

John Piper: The Consequences of Forgiven Sin

I was again overcome by the story of David's sin against Uriah (murder) and Bathsheba (adultery) and God's response in 2 Samuel 11-12.

David acknowledges that the one who has done such a thing deserves to die (2 Sam. 12:5), but in the end Nathan says, "The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die" (12:13). This is amazing grace. God passes over the sin and takes away the penalty of death.

Although the sin is taken away and the death sentence removed, Nathan says, "Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die" (12:14). In spite of forgiveness, some "penalty" for the sin remains.

Disciplinary Consequences

I put *penalty* in quotes because I think we must distinguish consequences of forgiven sin (verse 13) from consequences of unforgiven sin. The latter are properly called penalties. The former we should probably call "disciplinary consequences."

That is, they are related to the sin, and they reflect the displeasure of God for the sin, but their aim is not retributive justice. They are not part of condemnation. The aim of the consequences of forgiven sin is not to settle the accounts demanded by a just penalty.

That's what hell is for. There is a judgment whose purpose is to vindicate the right by paying back the wrong, and thus establishing equity in God's kingdom of righteousness. This is done on the cross for those who are in Christ, and it is done in hell for those who are not.

The curse that we deserve came down on Christ at the cross if we trust in him (Gal. 3:13), but it comes down on our own heads in hell if we don't (Matt. 25:41). "'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). If He passes over sins and treats them—as He did with David—as though they are not worthy of punishment, that is only a merciful delay in the retribution. Either it will be made right in the cross, as Paul says so plainly in Romans 3:25, or it will be settled in "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5).

But the aim of God-sent consequences of forgiven sin is not to settle accounts demanded by the penalty of justice. The aims of the God-sent consequences of forgiven sin are (1) to demonstrate the exceeding evil of sin, (2) to show that God does not take sin lightly even when He lays aside his punishment, and (3) to humble and sanctify the forgiven sinner.

Purify, Not Penalize

Hebrews 12:6 teaches that "whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He receives." The purpose is not to penalize, but to purify. "For they indeed disciplined us for a short time according to their own judgment, but He does so for our profit, that we may partake of His holiness. Now no discipline seems to be joyful at the time, but grievous. Yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

Not all of the disciplinary pain ordained by God is directly owing to some sin we have committed, but all of it is ordered for our good as forgiven sinners. This is immensely important to teach in a day when there is an imbalance of emphasis on the Father's forgiving tenderness to the exclusion of the Father's forgiving toughness. Thus many people have no categories to handle the consequences of the sins in their

lives except to underestimate the preciousness of forgiveness or to accuse God of double jeopardy in punishing what He has already forgiven.

By the power of truth and the Spirit, we must learn to revel in the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of glory and the joy of the Lord at the very same time that we may be suffering from the consequences of forgiven sin. We must not equate forgiveness with absence of painful impact. David's life is a vivid illustration of this truth. May God give us the grace to learn it and live it. {eoa}

This article is one of 120 daily devotions in John Piper's devotional book A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All of Life. The book is comprised of meditations to help keep your heart and mind focused on the unparalleled beauty and majesty of God. A new hardback edition is now available.

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