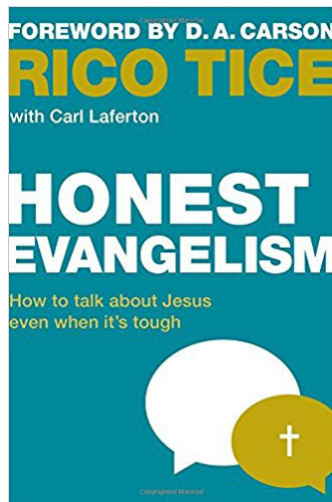
⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

Honest Evangelism

Written by Rico Tice & Carl Laferton

Bookstall Price: \$12



As a minister, renowned evangelist, and founder of “Christianity Explored”, Rico Tice seems to be the perfect person to write a book on personal evangelism. However, he opens *Honest Evangelism* with an honest admission that most Christians can truly identify with: “I find evangelism hard.” This statement sets the tone for the entire book as Tice draws on decades of experience to help Christians who don’t find evangelism easy. Through relatable stories, rich biblical truth, and practical advice, Rico Tice encourages us all to be honest with ourselves about why we won’t evangelize and honest with

others about why Jesus died and rose again.

Tice begins by noting two typical responses of an unbeliever to the gospel—hostility and hunger. He encourages us to risk the hostility to experience the hunger. After walking through insightful theological and biblical motivations for evangelism, he moves into the most convicting section of the book. Here, Tice argues that our reluctance in evangelism is usually due to the presence of idols in our heart. In short, we love something else more than we love Christ. This is a sobering and enlightening reminder as many of us don’t need to be told why we should evangelize; rather, we need to honestly reflect on why we won’t.

The latter half of the book focuses on practical advice to encourage evangelism. In looking to steer conversations to the gospel, Tice suggests the practice of asking good questions and being genuinely interested in the person you are witnessing to. After all, these are real people, not just evangelistic projects. In learning more about the person, we can begin to look for opportunities to ask “painline questions”: questions that draw on your knowledge and friendship with the person and move the conversation to a serious topic. In all of this, he gives the refreshing reminder that any personality type can effectively share Christ, because God has called every single Christian to the task of evangelism.

Whether you find evangelism easy or difficult, *Honest Evangelism* will challenge you to be honest about your motivations in personal evangelism, and honest with those around you about the surpassing worth of knowing Christ as Lord and Savior.

– RECOMMENDED BY KALEP KANODE

Excerpts From the Book

1

“If you’ve ever tried to talk about Jesus and felt weak, scared, legs made out of jelly, and a message that sticks in your mouth and sounds halting as it leaves your lips, then you’re in good company.”

– Two Halves of the Story, p.21

2

“If we’re to share Christ, we need first to love Christ! We need to ask the Spirit to go to work in our hearts with the gospel, so that we’ll love Christ more and more, and he’ll displace our idols, and so when we talk about what we love, we’ll be talking about him.”

– Why We (still) Won’t Evangelize, p.46

3

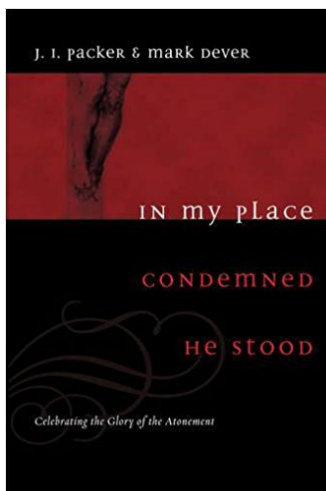
“...It’s God who opens blind eyes. You communicate the message-and then you pray that he would do the miracle. This is so liberating. What is successful witnessing? It’s not someone becoming a Christian – it’s someone hearing about Christ. It’s not you winning an argument, having all the answers, or giving an eloquent speech-it’s you preaching Christ.”

– What Must I Remember?, p.55

In My Place Condemned He Stood

Written by J.I. Packer and Mark Dever

Bookstall Price: \$15



What did the cross of Christ accomplish? The answer to that question is summed up in three words that are at the very heart of the gospel message: penal substitutionary atonement. *In My Place Condemned He Stood* is a collection of four important essays written by J. I. Packer and Mark Dever unpacking and reflecting on the significance of this short phrase. The authors describe their book as a “tract for the times” intended to set forth the truth of the gospel in an age in which some in the church are “sidelining, and in some cases even denying, the work of Jesus Christ as our redeemer . . . in favor of the idea of Jesus as teacher, model, and pioneer of godliness.” (p. 18–9)

Though none of us are likely in danger of denying the work of Christ as our redeemer, many of us know the temptation to downplay the realities of the cross in order to make the message of the gospel a bit more palatable to our friends and neighbors. An even greater number of us know the temptation to downplay or even to completely lose sight of the realities of the cross when it comes to dealing with our own sin and navigating the daily struggles of life in a fallen world. One of the most helpful tools for resisting and combatting these temptations is a robust understanding of what exactly happened at the cross and why it is so essential to the message of the gospel. I know of no other book that explains the “what” and the “why” of the cross as clearly, thoroughly, and succinctly as this one.

I highly recommend *In My Place Condemned He Stood* to anyone looking to dig deeper into the meaning of the cross and the message of the gospel. It would be an excellent tool for one-to-one and small group discipling, as the truths it contains are often more thoroughly digested and applied in the context of conversation.

– RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS

Excerpts From the Book

1

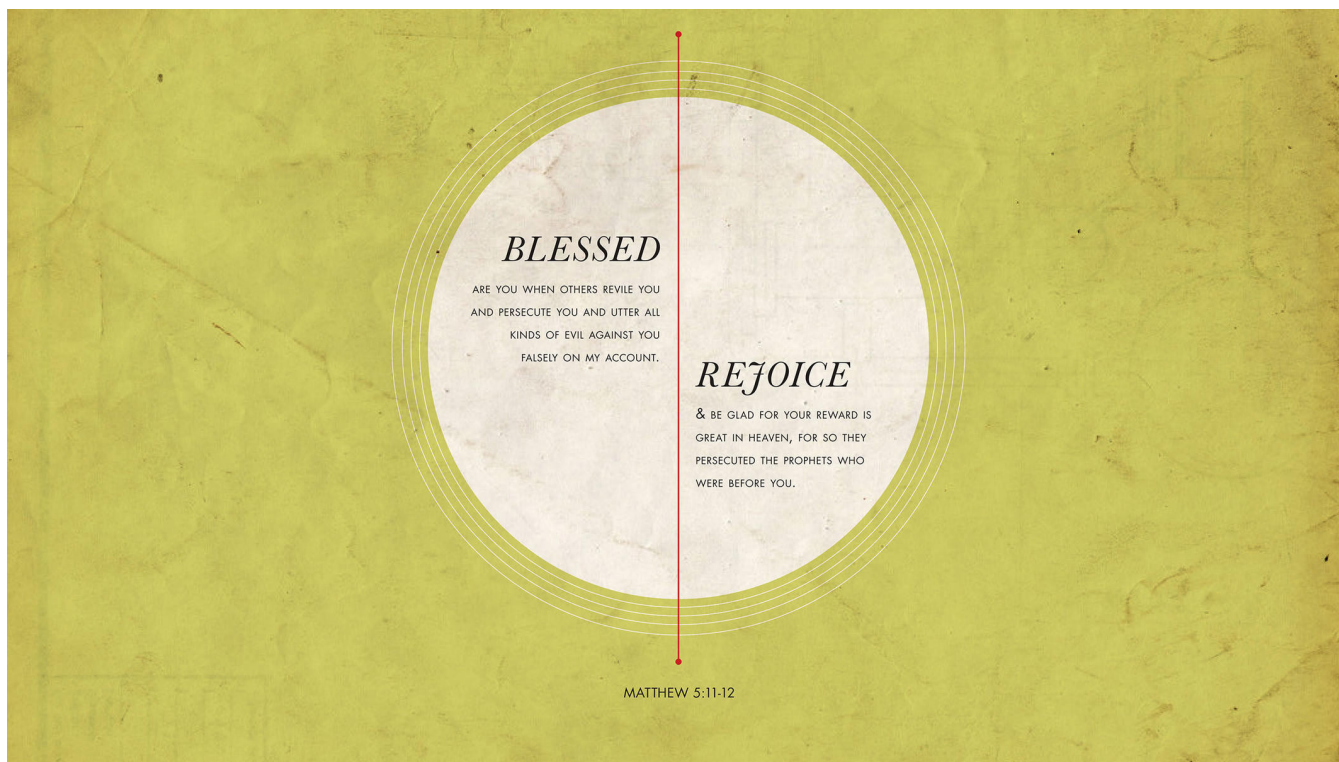
“The notion which the phrase “penal substitution” expresses is that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption, and glory.”
– What Did the Cross Achieve, p.77

2

“The atonement protects us from our native tendency to replace religion with morality and God’s grace with legalism. Apart from Christ’s atoning work, we would be forever guilty, ashamed, and condemned before God.”
– Nothing but the Blood, p.102

3

“The cross on which the divine-human mediator hung, and from which he rose to reign on the basis and in the power of his atoning death, must become the vantage point from which we survey the whole of human history and human life, the reference point for explaining all that has gone wrong in the world everywhere and all that God has done and will do to put it right, and the center point for fixing the flow of doxology and devotion from our hearts.”
– Epilouge, p.148



“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

– Matthew 5:11–12

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes to describe what it looks like to live in the kingdom of heaven. They should characterize citizens of the kingdom, those who trust and follow the King of the kingdom, Jesus. He describes their life in relation to God (spiritually humble, seeking his righteousness, pure in heart) and others (meek, merciful, and making peace).

As Jesus concludes in verses 11–12, we might expect him to describe how such a person as that will be accepted by others. After all, they are selfless people. They put the needs of others before their own. They strive to make peace in the community. They don’t think of themselves too highly but are humble in their assessment of who they really are before the Lord. What’s not like about these people?

Jesus concludes by saying, “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely...*” Righteousness is not rewarded as we might expect. Citizens of the kingdom do not receive

a friendly welcome from citizens of the world. This isn’t new; it’s always been this way. “[*T*hey persecuted the prophets.” To be mistreated in such a way—angrily criticized, slandered, defamation of character, and all sorts of persecution—usually meant that the person had done wrong and was a menace to the community. But nothing could be farther from the truth with true citizens of the kingdom.

So why do citizens of the kingdom receive such treatment? “*On [Jesus’] account.*” It’s Jesus they ultimately do not like. As a citizen, we represent him. We’re his ambassadors sent to communicate his message and exhort people to live under his authority. And it’s that message and authority they reject and will revile anyone who comes with it.

The righteousness for which we stand and the Christ with whom we are identified does not find favor with the world. But it does find favor with God. In the end, we are favored, i.e., “*blessed,*” by the One whose opinion matters most. May God give us the grace and mercy to live as citizens of the kingdom regardless the cost. May he help us “*rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*”

– BRAD THAYER

NEW MEMBERS



Don & Donna Ireland



Yuanlai (Andy) Zhou



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH