

Truth and Consequences

There is a difference between a punishment and a consequence. A punishment is something that is imposed by an offended party to even a score. A consequence is the naturally occurring result of an action, sometimes imposed by the offended party, and sometimes not. While punishments may be regarded as consequences, not all consequences are punishments.

God is not offended by our actions. Instead, He is saddened by them. When we sin, God does not become angry or hateful towards us. Instead, although disappointed by our actions, He continues to love us. Sometimes a loving parent will take matters into his own hands and spank a disobedient child in anger. But this is not what God is like. God is the perfect parent. The discipline of God most often takes the form of allowing His children to suffer the natural consequences of their actions, and then being there for them when they become overwhelmed by those consequences and ask for help.

God is neither excessively harsh, nor excessively lenient. What He wants the most is for us to learn from our mistakes. He is perfectly fair and just in the way He goes about it. The consequences of our good and bad behavior are evenly matched. What we sow, we reap. Christians are not exempt from this process. If God exempted us from this process, He would be depriving us of the opportunity of learning from our mistakes. He would be stunting our spiritual growth.

The influential parent who pays off the judge, does the child a disservice. The child loses the opportunity of learning from the “mistake.” Many evangelical Christians believe that Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of mankind and that people become saved from the consequences of their sin by relying on the payment that Christ made on their behalf. Many New Testament and Old Testament Scriptures seem to be saying this. However, this is not actually what took place on Calvary. On Calvary, Christ died for us in the sense that He died for our benefit. He died “for” us, not “in place of” us. Like any loving parent, God (in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ) is with us through all our sinning, and He experiences the consequences of our sin right along with us. He is not the one who is punishing us. He, instead, is the one who saves us. He identifies with us in our sin. The same God who raised up Christ also raises us up together with Christ and seats us with Him in the heavenly places.

Jesus’ early followers were very confused, to say the least, when their Master, instead of ushering in an earthly kingdom, allowed Himself to be humiliated, tortured, and crucified. Just before He was taken by the Romans, He told his followers that His body would be broken and his blood would be shed for them, for the remission of their sins. This sounded to them, in retrospect, like His death was some kind of payment for their sins, that their sins were placed on Him in similar fashion as with the scapegoat in Old Testament times. They looked to the Old Testament for clues as to the meaning and purpose of Christ’s death, and the passage that stood out the most was Isaiah, Chapter 53, which up to this time no one had associated with the coming Messiah. They read something into this passage that wasn’t really there. The Suffering Servant, in Isaiah 53, was clearly a reference to the nation of Israel. They were wounded for their transgressions, and by means of those “stripes” they were healed. The nation fell into sin, suffered the consequences, learned from the experience, and was returned to its land after the

captivity. The nation had been healed. God did not remove the consequences of their sin. Instead, God used those consequences to bring about healing and restoration.

The process of being saved from our sins does not involve the use of a scapegoat. Instead, it is a process of recapitulation. When we die to our old way of life, having suffered the consequences of our sins, and identify with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, we are saved from further negative consequences. We do not, however, at that time become perfect. We continue to sin, suffer the consequences of those sins, and then repeat the restoration process. The severity of those consequences depends on each individual situation. Sincere repentance removes the necessity of further correction, and yes, love does cover a multitude of sins. This is a process that continues until we are finally freed from these fleshly bodies and perfected in Heaven.