Question: If God is love, then how can we say that anyone will be condemned? What about those who have never “heard” the gospel?

I have been thinking about your question and I came to the conclusion that the answer I gave you at church, while accurate, was not good enough. So I thought I’d sit down and give you a more precise and detailed answer to your question. You asked me, “Since God is love, how can we say that he will send to hell those people who have no chance in this world to know him?” I think that is the accurate gist of what you asked. So let’s dig in and come to a better answer.

First, we need to come to grips with a few things. All we can now, all we do know about God is solely revealed in his Word. Apart from that revelation we cannot know him or even take a stab at Him. We can only know what He has revealed in the way that He has revealed it to us. There are two reason for this. First, in truth, we, apart from what God reveals are incapable of grasping the fullness of his majesty and being. We are just not capable of fully understanding the depths of God and his wisdom. Romans 11:33-36 is a passage that helps us grasp this point. It says, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

The second reason for this is that it reminds us to be dependent on the Word of God. If we do not believe in the Word of God then there is no faith. If we do not trust that God has revealed what we need to know and how, then there is no faith. If we determine that we can know God and we simple make God fit our human mind and limited reason, then we don’t really believe in God. Either our faith is based on who and what God says or we really don’t have faith! This is a real problem for the world. The common false teaching out there right now is that God has revealed himself in different ways to different people. Really? Why would God need to do that? He is God! He says, “This is who I am and you either believe or you do not! You do not determine who I am, I do!” This is really the essence of what faith is. The Lord God does not need to coddle to the needs of man, man must meet the standards and demands of God! And why would God reveal himself to a Hindu without any speaking of the Holy Spirit and Jesus? And why would God reveal himself to the Muslim as a God who must have his people killing for him or else? We must be dependent on God’s Word!

All of that said, let’s now begin to address your question. It is a good question but it clearly shows a lack and grasp of the true nature and being of God. Your question makes a judgment on the Lord based on only one of his attributes when in truth there are quite a few attributes of God. The danger of this can be shown with this simple illustration. Let’s say that people want to know Doug. But all they ever want to talk about and acknowledge about Doug is that he is tall. It is true, but if that is all you ever acknowledge about Doug you are going to miss a lot! Do you see the point? So let’s just talk about the attributes of God as he reveals them.

Yes, God is love. His love is holy and pure and has not a single flaw to it. It is perfect love in every way but this love of God is greater in depth than we as mankind can grasp. You do realize that this God of love sent his Son to the cross! In our human minds, how is that love, to punish your Son, your perfect Son with the world’s sins and the world’s total damnation? Yet, God is love. It is pure and holy to a point and degree that we cannot grasp. Fathom this: It is the loving God who wants all men to be saved AND it is the loving God who says that whoever does not believe will be condemned! Yet, this is the depth of God’s love. To get this across to you in a simpler form just think of how you had to discipline your girls for their good and wellbeing. You did not discipline and punish because you hated them, but because you did love them! Make sure you don’t limit or deny the full extent of God’s love!

Now love is only one attribute of God. Let me just list a number of God’s attributes that I can think of off of the top of my head: Omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, just, righteous, holy, kind, gracious, unchanging, eternal, wise, triune, spirit, compassionate, faithful and forgiving. Right now I want you to understand that I can write a page or so on each one of those attributes of God and probably still never touch the true essence of what that attribute is. God is a whole lot more complex that just love! Take the fact that his is omnipotent, that is, all powerful. Can you grasp that? Can you fathom a being who out of his mind and will created matter and everything about this universe there is? What kind of power did it take to create a world out of nothing in six days? If you can’t grasp that, welcome to the party of our limited human ability.

Let’s talk about God’s omniscient attribute. This means that God is all knowing. Please understand the depth of this. God knows everything in every way. God knows what is and what was and what will be and it is perfect, holy knowledge in keeping with His other attributes. But even more important, God know all the possibilities of knowledge. He knows what could be in each and every situation of life. God has a wisdom and knowledge that we can’t grasp. Please keep this attribute in mind because it tells you that you must trust God’s knowledge since his knowledge is far superior and beyond yours. So are you going to stand in judgement of God? Do you know what He knows, all of it in every way? No! Then I would tell you that you are in no position to decide that God is not loving if people end up in hell! You don’t know what He knows, and that alone should cause you to yield to his judgements in everything. And if you do not wish to yield to God, then again I must tell you that what you claim to believe is not God but some sort of false idol devised by your sinful mind. Let’s go on.

God is holy. He has no flaws in any way. He is incapable of evil or doing what is bad or making anything flawed. God is holy. He makes no mistakes and his pureness is again something that many have trouble grasping. There is so much more to say here but let’s get to another great attribute that fits nicely here….God is righteous and we will also add just. In other words, as you combine these aspects and characteristics of God it is very clear that God cannot and does not make mistakes in anything. He is incapable of injustice, but always judges with a pureness and certainty that no man has ever managed. In every judgment, God knows all the facts better than even you know the facts of your life. He makes no mistakes, does not take short cuts and when his justice is pronounced you can bet it is completely and perfectly flawless in every way. He is never wrong!

Finally I want to speak of God’s graciousness. God in total grace, without any input from us, sent his Son to be our Lord and Savior from sin. You are not going to heaven because of your goodness or because you are not as bad as some. God’s Word makes it clear that we are all by nature lost in trespass and sin. We have nothing to offer to God. You can go and read Romans 3. We foolish humans think we are going to obey the law and get saved, that God must save us because we are so wonderful. God says, and this is His ultimate standard, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” That’s the standard. You must be holy and perfect in every way or you are going to hell. But God in grace, sent his Son who did everything for our salvation. God simply tells us that faith in Jesus is the only, note that, the ONLY way to be saved. No Jesus, no salvation. Jesus clothes you with His righteousness and in Jesus and only in Jesus we are made holy and perfect before God, not because we are but because God in grace pronounces us that in Jesus. If you don’t have the saving works of Jesus then you will stand before the full weight and power of the law. It will not be pretty. Without God’s grace we have nothing. And that grace is the very epitome of the life of Jesus. I still don’t think I can grasp fully the grace of God in our salvation. But I know that without his grace I cannot make it into his eternal kingdom. His power, his marvel, his way is what makes salvation what it is. It is what His Word declares. I cannot go beyond his Word and I cannot go short of his Word. The Word is everything. And yes, in case you are wondering, the Word is Jesus! (Check out John 1:1ff).

Now believe it or not we are still working for our answer. The next thing we need to speak of is the will of God. The only will of God I can grasp and speak of is what God has revealed. I am not wise enough to know the mind of God or fathom what He wants unless He tells me what he wants. On just this let me quote to you from the book I recommended (Grace Abounds The Splendor of Christian doctrine by Daniel M. Deutschlander. Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, WI) Page 123 makes this statement:

“Much damage has been done by those who are not satisfied with God’s revealed will and want somehow to get at his hidden mind and will. On the one hand, they place an enormous burden on themselves to get at the mind of God that he has not promised to open to them apart from his Word and sacraments. On the other hand, they presume and imagine that their own feelings and choices are God’s feelings and choices. They confidently declare that they feel “led by the Lord” to do this or that which is not revealed in his Word. In their judgment, anyone who gets in the way is getting in the way of the Lord.”

If you would but contemplate that paragraph it very much explains the problem our world now has. We think we can know God apart from his Word. No, we cannot. I pray you do get this book because the whole section on God and what we know would be such an eye opener.

Anyway, when we speak of the will of God we must acknowledge that there is the antecedent will and the consequent will of God. The antecedent will of God is the will of God that takes place before an event or an action and is the cause of that event or action. Think of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. God willed that to be and so it was. Nothing could have stopped it from happening. The same with so many other things: Babylonian captivity, return of the exiles, the birth of Isaac, the selling of Joseph by his brothers….the list is really pretty long and involved. We only know this will when God reveals it to us and that is only done in his written Word.

The consequent will of God is what God does because the actions and sinfulness of man brought it about. It is really what God told us the consequences of sin would be. Thus, though God knew Judas would betray Jesus, it was Judas who rejected Jesus, Judas who turned away from faith and then in an act of pure unbelief and despair hanged himself. The consequent will of God was to condemn Judas to hell. In many ways, God’s Law lays out the standards and God in His holiness and justice carries out his standard perfectly. The only time God suspends his consequent will is when faith in Jesus is in action for us. Then God forgives us which is really his antecedent will.

Do you get the feeling that you really have no true grasp of God? I hope so! The Bible is a continuous revelation of God’s antecedent and consequent will in action. You must understand them and divide them properly. God wants all men to be saved and yet, the majority of mankind, because of their rejection and stubborn refusal to believe and trust in God through Jesus will go to hell! In other words, the truth and wonder of God is much deeper and involved that just that God is love. To limit your grasp of God to just that is like trying to describe a car by only talking about the steering wheel. Or another way to describe this would be to think of a car from it various aspects. Look at just the front of a car. It is the car but you would be missing lots of components to just look at the front. You have to look at the sides (both), the rear, the bottom, the top, under the hood, in the interior…all the doors! Then start looking at the motor, transmission, drive train, wheels, bearings, cables, wiring, cloth, seats, gadgets…get the point?

So what is the ultimate point? That God in his justice and judgment says that those who do not believe in Jesus and his redemption are going to hell. You can argue that such and such a person never had a chance, never heard the Gospel! I say, “How do you know?” Are you calling God unjust? Are you saying God is wrong and wicked? Do you really know all that God knows? Remember when we spoke of the omniscience of God? God knows everything that was, is, and will be and everything that could be too? I believe that God knows that even had these souls been exposed to the Gospel they would have rejected and hated Him. I believe that God knows their heart and the wickedness there, yes, the hatred of His truth and wonder found there. I believe God knows what He is doing and would never, ever condemn or damn without His perfect justice and knowledge being put to full use.

I also believe there is one more factor to take into account. In Genesis, when God called Abraham to faith, God told Abraham that the land of Canaan would be his, but not for another 400 years. Go to Genesis 15:13-16. God tells us that the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure. The Israelites will be the instrument of his judgment against these people. 400 years before God enacts his judgments on these people. God knew they would get more and more wicked and was willing to wait to bring about their final judgment and damnation. Or look at the history of the Exodus. Pharaoh despised God and time and time again God’s Word reveals that Pharaoh “hardened his heart against God.” But pay attention, because eventually the Word says, “And God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” In other words, Pharaoh wanted hell and God was more than happy (and just and holy and righteous and wise…) to grant him what he wanted.

So let’s talk about the perfect judgment of God! God says that those who do not believe will be condemned! This is his antecedent will. We have a majority of the world that has rejected, spurned, hated, and chased after anything but the true God. I will not decide that my human judgment is better than God’s. I will not decide that I know all that God knows. I will trust that God, as he says, will act in perfect, holy and righteous justice. This is the truth of faith! God is God and either we believe and trust in Him or we don’t. And if we decide to reject his wonder and marvel, well, don’t blame God for that! His wonder and wisdom is beyond what I can grasp.

Well, I hope that answers your question more fully. Lots to know, lots we still don’t know, but finally our trust and confidence must be in the truth and wonder of God. We will stick to his Word and though the world and foolish human thinking causes us to doubt his pureness and holiness, we will always get back to His truth. It is the only thing that counts!

Any further questions. Let me know. Get that book, you will enjoy it!

As you read, remember my passion for the truth of God. My rhetorical questions and in your face finger pointing is just a part of my passion. Smile and recognize it is just done to make a point and not because I in any way doubt your faith! Love ya!