

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke Part 15: Reversing Pascal's Wager

Countryside Community Church
Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
January 24, 2015

Scripture: Luke 13:1-8; 22-30

Answer "Yes" or "No" to the following question: *Does God exist?*

Hold on to your answer and find a coin.

Flip the coin.

If the coin comes up "heads," let's imagine that your answer to the question above is right. "Tails" means you are wrong.

Now, imagine you are dead. What would be the consequences of your decision about God?

In the 16th C, philosopher Blaise Pascal did a lot of thinking about how he would answer the question of God's existence. While he was skeptical about God, he chose to believe in God anyway. He articulated the basis of his belief in a line of reasoning that became known as "Pascal's Wager."

Pascal approached the question of God from the standpoint of gambling and the afterlife (or lack thereof). He said that we essentially make a wager with our lives when we answer the question about God. Even though Pascal was skeptical about God's existence, he chose belief over unbelief, arguing that belief is the best bet you can make.

His reasoning? If God does not exist, he noted, one who believes in God has lost nothing. After death, there would only be oblivion if there is no God. The believer does not suffer for being wrong. Yet if God does in fact exist, the believer gains an eternal reward. On the other hand, if an *unbelieving* person is proved correct, and God does not exist, the unbeliever gains nothing for making a correct bet, for nothing awaits us. But if God exists, the unbeliever not only loses the wager but suffers eternal punishment. So a believer literally has everything to gain and nothing to lose through belief, while the unbeliever has nothing to gain and everything to lose.

Have you spotted the flaw in Pascal's argument? Actually, there are many, though millions of people over the centuries have made a similar wager themselves, down to our day.

For one thing, Pascal assumes that God would prefer a calculating hypocrite to an honest agnostic; that God rewards one whose “belief” is really just a matter of objective risk assessment and punishes one who, despite the potential risk, would remain truthful about their lack of belief. Is such a “god” worth believing in?

This kind of deity sounds more like a human being than God. God as the emperor with no clothes, who prefers to hear his subjects praise his fine attire than acknowledge his nakedness.

The main problem, however, with Pascal’s Wager is the underlying assumption he makes about God’s nature and character. It is an assumption he shares with most forms of religious fundamentalism. And it is precisely this assumption that Jesus sought to overturn throughout his life and ministry. The assumption is that God punishes those who do not please God in a certain way and rewards those who do please God.

In other words, the assumption is that God is really no different from us, except many times more powerful. While many would deny this statement on the face of it, it is nevertheless true that most people, when they think of God, simply project an image of themselves written large across the heavens and call it God. God created in our own image.

Let me illustrate.

Since we are loving, we assume that God is loving too – only to the thousandth degree. Since we are gracious, God must be gracious – only exponentially more. We may be wise, but God is Wisdom itself. We may be charitable, but God is Charity itself. All well and good. Except when it isn’t.

For, if we are merely projecting ourselves onto the clouds and calling it God, there are a lot of other tendencies we will assume God has that Jesus came to show us God does not have. We may be loving, but we are also vindictive, brutal, egocentric, stingy, and we can hold grudges. We also discriminate against those who are different from us, take advantage of others who have less power than we do, and we tend to use force and fear to bring others into line when they act up. Elevate all these qualities into the heavens and multiply them to the 1000th degree and what to you get?

You get the god of all religious fundamentalism. But before we go pointing fingers, let’s consider how this all-too-human god affects our own faith and action.

When the tower of Siloam fell on eighteen innocent people and killed them, the people of Jesus’ day tried to make sense of what had happened. If they were God, they would have reached down from the heavens and prevented the tower from falling in the first place. Wouldn’t we do the same, if we were God and had the ability? But that’s not what God did. So the crowd could only assume that God must have been angry with these people, giving them their just reward. Don’t we have a tendency to speculate about what bad thing a person has done when life seems to treat them with unusual

severity? For that matter, don't we ask this about ourselves when life hits us unusually hard?

When Pontius Pilate killed a group of Galileans, mingling their blood with their sacrifices, again the people tried to make sense of it all. If they were God, they would have struck Pilate down with lightning before he could lift a finger against their brethren. Since God didn't harm Pilate, it must have been God's intention to allow harm to come to the Galileans, based on some sin.

Yesterday, one of the speakers at our Center for Faith Studies event on race relations shared a painful story from childhood. As an African American growing up in the 50s, she could not figure out why white people treated her people with such disdain, even violence at times. The only explanation she could come up with as a young child is that black people must have done something terribly wrong to warrant such ill treatment by whites. So she spent months trying to figure out just what her people had done. While she finally realized that nothing was done except existing, her first, second, and third inclination had been to find fault with herself and her people.

So it is when we project ourselves into the heavens and call the image "God," as well. When bad things happen to us, our first, second, and third inclination is to wonder what we've done to deserve it. And if we should realize that we've done nothing to deserve it, we still wonder why God is punishing us!

Jesus overturns our assumptions. Facing the crowd's speculations over the deaths of their peers, he wouldn't allow their projection of God to stand in for God. He tells the crowd that the people who died were no worse sinners than anyone else, and their death had nothing to do with God's punishment.

Then Jesus added this warning: "I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

This sounds like Jesus has just contradicted himself! Having just assured the people that those who died were not being punished for their sins, now he warns those who still live that they will be punished for their sins unless they repent. Is this not a problem?

The problem is not with Jesus but with us. When we assume that Jesus is threatening the living with death for their sins, we betray the fact that we have bought into the logic of the crowd; the logic of Pascal; the logic of fundamentalism – logic that Jesus sought to reverse. We have bought into the assumption that there is an angry God up there who has no patience for those who don't snap into line. That's why we naturally assume that Jesus is threatening the crowd when he announces that they will die just as the others did if they do not repent.

The truth of the matter is that God has a lot more patience with those who misbehave than we do. Why are we so disappointed with God all the time for not putting an end to all the violence and bloodshed and other insanity we face on earth? We think that

any God worthy of truly being worshiped would wipe every person from the face of the earth who causes harm. ISIS should be nothing but charcoal by now. Corrupt politicians should be in the grave. Those who hurt or abuse children should have all received a one-way ticket to hell the first time they even thought of laying a hand on a child. But God allows it all to happen. Lying, cheating, and stealing, warfare, bigotry and betrayal. These things all make us mad as hell, to the point where we cannot imagine a God who is good allowing any of this to happen in the first place. For if WE were God ... there would be hell to pay.

Jesus keeps reminding us that we are not God, though we are related. We are related to God in our loving nature, our kindness, our generosity, and our grace. But if we were truly God, we would love even our enemies, we would do good to those who hurt and abuse us, and pray for our persecutors. We would lend to others expecting nothing in return, and we would welcome those who are most unlike us into our homes and offer our best food.

When we hear Jesus saying, “unless you repent, you will perish as they did,” and hear a threat in it, we betray how far from God we really are. What does it mean to “perish as they did”? Jesus had already stated in no uncertain terms that people who perished *were no different from those still alive*. Those still alive were judging those who perished, assuming that they must have done something sinful for which God was punishing them. And those who died were just like the crowd. If they were still alive, they’d be wondering what the dead had done to deserve God’s punishment, too. What Jesus is getting at when he says, “unless you repent you will perish as they did,” is that unless they change their whole way of thinking (the true meaning of the Greek root word, *metanoia*, which is translated as “repent”) they will go to the grave still believing in a God who does not exist – a God who is just as mean-spirited, vindictive, and judgmental as they are.

The God who Jesus knew is a God who is like us in our love, but unlike us in our hatred; who is like us in our compassion, but unlike us in our brutality; who is like us in our generosity, but unlike us in our stinginess. In other words, the God Jesus knew is not so full of contradictions as we are.

Shocked at the implications, someone asks Jesus, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

What Jesus is saying is that if your God is merely a projection of yourself written large on the clouds, complete with all your anger, impatience, and your desire for vengeance on those who hurt you, you will never find the True God, much less act in accordance with God’s will. If you wish to find God, you must narrow your focus. Narrow it until you find a God whose love never gives way to hatred toward those who don’t love God back; narrow the focus until you find a God whose patience with the unloving is so great that God will allow them to become more and more miserable until they get so sick of themselves – and the god they’ve projected onto the clouds – that they finally stop

running away. A God who greets them with open arms when, at long last, they turn toward the One who has loved them since before they were born, and will love them for eternity.

Yes, it's true. If you're a jerk, God will not strike you down with lightning. Rather, God will allow you to keep being a jerk until you're so sick of yourself and the god you've created, who hates everyone that you do and condemns everyone that you condemn, that you finally stop believing in this god and allow the True God to change your heart and your life along with it.

All of us were born in God's image and likeness, thus we all sense the True God's invitation to us. In the deepest recesses of our being we sense that we are loved beyond our imagination. But because this love is truly "beyond our ability to imagine," we get scared. Few of us, therefore, "enter by the narrow gate," betting our lives on the love that has been revealed to us.

Instead, we make Pascal's wager. We find it safer to worship a God who punishes people for eternity when they fall out of line than to worship one who will never give up on us. Because if we worship the God of Infinite Love and discover we were wrong, then eternity is a very long time to be punished.

Jesus says, "Not so fast." He knows what Pascal did not. Pascal thought there was no downside risk for believing in a vengeful God. What he did not consider is that by believing in such a god, we torture ourselves – and others – *in the here-and-now*.

Jesus taught that heaven may be found already in the here-and-now. By turning our backs on the grace and love that exists for us and all people in the here-and-now, we effectively turn our lives, and that of others, *into a living hell*.

Reverse Pascal's bet, Jesus would tell us. For the kind of God you bet your life on is the kind of God you will find, whether this God actually exists or not.