

# Discipline in the Christian College: Can It Be Redemptive?

by John Piper

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*John Piper explores the redemptive purpose of chastisement in Christian education, emphasizing its biblical foundations and practical applications.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:67

**Topics:** "Christian Discipline", "Redemptive Punishment"

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## Description

John Piper delivers a sermon addressing the question of whether various forms of chastisements in a Christian college can be an effective instrument of God's grace to save people from destruction and cultivate goodness. He explores the biblical perspective on discipline, emphasizing the redemptive use of chastisements by God in both the Old and New Testaments. Piper reflects on the biblical teachings regarding the family, government, and church's use of chastisements for the good of individuals, highlighting the importance of discipline in these spheres. He concludes that while a Christian college differs from these institutions, there are structural overlaps that justify the application of biblical principles of chastisement for redemptive purposes.

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## Transcript

A Message to Bethel College Counseling Staff

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### THE QUESTION

In order to understand the question, we must define at least two of the key terms more precisely. The term "discipline" may mean the rigorous training or instruction by which knowledge or character is inculcated into a disciple. Or it may refer to denying someone a pleasure or inflicting someone with pain in order to change their attitude or behavior when they have done wrong. This same ambiguity exists in the Hebrew word, *musar*, and in the Greek word, *paideia*. The reason the ambiguity exists throughout these languages is probably because in every culture effective training has always included some form of punishment for wrongdoing. In my own attempt to answer this question I am going to consider only the second definition of discipline, that is, chastisement.

The other term that needs clarification is the term "redemptive." I hesitate to use the term redemptive of any human action, since I believe God in Christ is the only Redeemer, that is, the only one who can pay the price to free us from sin and destruction. But I assume that what is meant here is that God often uses human instruments to apply the gracious redemption of Christ to other people. So that is the way I will use it here. Now, with these clarifications, the question I would like to try to answer is this: Can the use of various forms of chastisements in the Christian college be an effective instrument of God's grace to save people from destruction and to cultivate goodness?

I would add one other observation concerning this question. To keep it in its proper perspective we should realize that an equally valid question, and perhaps a more Biblical one, would be "Can leniency be redemptive?" Unless this question is posed alongside the first one it seems as if the deck is already stacked against the redemptive power of chastisement, when in fact, it may be that the burden of proof should lie on those who promote the withholding of chastisements rather than on those who promote their use. Romans 2:4,5 says, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." Clearly then, one form of redemptive effort is kindness and leniency. But just as clearly from this text that effort often fails and results in greater hardness of heart. So there should be no assumption from the outset that leniency is effective whereas chastisements are questionable. They are both questionable.

#### GOD'S REDEMPTIVE USE OF CHASTISEMENTS

We learn from both the Old Testament and the New Testament that God in his mercy inflicts pain upon his people for their good. In what follows I will try to give several examples of his chastisements and the benefits which they bring.

One of the main points of the book of Job is that God speaks to man for his good through affliction. This comes out especially in the speech of Elihu in chapters 32-37, perhaps most clearly in 36:15 where Elihu says, "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity." When God is finally through with Job, Job says (42:6), "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." The chastisements of God had had their salutary effect on Job. He had recognized the lurking sin of pride in his heart that had raised its ugly head during his illness. But now, through affliction, his ear had been opened to the truth, and he had been delivered by his affliction. (See 2 Cor. 12:7-10 for a similar view of affliction in the life of the Apostle Paul.)

In Psalm 119:67 and 71 the psalmist says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep thy word ... it is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." Here the psalmist rejoices that God had graciously done what needed to be done in order to keep him from going astray and help him obey the statutes of the Lord.

Isaiah shows that God's chastening can have the redemptive effect of causing people to pray: "O Lord, in distress they sought thee, they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them" (Is. 26:16).

In 1 Cor. 11:29-32 Paul gives a surprising interpretation of some of the sickness and death in the Christian community at Corinth. He relates it to their abuses of the Lord's Supper, and says, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world."

The meaning of this text seems to be that the sickness and even the death of some of the Christians at Corinth was a chastening judgment from the Lord which was gracious in the sense that it was intended to keep the church from being condemned. This shows, incidentally, how limited our perspective is when we pass judgment upon God for a person's sickness or death, not knowing that God may have rescued that person from condemnation by chastening him in this way.

Finally, there is the very familiar text from Heb. 12:5-11. Here the writer reminds the believers that they may expect a very severe struggle in their Christian faith that might even result in the shedding of their blood. Then he interprets this affliction in terms of God's discipline or chastisement. He says, "And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are reprov'd by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.' It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." The main point of this text is that all the afflictions that come upon a Christian as he is walking in faith are the loving chastisements of his father and have the supremely redemptive purpose of bringing the Christian to share the holiness of God and to yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

It would be possible to gather many more such texts, but these will suffice to show that, at least in God's relationship to his people, chastisements can be and indeed are intended to be instruments of God's grace to save us from destruction and cultivate in us his holiness.

#### IS THE USE OF CHASTISEMENTS GOD'S PREROGATIVE ALONE?

There are some things that God does that man most definitely should not do because he is not God. Is the use of chastisements in the activity of redemption one of them? It seems to me that there are at least three spheres of human life in which the scriptures teach that God has ordained for men to use chastisements for the good of other people.

##### The Family

Within the family God has ordained that parents chastise their children for wrongdoing in order that they might come to know what is evil and what is good. For example, there are many proverbs which give voice to the accumulated divine wisdom of the people of God and instruct as follows: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (13:24). "Discipline your son while there is hope; do not set your heart on his destruction" (19:18). "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (22:15). "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with a rod you will save his life from Sheol" (23:13,14). "Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart" (29:17). It seems clear from these texts that God wills for parents to use chastisements in order to do good to their children. Specifically, the scripture teaches that it is like hating your child not to chastise him. It is like setting your heart on his destruction if you never punish him. But when chastisements are properly used, it is like driving folly out of his heart and will save his soul from Sheol. Therefore, it seems that at least in the

sphere of the family, God has ordained that not he alone use chastisements in the sanctification of his people, but that parents also should employ chastisements as one of the means by which they work as God's agents in saving their children from destruction and cultivating in them the goodness which God desires.

## Government

The New Testament teaches that God has ordained the existence of governing authorities for the good of society, and specifically has entrusted to these governing authorities the right to use force and punishment in the execution of justice. For example, in Rom. 13:3,4 Paul says, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer." (See also 1 Peter 2:13,14.) It appears, therefore, that God has ordained for human governing authorities to use chastising measures in the performance of their duty to maintain order in society for man's good. This text, to be sure, is different from the ones concerning the family, because nothing is said here about the sword being redemptive for the person punished. The point, rather, is that society as a whole is benefited when governing authorities exercise their punitive powers justly.

## Church

The New Testament teaches that within the church there is also an appropriate use of chastisement for the good of erring members. First of all, Jesus teaches in Mt. 18:15-17 that after several unsuccessful efforts to regain a disobedient brother, there may come a time when you should regard him as "a gentile and a tax-collector." That is, there may come a time when a chastisement of ostracism is appropriate. This is spelled out for us in greater detail in the letters of Paul. For example, in 1 Cor. 5 a man is sleeping with his step-mother and boasting about it (v. 2). In this situation of blatant and unrepentant sexual immorality, Paul says, "When you are assembled and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (v. 3-5). This process may seem strange to us today, but the least we can say is that within the church part of apostolic teaching is that the law of love did not exclude this kind of tough chastisement. In fact, it seems clear from the last clause of this quote that the intention of the excommunication is for the guilty man's ultimate good, "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." It may well be that the person referred to in 2 Cor. 2:6 is this same immoral man who was ejected from the church. But here, sometime later, Paul says, "for such a one this punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, for he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him" (vv. 6-8). This seems to confirm that the ultimate purpose of the excommunication was repentance. If there has been a genuine change of heart Christians should always be ready to receive back into fellowship an erring brother or sister.

A similar view of church discipline seems to be in view in 2 Thess. 3:10-15. "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: if anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." Here again we see the possibility that love may take the form of an ostracizing warning. Indeed, it may take the

form of refusing to feed a brother who consistently mooches off of other people and refuses to work. Finally, in 1 Tim. 1:19,20, Paul deals with certain people who have rejected conscience and made shipwreck of their faith. He says, "by rejecting conscience certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme." Whatever this strange delivering over to Satan is (perhaps a prayer that God would use sickness to bring the person to repentance) it is plain that within the loving Christian community there comes a point when the right thing to do is to administer some form of chastisement.

## REFLECTION ON THE BIBLICAL TEACHING

Of course, none of this teaching relates explicitly to the Christian college in the Biblical context, because there was no such thing. Therefore, we must reflect upon this material and the situation in which we find ourselves in Christian Education, and ask whether or not these truths of the Bible lead us to a positive answer to our question, Can the use of various chastisements in a Christian college be an instrument of God's grace to save people from destruction and to cultivate goodness? I would argue that even though a Christian college is not identical to the institutions of government, family, or church, there is sufficient structural overlap between these three institutions and the educational institution to justify applying the Biblical principle that duly administered chastisements can be redemptive and should be employed. While a Christian college is not synonymous with the institution of government, nevertheless, there is the necessity of governance within the institution in order to maintain the order and atmosphere which promotes the good and just ends of the institution. Certain attitudes and behaviors can destroy this order and atmosphere and therefore the duly appointed authorities within the institution are, by analogy, somewhat in the position of the authorities in government. While the Christian college is not identical to the institution of the family, there are explicit and implicit expectations from the parents of the young people that the educational effort of the institution will continue the training in righteousness begun at home. And while the Christian college is not synonymous with the church, it does, in analogy to the church, attempt to structure life by Christian principles and a Christian spirit. On the basis of these similarities in structure and purpose between the Christian college and the institutions of government, family and church, it seems to me unjustified to argue that in the Christian college the appropriate use of chastisements for the good of the community and for the chastised individuals is wrong or inappropriate.

The assumption that I have not made explicit up to this point is that the use of chastisements is only one form of discipline. It will, of course, be preceded and mingled with all the other Christian forms of patience and long-suffering and forgiveness and admonition. Chastisement will never come in the form of a knee-jerk retributive reaction. The extreme form of chastisement, namely, expulsion from school, will surely be applied only where there is recalcitrance and a manifest unwillingness to perform a genuine turnaround.

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