

Where Would We Be Without Punishment?

by Theodore Plantinga

Many people in our society "want" punishment -- or say they do. From time to time I read that such-and-such a percentage of the Canadian public "wants" capital punishment, for example. Many commentators are distressed at these attitudes.

Why do so many people "want" capital punishment? In exploring this question, we are really asking: Where would we be without punishment?

To get into our topic, we should ask ourselves: what if wrongdoing went unpunished? Small children in our homes would probably see nothing amiss here. When they get into mischief, they hope their parents don't find out -- or, if they *do* find out, that they will choose not to dish out any punishment. Small children are not sufficiently reflective to wonder what sort of world this would be if wrongdoing went unpunished. They do not stop to ask themselves: where would we be without punishment?

As Christians we give thanks to God for many favors and bounties he bestows upon us -- from the magnificent to the relatively trivial. Do we thank him for punishment? I believe we do, but often without realizing it. When we give thanks for our redemption in Christ, we are in effect thanking him for the plan of salvation in which formal punishment plays such a major role. We are thanking him for taking our sin so seriously that he embarked upon a carefully defined course of action to deal with it and clear it up, so that man can be reconciled to God, so that our sin and guilt do not become an everlasting barrier between ourselves and God. Thus we do -- and should -- thank God for punishing sin.

The consciousness that wrongdoing *must* be dealt with is so strong in human beings that sometimes one person *begs* another for punishment of some sort so that he (i.e. the wrongdoer) will be able to feel better. The wrongdoer may say: "Go ahead -- sock me one. I deserve it!" In certain societies (the kind some people call primitive), there is a specific price to pay for wrongdoing: people know in advance what must be done by way of atonement. Some of the legislation in the Old Testament also recognizes the need for punishment and restitution to make it possible for human beings to go on living side by side

after one has wronged the other. I believe there is wisdom in all of this. When someone accidentally steps on your toe and quickly apologizes, you accept the apology and there are no aftereffects, for the offense was trivial. But even in such a case, what if no apology was offered? You would be a bit out of sorts. Here, too, we see that wrongdoing must be acknowledged and dealt with.

A useful exercise is to ask what alternative there is to punishment. The guilty child may hope fervently that his wrongdoing is ignored. Adults who adhere to what I call the "prevention mentality" may think along similar lines and declare that evil acts do not have to be dealt with; all we need to do is make sure they do not happen again. This way of thinking is one of the major approaches to crime in our time, and it also has a significant impact on the way some people raise their children.

The main alternative to punishment really has two components. One is what I have called the prevention mentality. How does it operate? Let me take an example that is close to my own heart. Proponents of the prevention mentality do not tell small children that it is wrong to destroy books (and punish them when they disobey this rule); instead, all books and printed materials are put out of the reach of children.

The second component in the alternative to punishment is the determination to "fix" anything and anyone that malfunctions or does something wrong. Now, "fix" is something of an ugly word. We get dogs and cats "fixed" to prevent certain types of activity. Some people are of the opinion that rapists ought to be "fixed." In some Islamic countries it is thought that the thief has to be "fixed": if his hand is cut off, he is not likely to use it again for stealing. In some totalitarian countries, e.g. the Soviet Union, dissidents are "fixed" in mental hospitals.

I am not arguing that it is always wrong to get dogs and cats "fixed," although we normally associate this word with machinery and mechanical things. Indeed, in the mechanical domain "fix" is an honorable word: many people make a living "fixing" things. Since language relies so heavily on metaphors and analogies, we readily transfer the concept of "fixing" to other domains. Don't doctors fix us? Aren't there doctors who deal with those embarrassing plumbing problems that seem to creep up on us with advancing age? Aren't women forever in the hospital to get this or that fixed? By using such language -- note carefully please -- we tend to minimize the problem. "Why were you in the hospital?" one person asks another. "Just getting a little plumbing problem taken care of." Or perhaps: "Getting my shoulder fixed."

Are there also doctors who fix the soul, doctors who can put steel into your backbone, equip you with a conscience, make you more sensitive, and perhaps even religious? Many people believe there are, and that the work of such doctors (usually called psychiatrists) is a higher-order fixing. I would suggest instead that the fixing metaphor has here been extended far beyond its legitimate domain. What we see instead is that such doctors -- who enjoy a mixed record of success and failure, by the way -- deal with us somewhat the way God does, i.e. via words. They may have an effect on our lives, but we do not simply receive their ministrations passively, as though we were automobile engines being fixed by skillful mechanics. It would be more appropriate to say simply that we *change* as a result of our interaction with such doctors.

And what about our parents? Did they "fix" us when we went wrong? They may have gotten angry on occasion and shouted, "I'll fix you!" but they didn't really mean it. Christian parents are well aware that human action is governed from within, from the heart, and that the heart, as the seat of our personality, is not a mechanism. "Create in me a clean, heart, O God ..." we pray.

It can hardly be denied that there are wrongdoers who would rather be fixed than punished. "I need help," they tell us when they are caught red-handed. Being "fixed," they think, means getting off lightly -- and perhaps they're right. I suggest, however, that there are also many people who, when convicted of wrongdoing, would rather be punished than "fixed."

Here we have come to the very heart of our topic. Why do people feel this way? Because there is something about punishment that honors man as a *moral creature* who is intended by God to do the right freely and responsibly. "Fixing," when it comes to human beings, is an affront to the dignity that is ours by virtue of the image of God. When we "fix" someone and prevent him from continuing a pattern of wrongdoing, we have, in a real sense, given up on him.

Man, as the bearer of God's image, can be manipulated and controlled only up to a certain point. In the long run, moral appeals are more effective than physical constraints. This thesis may startle you, and so I will repeat and reformulate it: social control depends much more on moral language than on gates, fences, locks, and guards. (Please apply this observation to human society as a whole: I am painfully aware that there are evildoers who do not respond to moral appeals and must therefore be restrained physically and probably imprisoned.)

The story of salvation as it is recorded in Scripture and represented in Christian doctrine chooses decisively for punishment rather than repair or fixing. When things go wrong in the relationship between man and God, God does not override the prerogatives he assigned to man when he first made him. He could have destroyed man, but he graciously chose not to. He could have ignored the transgression (the small child's preference), but he did not do that either. Instead he decided that punishment was in order.

Have you ever been ignored when you wanted to make up for something you did wrong? Let's suppose you committed an offense against someone but did nothing to set matters right. Two months later your conscience is bothering you, and so you seek out the person you wronged and ask his forgiveness. Suppose, further, that this person is some sort of social superior. At first he says he doesn't know what you're talking about, that he doesn't recall such an incident. You are miffed by this. Then he finally says that he remembers but had long ago dismissed the affair from his mind as insignificant. This doesn't make you feel any better either. You were looking for forgiveness, but now his attitude is upsetting you because you sense in it a disrespect directed at you. Moreover, he says he is busy, that he doesn't have time to talk about it. You respond by saying that you *have* to deal with this matter, that it's been bothering you for weeks. He replies impatiently, "Look, let's just forget about it, okay? Now, if you'll excuse me, I have quite a few things I have to get done before the day is over." How do you feel after this interchange?

At this point you are probably becoming aware that there is a rather substantial connection between punishment and respect, as the German philosopher Hegel well realized. In punishing the wrongdoer, God is showing *respect* for the creature he has made. And in vicariously punishing his own Son, God is demonstrating how seriously he takes man. He does not brush man aside and say, "Let's forget it. I have things to do." No, he gives the matter of our waywardness and rebellion his full attention. This is part of our reason for giving thanks for punishment.

We like to emphasize that the Bible is at bottom a story -- or an interconnected series of stories. Well, what is the story about? At bottom it is a drama of punishment and reconciliation -- or, more specifically, a drama that involves punishment as making reconciliation possible. The fact that punishment has such thematic significance in our Bible is by itself enough reason to give thanks for it.

Another phenomenon from ordinary experience can help us understand God's graciousness to us in the drama of salvation and justification. The respect and

consideration shown to people accused of crimes in our courts gives us something to think about (especially in view of the fact that many of these offenders seem to be such despicable individuals). There are people in our society who grow impatient at these practices; they do not agree with the consideration and respect shown to the accused criminal. They seem to think that someone accused of a serious crime -- murder, let's say -- should not be dealt with in such a careful and measured manner. But society and our judicial system deem otherwise.

The consideration shown accused criminals should also be present when our children are punished (but without the legal trappings, of course). Some critics and opponents of punishment try to convince us that the punishment received by a Christian child in a Christian home is at best a brutal conditioning technique -- something that might be appropriate for dealing with animals, but surely not for people, let alone our own children. At worst, they maintain, it represents sadism and "child abuse."

For the most part, this criticism misses the mark. The examples such critics give tend to be cases where the privilege and responsibility of punishing children is indeed abused. (Far be it from me to maintain that whenever punishment is administered, it is done appropriately; in this area of human life, we sin as much as in any other.) Ultimately, the critics have not understood what punishment is. Their tendency to use such terms as "natural punishment" - - here I am thinking especially of B.F. Skinner -- already indicates how far off the mark they are. Punishment and respect go together.

The conclusion -- perhaps I should say the moral of the story -- is that there is more involved in the practice of punishment in the Christian life than many of us seem to realize. I do not mean to say that the punishment of children is a kind of re-enactment of the drama of salvation, for there is, strictly speaking, nothing salvific about the punishment parents give their own children. (We are not saved by the punishment we mete out, any more than we are saved by our good works.) Rather, what we should stress is that the institution of punishment helps the child understand the drama of salvation in which God demands punishment for human sinfulness and allows his own Son to bear that punishment.

Just as Christian children need to see some sheep every now and then to help them understand certain passages in the Bible, they need to know from personal experience what punishment is and how it serves to deal with wrongdoing in a way that allows us to leave our evil deeds behind as we get on with life. And so, when we punish our children, we must help them to see not just their own

waywardness (which often gets too much emphasis) but also the grace of God as it reaches out to fallen man and tries to restore him to a state of righteousness. In other words, we must help them understand how patience, consideration and love are the very foundation for punishment. The tendency to regard punishment as a mere expression of irritation and anger is not only humanly wrong; it is theologically mistaken.

In summary, then, we punish (and are punished) not just because punishment is better than "fixing" and more in tune with our status as human beings, as moral creatures who are able to respond to criticism and moral norms, but especially because punishment is God's chosen way of dealing with us. And so we need a high view of punishment in the Christian community.

Why, then, do we dislike administering punishment? (I take it that you are like me in this respect: it gives me no pleasure whatsoever to punish my own children or to discipline students.) We dislike it because there is something frightening about standing in God's place. If I were possessed of perfect righteousness, I would punish with a clearer mind and conscience than I am normally able to muster. But I am as much a sinner, I fear, as the person I punish. Yet, sinner though I be, I am also created in God's image, and mandated as an adult human being and a father and a teacher to stand in his place, and -- breathtaking as it sounds -- to do his will in upholding what is right. Like the magistrate, I do not bear the sword in vain. (Perhaps I could better speak here of the rod.) Still, I use it with a heavy heart, and I long for the time when sin will be definitively behind us, when there will be no more tears and no more need for punishment. May that day come quickly! *[END]*