

Q. Will God allow our disobedience and idolatry to go unpunished?

A. **No**, every sin is against the sovereignty, holiness, and goodness of God, and against his righteous law, and **God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them in His just judgment both in this life, and in the life to come.**

Text:

Ephesians 5:6 – “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

It seems that there were some people teaching the believers that God in His grace was “winking at” sin, and that it was not such a big deal if they were living in unrepentant sin.

When we look at the immediate context of this passage, we see that a major part of Paul’s message clearly taught and warned that a holy and just God must punish our sin and idolatry, and that to be outside of God’s kingdom was to be under His righteous wrath:

- **Ephesians 5:5** (LSB) – “For this you may know with certainty, that no one sexually immoral or impure or greedy, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (emphasis mine)

Because God is holy, says Paul to the Galatians,

- “Stop being deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who is sowing to his own flesh, from the flesh will reap corruption, but the one who is sowing to the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” (**Galatians 6:7-8**, my translation, emphasis mine)

The reason God must judge us is because God *is* a righteous, holy, and perfect Judge:

- **Genesis 18:25** (NET) – “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked

are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice¹?” (emphasis mine)

- **Psalm 7:11** (ESV) – “God is a righteous judge², and a God that feels indignation every day.”
- **Psalm 9:7-8** (ESV) – “But the LORD sits enthroned forever; He has established His throne for justice, and He judges the world with righteousness; He judges the peoples with uprightness.”
- **Psalm 50:6** (LSB) – “And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge.”
- **Psalm 67:4** (ESV) – “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You judge³ the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.”
- **Psalm 94:2** (ESV) – “Rise up, O Judge of the earth; repay the proud what they deserve!”
- **Isaiah 33:22** (LSB) – “For Yahweh is our Judge, Yahweh is our lawgiver, Yahweh is our King; He will save us.”
- **John 8:50** (ESV) – “Yet I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks it, and He is the Judge.”
- **2 Timothy 4:8** (NLT) – “And now the prize awaits me – the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of His return.” (emphasis mine)
- **Hebrews 12:23** (NLT) – “You have come to the assembly of God’s firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God Himself, who is the Judge over all things.” (emphasis mine)
- **James 4:12** (LSB) – “There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you who judge your neighbor.”

¹ This is a wonderful literal translation. ESV, CSB = “What is just?”; NET, NLT, NIV = “What is right?”

² This is a good translation of the participle. It could also be translated, “God judges righteously.”

³ The verb is an imperfect, which is why the LSB translates it, “for You will judge...” (cf. the imperfect in 96:10 is translated rightly as a future). However, all other English translations are not wrong to translate it as a gnomic present, as is common to do when translating Hebrew poetry.

- **James 5:9** (ESV) – “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.” (emphasis mine)⁴

In Hebrew, as in English, the word “judge” (שׁוֹפֵט, *shophet*) comes from the word “justice” (מִשְׁפָּט, *mishpat*). Thus, as Judge, God acts in accordance with justice. And the standard of God’s justice is His own perfect, holy and righteous character,⁵ which He has revealed to us in His Law.

Since this is so, Abraham’s words take on a whole new terror. There is only one Judge, and He will – must!! – judge righteously – in accordance with His own righteous standard and character.

That God judges *others* who have wronged us or sinned against us can give us great satisfaction that justice will – must – be meted out.⁶

Because the Bible teaches that we are all unrighteous and guilty sinners who have broken God’s righteous Law,⁷ it is a “fearful thing” to fall into the hands of *this* just Judge (**Hebrews 10:31**).

Eternal Punishment

As unsavory as it may be to our natural tastes, the Bible clearly, unequivocally, and unashamedly teaches that there is a place of eternal punishment where those who have not had their sins forgiven by Christ will dwell in everlasting torment.

- **Daniel 12:2** (LSB) – “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to reproach *and* everlasting contempt.”
- **Matthew 25:46** (ESV) – “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.:

⁴ This is clearly an article of *par excellance*. There are certainly many other judges in this world. However, there is really only one true, righteous, and perfect Judge.

⁵ In the words of Shai Linne, “He is the standard by which all righteousness [is] measured.”

⁶ See, for example, **Romans 12:17-19**; **Hebrews 10:30** (both alluding to Deuteronomy 32:35)

⁷ We have already dealt with the doctrine of universal inherited sin from Adam and cannot deal with that again.

- **John 5:28-29** (LSB) – “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”
- **Romans 6:23** (LSB) – “For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
 - Though “eternal” is not used with “death,” it is implied by parallelism with “life” that *both* are modified with the adjective “eternal.” That is, though the wages of sin indeed includes physical and temporal death, it also culminates in ultimate separation from the life and blessing of God.⁸
- **Revelation 14:9-12**⁹ (LSB) – “Then another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, and he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His rage, and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.’ Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.”

Incorporating God’s Absolute Justice in Evangelism

When we understand God’s immutable holiness and commitment to perfect righteousness when He judges the world, it should cause us to plead with the lost and unconverted to flee to Christ:

- John the Baptist in **Luke 3:15-18** (cf. Matthew 3:7-12)

⁸ This is clearly God’s warning to Adam and Eve in the Garden in **Genesis 2:17**. Literally, the Hebrew reads, “dying you will die.” Though they did not physically die immediately after their sin, they were spiritually separated from God’s presence and blessing, and needed God to “cover” their sin before they could be restored to fellowship with Him. Those who die without God’s atoning sacrifice to cover them will forever be separated from His blessing presence. This is eternal death.

⁹ Cf. **Revelation 20:11-15**. Though “eternal” is not used, it is entirely legitimate, in light of the rest of Scripture, to see the “lake of fire” as a picture of eternal judgment, much as the unending “smoke” in **14:11**, which reminds us that we must be careful of interpreting Revelation sequentially. John is not writing an epistle or narrative, but writing in apocalyptic, which loves to look at the same event from different angles/pictures and use repetition for emphasis.

- Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:10-11, 20; Acts 24:24-25**
- Jesus in all His teachings and warnings and parables
- Ezekiel in **Ezekiel 3** (esp. vv.18ff.)
- YHWH in **Ezekiel 18** (esp. vv.30-32)
- The angels in **Genesis 19:15-17**
- Noah in **2 Peter 2:5**
- **Jude 23** (LSB) – “and for others, save, snatching them out of the fire.”

Some verses to meditate upon before evangelizing:

- **Psalm 33:5** (ESV) – “He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.”
- **Psalm 89:14** (ESV) – “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before You.”
- **Proverbs 1:7** (ESV) – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction¹⁰.”
- **Proverbs 9:10** (ESV) – “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”
- **Proverbs 11:21** (ESV) – “Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished.”
- **Proverbs 16:5** (ESV) – “Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished.”
- **Psalm 2:10-12** (LSB) – “So now, O kings, show insight; take warning, O judges of the earth. Serve Yahweh with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in *the* way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!”
- **1 Peter 4:5-6** (ESV) – “But they will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are [now] dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”

¹⁰ LSB = “discipline”

Questions for Reflection

1. If believers have had all their sins punished in Christ, are they “punished” when they sin? (Better: “disciplined/chastened”, cf. **Heb. 12:5-11**, ESV)
 - Cf. Owens’ thoughts on “double payment” (i.e., God cannot punish a sin twice [i.e., once on Christ and once on the sinner]).¹¹
 - Owens – sin may disrupt the believer’s communion with God, but never his or her union with Christ.
 - WCF, 11.5: “Although they never can fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of His countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.”

2. Why is it a mercy that there are immediate (and often painful) consequences to our sins?
 - **Proverbs 19:18** (LSB) – “Discipline your son while there is hope, and do not direct your soul to put him to death.” (emphasis mine)
 - **Psalms 119:67** (ESV) – “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.”
 - **Psalms 119:71** (ESV) – “It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes.”
 - **Proverbs 20:30** (ESV) – “Blows that wound cleanse away evil; strokes make clean the innermost parts.”
 - **Ecclesiastes 8:11** (LSB) – “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are fully given to do evil.”
 - **Proverbs 19:25** (ESV) – “Strike a scoffer, and the simple will learn prudence; reprove a man of understanding, and he will gain knowledge.”

¹¹ Wayne Grudem does an excellent job dealing with this as well in chapter 24, section 5 (a, b) of his *Systematic Theology*.

3. How is God just to mete out eternal punishment for temporal sins?

- Edwards' concept that the gravity and severity of a sin is ultimately measured by the dignity and worth of the one (or the law) which has been sinned against.¹²

4. How can knowing that no sin will go unpunished affect how we respond to others who sin against us?

- **Romans 12:17-21** (ESV) – “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to¹³ the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.¹⁴ To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.¹⁵ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

- Cf. Hebrews 10:30; Proverbs 20:22

- **2 Samuel 3:39**

5. Have Christians today lost sight of the hatefulness of sin? If so, how can reflecting upon God's just judgment on sin provide a remedy for this?

- **Proverbs 20:8** (ESV) – “A king who sits on a throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.”
 - Longman: “This is a picture of the just and wise king, who dissipates evil through deliberate application of law in his kingdom. Because of his just determination of law, criminal elements are fragmented and unable to coalesce into a substantial threat to order. The reference to the king's eyes may reflect the idea that nothing escapes his notice.”¹⁶

¹² For e.g., see his sermon, “The Eternity of Hell's Torments” (<https://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/eternity.htm>)

¹³ LSB = “leave room for”

¹⁴ Quoting **Deuteronomy 32:35**

¹⁵ Referencing **Proverbs 25:21-22**

¹⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 378.

- Cf. **20:26** (ESV) – “A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.”
- **Proverbs 11:31** (ESV) – “If the righteous is repaid on earth how much more the wicked and the sinner!”
- **1 Peter 1:17** (NLT) – “And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favorites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of Him during your time as “foreigners in the land”.”
- **1 Peter 4:17** (ESV) – “For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”

6. How does meditating on God’s just wrath foster heart-felt gratitude and appreciation for the gospel, and worship of Christ?

- See especially **Isaiah 53; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:1-3; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 3:18.**

Soli Deo Gloria!!