

171 Punishment rules

I wonder how you reacted to my previous article,^[170] in which I suggested that a view of God as a punishing God was bad theology?

Am I saying that sin doesn't matter? No, sin leads to death: "the wages of sin is death".^[Rom 6:23]

Am I saying the cross doesn't matter? No, because it was there that evil was defeated once and for all.^[Col 2:13-15]

Am I saying that, in the end, everyone will be saved? No, but I **am** saying – and will stand by it – that everyone, but **everyone** is loved and cherished and accepted by God, including X, where X is the worst tyrant you can think of. God "wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."^[1 Tim 2:4]

Am I really saying everyone **is** accepted by God? Yes. The prodigal son never stopped being his father's son. As CS Lewis wrote, "the doors of hell are locked on the inside": people are only there because that's their choice.

That's a difficult one to swallow, I know. We think – not unreasonably – that people who are evil **should** be punished, especially X. And there's a helpful list of such people in Romans 1 – take your pick! Paul clearly says in that passage that they will be punished by God.

No, I don't believe he does. Paul says that God's "wrath was revealed against" them, and God "gave them over to..." As I see it, "God's wrath" is allowing people to experience the consequences of their own sinful (self-centred) choice.

If you think that Paul (or another writer) **does** teach somewhere (if not in Romans 1) that God **punishes** people for their sin, then go back to that passage and check if your interpretation tallies with Jesus' teaching. If it doesn't, then your view of God (or that of someone whose views you have been relying on all these years) is mistaken.

If you think (or someone whose views you rely on thinks) that God has retribution as part of his psyche then I would say that your image of God is mistaken because "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,"^[John 14:9] and there's no retribution in Jesus' teaching. None!

For hundreds of years, Christians have been fixated on retributive justice – "on the cross, when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied," we sing. Someone has to die, someone has to be punished – but it's OK, we say, because Jesus took the punishment for our sins.

We think God is (at least partly) retributive, and we have been taught all our Christian lives to read that image of God back into Scripture.

Free grace, free forgiveness – especially of X – is just not right! But if we think that God can't forgive and restore X, then our image of God's love is too small – way too small!

But each individual is ultimately responsible for their own destiny; God's love **allows** us to choose death, but we are God's children unless and until we finally reject God's love.

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