

Talking with People the Way Jesus Did

Thanksgiving season is upon us, and while most of us are looking forward to a four-day weekend and gathering with family, some among us dread it. It's not the loneliness, even though a lot of us will be eating a take-home Cracker Barrel Thanksgiving dinner by ourselves. No, the ones I'm thinking of are those who are compelled to gather with relatives we avoid the rest of the year. It may not be a full-blown dysfunctional setting, but a lot of families have that one relative—an elderly aunt or that weird brother-in-law—who makes things awkward. She has no filter on what she says or maybe he likes to bring up touchy subjects just to stir the pot of controversy. You know the topics:

- Politics.
- Why so-and-so [who is sitting at the table] isn't married.
- Who makes a better stuffing than that which was served.
- Tennessee v. Alabama football. (Hey, it's a big deal in my neck of the woods.)
- Hell.

OK, so maybe that last topic is not generally brought up over yams and cranberry sauce (unless the dressing really was bad), but it is a topic most of us avoid discussing. It makes us uncomfortable to consider the reality of it. I'll admit I don't like to talk about hell—but I will. If it's in the Bible passage I'm reading, I'll address it.

I've never been one for fire-and-brimstone sermons. I've bothered by the way some people relish those sermons, especially the preachers who preach hell, fire, and damnation with such enthusiasm that they seem to enjoy it. They justify it by saying, "Jesus preached more about hell than heaven!"

Did He?

What Jesus talked about more than anything else was the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God encompasses the life we have now with Christ, and it includes our eternity with Him. His kingdom is in our midst now, but a day is coming when His children will

dwell in His presence in His eternal kingdom. We euphemistically refer to this as heaven—and living in His presence with definitely be heavenly.

Growing up, I sat through a lot of fire-and-brimstone sermons that scared people into heaven. They made a decision out of fear, not out of being drawn to the love and grace of God. And when the fear and emotionalism wore off, too many of them stopped coming to church. They had their "fire insurance," and they didn't see the need for anything further from the church.

While Jesus did "get in the face" of some sinners (particularly the self-righteous religious people), most of His conversations were an invitation to come to Him. And people were drawn by His love. Consider what makes heaven heaven. It's the presence of God—and in God we find love, light, peace, security, hope, to name just a few.

Now consider what makes hell hell. It's the absence of God. And since God is the source of love, light, peace, security, and hope, hell becomes hell because of the total absence of love. Darkness. No peace. Insecurity. Hopelessness. Sure, we can talk about the fiery lake, but it's the total absence of God and anything good that comes from Him that makes it a truly frightful place to me.

Cynics cry out that a loving God wouldn't send anyone to hell. God doesn't. In fact, He does just the opposite. He invites us into His presence. It's their choice whether they want to accept that invitation and run into His arms. And if they don't want God in their lives, He gives them what they want: a total absence of His presence. And that is a scary thing.

I doubt the topic of hell will come up during the dinner conversation this Thanksgiving, but I hope you will take the opportunity to issue an invitation. Invite them to encounter the love, grace, and salvation of Jesus.

It's heavenly.