

Q&A – Penance isn't to punish, but to heal and strengthen

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Q. I kind of get the idea of going to confession. Jesus forgives all our sins. But then why do we have to do penance afterward? It seems like we still have to “pay” for forgiveness. Am I missing something?

A. That question is really insightful. I imagine that many of us have gone to confession and wondered where “for your penance, I would like you to . . .” fits into the concept that God’s love and forgiveness are free.

On the other hand, while confession might scare some people, others believe it is too easy. As a priest who hears confessions every day, some people will come into the confessional and confess sins for which they are genuinely sorry, and if I don’t give them a “big enough” penance, they get upset with me.

I understand this. I really do. I know what it is to go to confession and receive a penance that does not seem to be as significant as my sin. I am sometimes tempted to ask the priest if he heard everything!

But then I remember what the penance is for. It is absolutely not the “price” for my sin. The price of forgiveness for my sin is not praying a decade of the rosary or a few Our Fathers. My pride sometimes likes to think so (“I’m paying for this sin with my difficult penance!”), but that is not even remotely true.

The price of my sin is the life, death and resurrection of God himself. In Jesus Christ, God has paid my debt. Nothing less than that would suffice, and no one less than him could accomplish this.

Because of this, we know that the penance we do after confession is not connected to the price of forgiveness. But then why do we do it?

Dealing with consequences

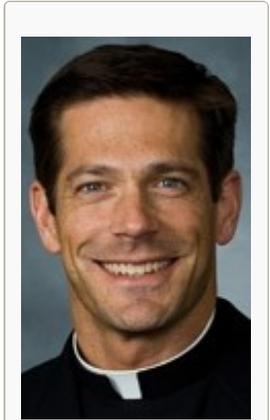
One place to start is the concept of “discipline” in the Bible. There are a number of places in the Scriptures where God has given his forgiveness to a person who cried out for mercy, but there were still consequences that followed from the sin; there are “after-effects” to our choices. These after-effects require that we engage in some sort of discipline.

There are a few things that we need to keep in mind when it comes to God’s discipline. The Letter to the Hebrews states that “whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges” (Hebrews 12:6).

One of the key elements of this passage is that, when it comes to God, discipline is relational. It is not arbitrary, nor is it based off of God’s lack of concern for his children. Rather, discipline that comes from God flows out of a profound relationship with God as our Father.

Reflect on this for a moment: Scripture goes on to describe the nature of this relationship and the discipline that flows from it. The author asks, “what father is there who does not discipline his son?”

The answer is essentially: a father who doesn’t care. God’s discipline is intended to reveal his love, not



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detract from it. I think that many of us might be tempted to prefer comfortable distance compared with demanding intimacy. Furthermore, this discipline is oriented toward growth. It is oriented toward the child being able to grow in strength and maturity.

A father does not discipline his son so that the son can prove his own love or so that the son can earn his father's love. The discipline is not about "earning" (the father already loves the son), nor is it an arbitrary punishment.

So what is really good discipline for? Think about really good coaches. They will rarely treat all of their athletes the same. More often than not, the truly great coach will know exactly where the athlete needs the most help.

Now, there are many reasons why a coach might use one "discipline" for a particular athlete. Some coaches might use training or discipline in order to deter bad behavior ("If you show up late, you'll be running three laps!"), or to punish bad behavior ("You dropped the ball, run three laps!"), or to protect the other athletes ("Stop fighting, go clear your head and run three laps!"), or strengthen a weakness in a particular athlete ("You need to increase your endurance, go run three laps!").

These are four traditional reasons for discipline in many areas of life. It is true of the prison system. Some people imagine that prison works best as punishment ("You committed a crime and now you must be made to pay"). Others believe that prisons are there to deter potential criminals or to protect society or for rehabilitation.

Penance after confession is not a punishment. It is not a deterrent. And it is typically not about isolating the individual from the group.

The best penances are those that are oriented toward healing and strengthening. They are meant to help the penitent become more whole. A penance is meant to provide a chance for the penitent to allow God's grace to settle more deeply into the wound that the sin has caused, and bring about more thorough healing.

In this sense, the priest stands in both as surgeon and physical therapist.

As surgeon, he cuts out the cancerous sin so that it can no longer do damage. As physical therapist, he prescribes certain "exercises" to do in order to facilitate healing. With this in mind, the next time you go to confession, freely embrace your penance with gratitude, knowing that it is given by a Father who loves you and desires that you can walk in ever-growing strength.

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