

## The Difference Between God's Discipline and Eternal Punishment

I received an inquiry about the discipline of God stating, "I don't believe in this because the Bible says we are forgiven. If we are forgiven, how could God punish us?"

The key passage in reply to this question is Hebrews 12:5-11. The author of Hebrews was writing to Christians, believers who were forgiven and redeemed and justified before God all on the basis of Christ's atoning work on the cross. Therefore when he wrote "those whom the Lord loves He disciplines", he was referring to Christians as the ones whom the Lord loves. I know that God loves everybody, but the context here is a special love within a special relationship made possible by Jesus. People who do not have Jesus as their Savior are separated from God by sin, and in that vein they do not have the intimate family type relationship that the author means when he says in v7, "God deals with you as with sons". This is the same intimate family of God type relationship Paul talked about in Romans 8:15-17, "we have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out Daddy. The Holy Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also of God and fellow heirs with Christ." Paul had already pointed out in Rom.8:9 that all Christians are indwelt with the Spirit which makes this special spiritual family relationship possible and exclusive only to Christians.

The key word used for discipline in Hebrews 12:5-11 both as a verb and a noun is *paideia* in Greek. It is used nine times in this passage and denotes the training of a child. The word signifies what parents do to train, correct, and educate children in order to help them grow up properly. It is a broad term used for everything from a stern talk to hard labor to spanking to even worse. Christian living involves relationships with other believers, but also our relationship to God. The emphasis here is on God's use of discipline within that relationship.

### The Difference Between Discipline and Punishment

God wants to help us mature, grow up and live holy lives. His discipline is done out of love and is meant to bring a positive change in our lives. When we first receive Christ many changes come in our attitude, our desires, and our behavior, but there is always some lingering fleshly desire that holds on tightly and won't let go. It is God's desire to use various circumstances, afflictions, or relationships to help change us. Like someone said, "It is

possible to make mistakes and not know it, but not if you are married.” One good example of God using afflictions as discipline to humble His servant is Paul. After praying for relief from his “thorn in the flesh”, God let him know that it was a tool God was using to keep Paul humble, “to keep me from exalting myself” (2 Cor.12:7-9). Was Paul saved? Absolutely, and forgiven and he was positionally a citizen of heaven. Nevertheless, God out of love and within the spiritual family relationship that Paul enjoyed found it helpful to Paul to teach him humility. This was not a judgment leading to eternal separation and punishment—just discipline within the family. God’s discipline is corrective, not judgmental. Consider a more extreme discipline upon the church at Corinth. In 1 Cor. 11 some Christians there were using the assembling together for Communion as an excuse to party and get drunk. Paul admonished them and stated that they were suffering sickness and even death. God was disciplining them to correct their behavior, not to disown them. Therefore, positionally we are justified, but practically our holiness is a progressive on-going work. As the author of Hebrews said in 12:10 “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness (here and now)”.

## Church Discipline

A related issue is dealt with in many passages like Matt.18:15; 1 Cor.5, Galations 6, and 1 Thes.3:14-15. These passages are written to the church and address how to deal with Christians who fall in to sin. They need to be reprovved with a goal to “win” the Christian back—meaning to change his immoral behavior. This process is done in love for the benefit of the individual and also the Church. It may seem harsh especially when taken to its extreme, which is to expel the offender from the church, but the goal is always to restore with gentleness and love through discipline. Paul said it well to the church at Thessalonica, “the disobedient Christian is to be put to shame not as an enemy but as a Christian brother”(2 Thes.3:14-15).

## Is There a Post-Salvation Temporal Forgiveness ?

Our forgiveness from the penalty of sin is solely based on the atoning work of Christ, and once we have received Him as our Savior our sins are forgiven and we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and eternally secure. At the same time, as we continue to live in these mortal bodies with all our desires, sin still is a powerful force in our life that we must combat every day.

Haven't you ever wondered why in the Lord's Prayer given to Christ's disciples, Christ said, "if you do not forgive men their transgressions, then God will not forgive your transgressions". In what sense does God not forgive us who are already forgiven? If we are forgiven based on what Jesus did, how can we be unforgiven based on what we have done? Clearly He is talking about the forgiveness that affects fellowship within the family of God, not the forgiveness that leads to salvation. This temporal forgiveness is the prerequisite for experiencing a fruitful spiritual life here and now.

John addresses this in his first epistle where he talks about having close intimate fellowship with God. This fellowship requires that we "walk in the light". If we say we have fellowship with God yet "walk in the darkness" then we actually are not living in the close intimate fellowship with God (1 John 1:5-7). What he means is that if you are sinning or being disobedient—for instance, not forgiving others—then you are not walking in God's light. By saying you have no sin which is what the believer in v.6 says, you are deceiving yourself (v8). What do we need to do in this case? Read v.9-10, confess our sins and then God promises to forgive us and cleanse us. We are already forgiven from the penalty of sin, but to live in that close intimate fellowship we must walk in the light which requires repentance which is an expected by-product of confession. Then God will restore us to fellowship. If using forgiveness this way bothers you then fine, just think of confession and repentance because that is what he means.

Application—In Hebrews 12, the author gives the application in v.1, "let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us". This is followed by the passage on God's discipline, therefore the inference is—lay aside the encumbrances and sin or God will act in your life with some type of discipline. Encumbrances are distinguished from sin so there are two different issues that we must deal with. Encumbrances are things that weigh us down, burden us, or act as impediments. Using the author's image of life as a race, it is like running with a 40 pound pack or 20 pound boots. There are a wide variety of encumbrances like "the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches" that Jesus said distract us from the Word of God. In this sense even your family or friends could act as a distraction or encumbrance. Whatever weighs us down or diverts our attention or dampens our enthusiasm acts as our encumbrance that we must "lay aside". I love the imagery of sin acting as a trip wire or an entanglement in our race. We cannot run the race of life if our legs are wrapped up in wire. What in your life acts as an encumbrance, and what is the entanglement? Remember

what a wise theologian profoundly said, GOD HAS A PADDLE THAT FITS EVERY BUTT.

## Conclusion

We must not confuse eternal punishment with Godly discipline. God disciplines believers out of love to help them. In the short run it may be very painful, but God knows it is beneficial in the long run. In Genesis 32 Jacob is a great example. After becoming well known as a deceiver, God sent him on a 20 year journey of discipline working for Laban, the ultimate deceiver. Now in Genesis 32 we see Jacob on his way back humbly praying to the Lord and willing to give all that he had to his brother whom he had lied to and cheated 20 years before. Yet all the time of this 20 year painful journey God assured him that He was with him and would bless him.

May God bless you

CHARLIE TAYLOR