

Discipline vs. Punishment

Discipline

Discipline encompasses the concepts of correction, punishment, and education. Discipline may be given by parents, Christians, or even God.

Concept Summary

Several terms are used to indicate the idea of discipline in the Bible. These terms, both the Hebrew and Greek, portray the ideas of discipline, correcting, or training, and are all used in various contexts to indicate the idea that one is being instructed or brought back to the way that is right. The major terms in the OT are יָכַח (*yākah*, “to rebuke”; 2 Sam 7:14), תּוֹכַחַת (*tōkahat*, “rebuke”; Prov 15:5), יָסַר (*yāsar*, “to be disciplined”; Deut 8:5), and מוֹסָר (*mūsār*, “discipline”; Prov 15:5). These terms for discipline are common in the Wisdom books like Proverbs or Job, because wisdom teaching emphasizes the purpose of discipline as encouraging a return to correct behavior (Job 5:17; Prov 3:12; 19:25). The NT uses a variety of terms as well, including νουθεσία (*nouthesia*, “admonition”; 1 Cor 10:11), παιδεία (*paideia*, “training”; Eph 6:4), γυμνάζω (*gymnazō*, “to train”; 1 Tim 4:7), and ὑπωπιάζω (*hypōpiazō*, “to wear down”; 1 Cor 9:27). Several other terms related to these Greek words occur in the NT.

Theological Overview

In Scripture, the idea of discipline generally ... [Read more »](#)

Mediano results

Key Passages

Pr 3:11–12

My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Pr 13:24

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.

1 Co 5:1–7

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from...

1 Co 9:24–27

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as...

1 Ti 5:20

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

Heb 12:3–11

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?...

See Also

Genesis 18:16–33

Exodus 21:12–27

Leviticus 16:1–34; 23:26–32; 24:10–23; 26:14–46

Numbers 6:1–21; 29:7–11

Deuteronomy 4:15–40; 8:1–20; 11:1–32

1 Samuel 2:22–4:1; 7:2–17; 10:17–27; 24:1–22; 26:1–25

2 Samuel 7:1–17

1 Kings 1:1–27; 11:26–40

2 Chronicles 6:12–42; 7:12–22; 18:28–19:3; 33:10–17

Ezra 10:1–17

Nehemiah 4:1–23; 9:22–38; 10:28–39

Job 5:1–27; 31:1–40; 36:1–37:24

Psalms 1:1–6; 6:1–10; 38:1–22; 39:1–13; 50:1–23; 81:1–16; 89:19–37; 94:1–23; 107:1–22; 118:1–29; 119:65–80; 141:1–10

Proverbs 3:1–12; 5:1–23; 6:6–11; 6:20–7:5; 10:13, 17; 12:1; 13:1, 18, 24; 14:3; 15:5, 10, 12, 28, 31–32; 16:22, 32; 17:10–11, 27; 19:18, 25, 29; 20:30; 21:11, 17, 23; 22:15; 23:1–3, 13–14; 25:16, 28; 26:3; 27:5–6, 22; 28:23; 29:1, 11, 15, 17–19, 21; 31:10–31

Ecclesiastes 7:1–8:1

Isaiah 26:1–19; 30:18–26; 43:22–28; 48:1–11

Jeremiah 7:28–8:3; 8:18–9:16; 10:17–25; 11:18–23; 14:1–18; 30:1–24; 31:15–22; 35:1–19; 46:27–28

Lamentations 3:22–42

Ezekiel 4:1–17; 44:10–31

Daniel 1:1–21; 10:1–9

Hosea 5:1–15; 7:11–16; 10:1–15

Joel 2:12–17

Amos 4:6–13

Haggai 2:15–19

Zechariah 7:1–7

Matthew 4:1–11; 5:27–30, 38–42; 9:14–17; 10:34–39; 11:16–19; 13:44–46; 16:24–26; 18:6–11; 19:1–30; 26:36–46

Mark 2:18–22; 8:34–38; 9:42–48; 10:28–31

Luke 1:11–17; 2:36–38; 7:31–35; 9:23–26; 14:25–35; 18:18–27; 21:34–38; 22:39–46

John 15:1–11

Acts 2:40–47; 4:32–37; 10:9–16; 20:17–38; 24:22–27

Romans 6:1–14; 8:12–17; 12:1–2; 13:11–15:6

1 Corinthians 4:14–5:13; 6:12–7:9; 7:25–9:27; 10:23–11:1, 27–34; 13:1–13

2 Corinthians 2:3–11; 4:16–18; 8:8–15; 10:1–11; 12:7–10; 13:1–10

Galatians 5:16–6:5, 11–15

Ephesians 6:1–4

Philippians 3:12–16

Colossians 3:1–11; 3:18–4:1

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8; 5:1–11

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

1 Timothy 1:18–20; 2:8–3:7; 4:6–11; 5:1–2, 17–25

2 Timothy 1:3–7; 2:1–4:5

Titus 1:5–2:15; 3:9–11

Hebrews 12:1–11

James 1:19–20; 3:1–12

1 Peter 1:13–21; 2:11–12; 3:18–4:11; 5:5–11

2 Peter 1:5–11; 2:18–22

2 John 7–11

3 John 9–12

Jude 20–23

Revelation 3:14–22; 14:1–5

PUNISHMENT A negative consequence of wrongdoing that, in the Old Testament, often displays God’s equity or convey something about His judgment.

Types of Punishments

Biblical punishments can be organized into four major categories: financial, imprisonment, corporal, and capital.

Financial Penalties

- Payments are required for a wide range of reasons, including:
 - causing an injury that leads to lost time/wages (Exod 21:18–19);
 - causing premature labor (Exod 21:22–23);
 - ransoming the life of a negligent ox-owner whose ox has gored a person to death (the law initially calls for capital punishment; Exod 21:28–32);
 - replacing an animal who died due to one’s negligence (Exod 21:33–36);
 - making restitution for damages after starting a fire (Exod 22:6);
 - taking a woman’s virginity (Exod 22:16–17; Deut 22:13–19).
- Double restitution is due when someone breaks trust with a neighbor over stolen property (Exod 22:7–15).
- Double, fourfold, or fivefold restitution is required for stealing, selling, and/or killing an animal (the amount depends on the circumstances Exod 22:1–4).
- A transgression offering might include a sort of financial reparation (Lev 5:15–6:7).

Imprisonment

- Kings imprisoned people who had drawn their wrath (1 Kgs 22:27; Jer 37:15; Luke 3:20).

- Sometimes debtors would be sentenced to prison until they had fulfilled payment (Matt 5:25; 18:30).
- At times, imprisonment was the sentence for crimes of public unrest (Acts 16:23); however, Roman citizens could not be imprisoned without a fair trial (Acts 16:37).

Corporal Punishment

- Mutilation (Deut 25:11–12; Lev 24:19–20; Exod 22:22–25) within biblical practice is far more restrained than in the general ancient Near East (see below: “Comparison with Extrabiblical Law Codes”). Scripture records the gouging of eyes or cutting off of thumbs or toes for military crimes, although these punishments were not legislated (compare Judg 1:6–7).
- Flogging (Deut 22:18; 25:1–3) was used for a variety of crimes. This practice involved an instrument made of interwoven leather that might have included a metal, bone, or other sharp implement at the top to tear the skin. Because of the pain this inflicted, Provan suggests that the nickname of such an instrument was “scorpion” (compare 1 Kgs 12:11, 14; Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 104). The precise Old Testament use of flogging is not clear; in the New Testament period, Romans used it frequently to punish criminals (compare Acts 16:37–39; 22:24).
- Stocks were used in the Old Testament and the New Testament (Jer 20:2; 29:26; Acts 16:24). This involved placing an individual’s ankles, wrists, and head in a confined and contorted position.

Capital Punishment

- Stoning (Exod 19:13; Lev 24:14; Deut 22:20–21) seems to be used as the most common means of execution. It appears that the prosecutors/accusers were to throw the initial stones to demonstrate their own culpability in the person’s death (Deut 17:7). The practice of stoning had variations; at times, the criminal would be bound in some fashion or implanted in the ground, and stones would then be thrown upon him or her (Sanhedrin 6:1–4). Also, the individual might be taken outside the city (Phillips, *Criminal Law*, 25). At other times, the practice does not appear so formal (compare Acts 7:58).
- Shooting with an arrow (Exod 19:12–13) is prescribed as an option (along with stoning) for those who touched Mount Sinai, presumably because God’s presence resided there. In this case, the crucial requirement was to execute the offender without physical contact.
- Burning (Lev 20:14; 21:9) punished sexual promiscuity and often indicated the individual’s rebellion against God’s purposes. Because burning would prevent a proper burial, it completely eliminated the stigma of rebellion from the community (compare Lev 10:2; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 399). Thus, the punishment might have been seen not only in the means of death, but also in what happened after death (Hartley, *Leviticus*, 399; for an alternative view, see Rooker, *Leviticus*, 269; compare Gen 38:24).
- Beheading (2 Sam 16:9; 2 Kgs 6:31, 32) seems to have been reserved for crimes against a king. It was used in the New Testament times against Roman citizens as a more humane form of execution in comparison with crucifixion.
- Impaling, hanging, or crucifixion (Num 25:4; Deut 21:22–23) may all be linked, since the words for impaling (יָקַע, *yq’*), hanging (תָּלָה, *tlh*, κρεμάννυμι, *kremannymi*), and crucifixion (תָּלָה, *tlh*, ἀνασταυρόω, *anastauroō*) can be used interchangeably in Old Testament, Septuagint, and New Testament texts (compare Gen 40:19 with Josephus, *Antiquities* 2:73;

2 Sam 21:12 with Josephus, *Antiquities* 6:374). Biblical evidence suggests flexibility in how “hanging” was exactly carried out. The Hebrew term תלה (*tlh*) found in the law can refer to a variety of means (Deut 21:22–23). In certain cases, impaling or hanging leads to death (2 Sam 18:10; Esth 7:9); other times, it is a postmortem display (Gen 40:19; Josh 10:26; 2 Sam 21:12). The Hebrew terms can apply to suspending an individual from an object (hanging, compare 2 Sam 18:9) or to the placement of a wooden spike vertically through the criminal (impaling, compare Gen 40:19). The key elements are the public visibility of this display, its gruesome nature, and its deterrent effect (Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87). These factors connect the Old Testament practice with the New Testament practice of crucifixion, as Josephus attests (Esth 2:23; 5:14; 6:4; 7:9 with Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:208, 246, 280, 289; Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion,” 501; Yadin, “Peshar Nahum,” 2; Betz, “Jesus,” 6). Crucifixion was probably the worst possible punishment, and was feared by all (Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 37–38, 87). For further discussion about the methods of crucifixion, see this article: [Crucifixion](#).

- Various passages call for capital punishment without indicating any specific means (e.g., Exod 21:12–21; 21:29).

Relation to God’s Just Character

The emphasis within biblical law on God’s justice demonstrates the significance of punishments. This raises questions to the modern reader about God’s fairness. However, while the principle of “eye for an eye” may seem like gruesome retaliation, it actually denotes the concept of punishment in congruence to the crime (Exod 21:23–24; Lev 24:19–20; Deut 19:21). This restrains the ancient Near Eastern tendency to intensify the punishment (see below: “Comparison with Extrabiblical Law Codes”). Fairness defines the inner workings of the law:

- Financial penalties are levied against those who have taken from the productivity of others (Exod 21:18–19).
- Corporal punishment corresponds to the physical damage done to others, and was greatly limited (compare Lev 24:19–20; Deut 25:11–12; compare Hartley, *Leviticus*, 411).
- Some punishments contain limits to prevent abuse (Deut 25:1–3).
- The cities of refuge also evidence mercy for situations that were not premeditated (compare Exod 21:13; Num 35:9–15; Josh 20:1–9).
- Equity is seen across social lines as slaves are protected from certain abuses (Exod 21:27).

The fairness principle is at work even in questionable situations. For example, Deuteronomy 25:11–12 prescribes that a woman who touches a man’s genitals must have her hand cut off. Merrill argues that this situation describes emasculation (Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 328). This aligns with the context of the passage, which discusses levirate marriage and the continuation of a family. A woman who hinders another person’s ability to reproduce has committed a serious offense against another family. Thus, her own ability to be productive is destroyed. The law maintains a fair punishment with the crime. Another example may be the execution of children for rebellion. While severe, the law also contains restraint and equity (Deut 21:18–21). A trial before the elders ensured a form of due process, as opposed to allowing parents to order a child’s execution directly. While these punishments are extreme, they match the theological nature of the act. The Israelite system revolves around the justice of God. Punishments in the Bible display His holy disdain for sin and His equitable dealings with crimes.

Theological Implications

Because the nature of punishments displays God's justice, the use of various penalties in biblical narratives carries significant theological implications. Examples include the following:

- Rechab and Baanah, who are military leaders, murder Ish-bosheth (2 Sam 4:4–6). David executes them for their treachery against the Lord's anointed (2 Sam 4:12). He hangs them which, according to the law, signals that they are cursed by God (Deut 21:22–23). Parallel circumstances also place the deaths of the king of Ai, Absalom, Jezebel, the sons of Saul, and Haman in the light of God's judicial curse.
- David's response to Nathan's story matches the Old Testament law. For the theft and slaughter of a sheep, the guilty party was to pay fourfold (Exod 22:1–4). David was not initially aware that the parable targeted him (2 Sam 12:1–14). Some suggest that David paid with the life of four sons: the unnamed child, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah (Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 372).
- Christ's death was on a tree. In Old Testament law, no greater punishment existed for any crime, and the crowd would view His death as if He were under God's hatred. According to the Apostle Paul, however, Christ's death bears the curse for His people (Gal 3:13–14). Nonetheless, the stigma and shame of crucifixion remained a stumbling block for the Jews (1 Cor 1:23). For the Christian community, it was a mark of the perfect obedience of the Son (Phil 2:8).
- Stephen's stoning is consistent with the (albeit false) allegation of blasphemy (Acts 7:58; Lev 24:14).
- Paul recounts his suffering for Christ in terms of being flogged "40 minus one" (2 Cor 11:24). This refers to the law limiting floggings to 40 lashes (Deut 25:1–3). The apostle's point seems to be that he suffered some of the worst punishments in the law for crimes he did not commit because of his faithfulness to the Messiah.

Comparison with Extrabiblical Law Codes

Punishments in the Bible are fewer in variety and carried out more judiciously than in other contemporary law codes. Certain punishments are found in both the Code of Hammurabi and the Bible:

- financial penalties (Exod 21:18–19; Code of Hammurabi §203);
- flogging (Deut 25:1–3; Code of Hammurabi §202);
- burning (Lev 20:14; Code of Hammurabi §159);
- impaling (Deut 21:22–23; Code of Hammurabi §153).

Punishments in ancient Near Eastern law codes that are not found in biblical law include:

- drowning (Code of Hammurabi §155);
- dismemberment (Code of Hammurabi §218);
- castration (Middle Assyrian Law §15).

The severity of certain punishments differs between biblical and extrabiblical law codes. In many cases, biblical law restrains the extent of damage caused by a punishment. For example, a person cannot be flogged more than 40 times (Deut 25:1–3). In addition, the principle of *lex*

talionis (“an eye for an eye”; e.g., Exod 21:23–24) limits the severity of a punishment by insisting that the retribution fit the crime. This counteracted the general tendency of other law codes of the time to increase the retribution beyond the nature of the crime (Durham, *Exodus*, 324). The Bible applies mutilation, for instance, only to crimes in which one person has mutilated another (e.g., Lev 24:19–20); a woman who emasculated a man would have her hand cut off (Deut 25:11–12). In contrast, cuneiform sources have a much broader application of mutilation, including castration, throwing a person to the bees, and severing a lip, hand, or ear. They also call for mutilation on many more occasions than what the Bible allows (Middle Assyrian Laws §2.132; Code of Hammurabi §195; Hittite Law §2.19.92).

Biblical law applies its punishments with more impartiality than other legal systems. In extrabiblical law codes, only free people would receive fair or privileged treatment; the Bible makes no distinction (Hartley, *Leviticus*, 411; compare Code of Hammurabi §198–200). People of different social classes are regarded equally in the Bible when it comes to crime and punishment. While in certain cases, a master’s authority over his own slave was considered (compare Exod 21:21), Old Testament law does not punish slaves differently from free men (compare Code of Hammurabi §204–5). In the Code of Hammurabi, aiding a runaway slave was a capital offense, whereas the biblical law actually supports those who give sanctuary to runaway slaves ((Code of Hammurabi §16; Deut 23:15–16).

Although ancient Near Eastern law codes claim (like the Bible) to have divine authority, the purposes of extrabiblical legal systems differ from biblical statutes. Both sets of laws establish social order, justice, and some form of morality; however, the biblical system ties this to obedience and love for Yahweh (Deut 6:4–5). For Israel, the law was not merely a societal contract, but a reflection of spiritual affections; it was theological. As a result, punishments are more than just a way to enforce the law. They intentionally serve as an expression of God’s character.

ABNER CHOU¹

¹ Chou, A. (2016). [Punishment](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.