

Does God Punish Sinners?

Letter to a prisoner

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Dear in Christ I'm very glad we had a discussion about Deuteronomy and about God and punishment. It is very common for people to believe that God is a punisher. This is absolutely not true, but it is very prevalent in our society, so it is a hard thing for people to not believe.

Sometimes I think we look at God as we look at ourselves. We know that most people will punish wrongdoing. Certainly, your institution basically has as its mandate to punish those whom they think have committed crimes. We tend easily toward anger and bitterness and remembering wrongs. It is natural for the fallen man to think of God in the same way he thinks of himself, so it makes sense that we would think that God is a punisher. All of the Roman and Greek gods were cruel and punished. All of the pagan gods are cruel and punish. They are reflections of our own character.

God made us in His image in order to obtain His likeness¹. An application of this fundamental dogmatic truth² is that we should reflect God's character and *not think* that God reflects our character. God made us to become like Him. We do not reflect His image very effectively because of our sins.

Sin has peculiar ability in every case - to put it crudely, *sin makes us stupid. Sin makes us confused. Sin makes us believe delusions about ourselves and about the world and about others and even about God.*

You ask a very important question in your letter: **"I know you said God loves us, but how does He show it or prove it?"** The short answer is that He proves it by giving us His grace- that is - His presence in our life. The longer answer is that He helps us to overcome sin because when there is sin we do not feel Him in our life. This is why the Christian life emphasizes the following of the commandments and repentance. It is because a man who has sins is not able to see God or know Him. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

I think that there are hints in our own life experience that God is not a punisher but that He is a lover of mankind and wants to give us the best – that is – Himself.

One of these hints is that we call God Father. If a person in this life experiences a good father he knows a man that loves him without conditions and would never abandon him and would never punish him. A good father does not punish his child – he chastises him and corrects him in order to help him. I think punishment is really just to exact retribution on a person. God never does that.

We also, from our own experience, may have loved someone so completely that we could never imagine harming them even if they did something to harm us. This experience is a reflection for us of God's love toward us. His love is more perfect and can never be changed whereas our love can become corrupted.

Your own experience in prison may have shown you that mothers very rarely abandon their sons, or at least, mothers are more likely to maintain contact with their sons in prison no matter what their sons have done. The love of a mother for her son is often stronger than that of father. I think this is because there is a very spiritual connection between a mother and a son or daughter. That child once lived within the mother, and there is a connection that of father does not have. The church understands this connection between a mother and her child and therefore understands that the Mother of God, the Theotokos, loved her son completely and because of her connection to her son has great boldness in addressing Him about the needs of others. This is why we boldly go to the Theotokos and ask her for her prayers. It is not because she is superior to us – far from it! She is made of the same stuff as we are and was mortal just as we are. Her Son raised her up and because of her

great love and humility and because she is his mother He listens to her very closely. Certainly, she is superior to us in holiness but not in essence, since she is just a human being as we are just human beings.

Our prayers show very clearly that God is not a punisher. I gave you the kneeling prayers and they have a lot of references to the abyss of God's mercy. I will include some of those references here.

“Do Thou, O Effulgence of the Father, immutable and immovable Image of His essence and nature, the Fountain of wisdom and grace, open the lips of even me a sinner and teach me how I ought to pray and what needs to pray for; for Thou knowest the great multitude of my sins, but Thy loving-kindness will overcome their immensity³. For, behold, in fear I stand before Thee, **having cast the despair of my soul into the abyss of Thy mercy**⁴: do Thou pilot my life, O Thou Who by a word dost direct all creation by the unutterable might of Thy wisdom, O peaceful Haven of the storm-tossed, and cause me to know the way wherein I should walk.”⁵

“Remember, O Lord, our weakness, and destroy us not with our iniquities; but deal with our humility in great mercy, that having escaped the darkness of sin, we may walk in the day of righteousness, and having put on the armor of light, we may abide unassailed from all snares of the evil one, and with boldness glorify Thee, the only true God and Lover of mankind.”

“Accept us who fall down before Thee and shout: We have sinned; on Thee were we cast from the womb, from our mother's womb, Thou art our God. But inasmuch as our days were consumed in vanity, we were bereft of Thy help, we deprived ourselves of any defense; but **presuming upon Thy compassions**, we cry: The sins of our youth and ignorances remember not, and from our secret sins cleanse us, and cast us not away in the time of our old age, when our strength faileth; forsake us not even until we return again into the earth, vouchsafe us to return unto Thee; attend to us through Thy good favour, and grace; **measure our transgressions with Thy compassions, set the abyss of Thy compassions against the multitude of our sins.**”⁶

If you look at the prayer book and learn of our other prayers, you will see many other examples where *we declare that we are terrible sinners but also that God is a greater lover of man than we are sinners.*

I think we understand God's mercy more because our prayers are so humble and they declare our sinfulness. Many people profess to believe in Christ but very rarely profess their sinfulness. We remember our sinfulness every day, and it causes us to have fear. The fear of God is *not* being afraid that God will hurt us. The fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom, is to remember that we are sinners and that God loves us and to fear that we would do anything that would be displeasing to Him and not worthy of his great love for us. This is similar to the fear that a son should have that he might displease his father. He is not afraid that his father would kill him or cast him out of the house because of something that he does but rather that his father would be sad.

Why do you think the parable about the unjust debtor is so effective? In that parable the debtor owes a great sum to his Lord and his Lord forgives him the debt. This of course is teaching us that our sins are immense, but God's love for us is greater and He forgives easily. The debtor goes away and puts a fellow servant in prison for a trifling debt. Anybody who reads this parable knows that the debtor is doing a cruel and terrible thing. He was cruel because he did not remember God's mercy towards him. God gives us his mercy precisely so that we would learn to be merciful. If we are merciful, we become like God, and if we are like God then we can be united to him and know Him. Gratitude towards God because of our knowledge that we are great sinners and he still forgives us and helps us should be a major force which causes us to love not only our friends and our neighbors but even our enemies.

Since God teaches in the Gospel that we should love our enemies, this is another proof that He is a lover of men and not a punisher. Most people in society think that their enemies should be crushed and not loved. The Christian Gospel teaches that we are to love our enemies.

You mentioned something about the Jewish and Islamic concept of God. The Jewish concept of God began being steeped in paganism, and God gradually brought them to a better understanding of Him. That concept is fully matured in the Christian church. The Moslems on the other hand believe in a God that is much like the pagan God. He is somewhat aloof, and he rewards, but only when we do what he tells us to do. The Moslem does not hear that God loves him but rather that he is merciful. His understanding of mercy is that God could judge him but refrains because he has been placated. The Christian concept of mercy is that God is love and love always gives of itself fully to everyone without prejudice. God's mercy is not that He refrains from judgment, but that He loves us and wants to help us in every way to know Him.

To further answer your question of "how does God prove to us that he loves us and is not a punisher of us" is that *we learn by experience*. If a man loves his enemies and does not judge them or punish them but rather helps them, he is acting like God acts and through experience comes to understand God.

We talked a lot about how the Scripture uses words like God's judgment or his wrath or anger. This is because the men that God was addressing could not understand anything except wrath and judgment and anger. The gods that the Jews were aware of that were around them, that is, of course the demons, were cruel and capricious, and demanded to be placated by offerings. Since this is all that the Jews understood God used some of this language, but He transformed it, slowly. The greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind. No pagan would think that The next greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourself. Since a pagan believed in a god who was cruel and exacted punishment, he had no inclination to love his neighbor as himself, since **a man naturally aspires to be like his god even when he has created that god**. The Christian way of life is revolutionary. it is even more revolutionary than the Jewish way of life which was completely different than the way the pagan tribes were living.

It takes a lot of time to unlearn the bad lessons we learned as children. The more you love, the more you understand God's love. The more you forgive, the more you understand God's forgiveness. The more you struggle against sin, the more your heart is to the presence of God within it.

You asked another question in your letter: **"When you said God loves us, why does He love us?"** The answer to this is very simple, although difficult to understand. It is precisely because He is God. God by His nature loves. The Scripture explains this very simply by just saying that "God is love". The full context of this dogmatic statement is important: "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." (1 John 4:8) This tells you the solution to your conundrum. If you want to learn who God is and be sure that he is not a punisher, you must love. The solution to everything is to love.

May God bless you and help you in all things.

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¹ Genesis 1:26-27 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (27) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

² There are two fundamental, dogmatic truths, upon which all of the Gospel, and every other dogma and practice in the Christian church is based: 1. God is. 2 God made man in His image, in order to obtain His likeness, because of love. See: [Catechetical Letter 1 First things: God He Who is; The Trinity](#)

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/catechetical-letter-01_2015+first-things+god-he-who-is-the-trinity.html

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SYNOPSIS: All of our catechetical letters will explain what and why we believe and how we should live because of this belief. All our dogma and practice is morally based, because all of it originates with God, Who is good. First things: God He Who is; The Trinity. It is appropriate to start at the beginning when explaining something. We are attempting to write concise catechetical letters about the Orthodox Christian faith, and we will start at the beginning. ... Actually, we will start before the beginning. Before all things, there was God...

[Catechetical Letter 2: Who is Man? Why was He created. What are the implications?](#)

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/catechetical-letter-02_2015+image-and-likeness.html

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³ A Prayer of Supplication & Intercession for All People, From the Second Kneeling Prayer, Vespers on Pentecost.”

⁴ St Isaac the Syrian compares all of the sins of all mankind born and yet to be born, if totaled together, with God's abyss of mercy as a grain of sand is to be compared to the ocean. When we sin, we should feel shame, but never despair. Despair is a lie of the devil. It is one of his most effective lies. The western "god" is not a merciful God, but he is an idol made by rational thinking. The true God is an abyss of mercy. We must know two things in order to be saved. We must know God and that He is and that He is an abyss of mercy. If we only know that, then we would sin without restraint. We should also know ourselves and compare ourselves to God and be ashamed when we act unworthy of His mercy. This engenders in us repentance.

⁵ A Prayer of Supplication & Intercession for All People. From the Second Kneeling Prayer, Vespers on Pentecost.

⁶ A Prayer of Intercession for All People From the First Kneeling Prayer, Vespers on Pentecost.