



Unity Church of Christianity  
Punishment and Prayer  
March 20, 2011

### **Howard Caesar**

Recently we celebrated St. Patrick's Day. Some people wear green clothing or put green dye in their food or drink. We do celebrate St. Patrick's Day and the Irish, who are a unique, wonderful breed.

It reminds me of a story about three men who were sitting together, bragging about their new wives. They had just given their wives duties to perform around the house. The first guy, Terry, had married a woman from America. He bragged that he told his wife she needed to do the dishes and all of the housework. He said it took a couple of days, but by the third day he came home to a clean house. The dishes were all washed and put away. The next guy, Jimmy, had married a Canadian woman. He bragged that he gave his wife orders to do the cleaning and dishes and cooking. He said that he didn't see any results the first day, and the second day was a little better. By the third day, his house was clean. The dishes were done, and he had a huge dinner on the table. The third man had married an Irish girl. He boasted that her duties were to keep the house clean, the dishes washed, do the laundry and ironing twice a week, keep the lawn mowed, the windows washed, and have hot meals on the table for every meal. He said he didn't see anything the first or second days. But by the third day, most of the swelling had gone down.

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He could see a little bit out of his left eye now, just enough to fix himself a bite to eat and load the dishwasher.

At Unity we don't believe or teach that God punishes. But there are other ways that we can receive what might appear to be punishment or consequences in life. We teach that there are universal laws and principles at work in everyone's life. Through those laws, one can potentially suffer the consequences. There's a law of cause and effect—you put something into motion and it will come back of equal nature. It's not God, but the law, that issues the consequences. Much of traditional western Christianity has taught that God is a punishing God and that there is a place called hell, which is a geographical place of eternal damnation. You go there—that's it. That's how it has been portrayed.

A year or two ago I received an email from a local pastor saying he heard me state in a commercial that God does not punish. That was upsetting to him, and he wondered how I could possibly be telling people that. He went on to give data he had to support that God is, indeed, a punishing God. I was kind with him, and I wrote him an email back saying that he may have heard just a little blurb somewhere. I explained that there are universal laws and principles in life that we are punished by and that it is not God punishing us directly. It's not like God is a person in the sky making decisions about how much to punish each person. This is an orderly universe with laws and principles at work. There is that indirect way that consequences come to us in life. Jesus taught, "As you give, so shall you receive. As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

Just this week, in the Belief section of our *Houston Chronicle*, there was an article titled "All Hell Breaks Loose over Bell's Views on Damnation." They're referring to Rob Bell, a popular new pastor. Critics are calling him a traitor to the Evangelical label because his ideas are not in alignment with tradition. He has written a book in which he talks about heaven and hell and the fate of every person. His ideas deviate from traditional views and teachings. It caught my attention because it seemed very similar to what Unity has always taught. There are others out there coming to those conclusions as well—not that there's a right or wrong—but there's an advancement as people are awakening to new, broader concepts of God.

Rob Bell claims that heaven and hell are choices that we make and live with right now. He says that God gives us the freedom to live apart from God, which is the equivalent of hell—a consciousness in separation, as we teach. Or we can turn to God's ways, which would be described as heaven—in alignment with those universal laws and principles. This is not too far-fetched. Even the Pope from Poland, who was a very studious fellow, came out and said that heaven and hell are dimensions that we begin to experience in this lifetime. He was criticized all over for saying that, by many who didn't want to accept that idea. Based on his studies and manuscripts and texts, scholars often arrive at many of these conclusions.

Rob Bell says that death doesn't cut off the ability to repent, meaning that life continues on—even after death, there is always a progression. As a soul, you continue to correct, alter, change,

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expand, and broaden. He says that he sees no infinite eternal torment for things people did in their few, finite years of life. He states that Jesus makes salvation possible, even for people who have never known his name. We have to allow for mystery for people who have faith without ever knowing who or what it was. He says that churches that don't allow for this are misguided and toxic. He's pretty harsh with his conclusions. His view is that "Jesus spoke of the renewal of all things." Essentially, everything is in a state of becoming new. At any point in time, you can alter your life and make things better. It doesn't suddenly stop, and your chances are over. He says that God is love and that Jesus came to show us that. He says love demands freedom.

Part of life is to love a person enough to set them free. We have free will, so we have choice. The idea is to choose out of our love for God and the laws and principles—to align and build a relationship. It's all based on love and the freedom to love and have oneness versus separation. Rob Bell says that the heart of God is to rescue everyone from everything to be rescued from. That is the heart and nature of God.

Rob Bell had the courage and boldness to come out with his beliefs, having gone deeper into his studies, prayer, and reflection. Interestingly enough, the president of the world's largest Protestant seminary, Richard Mau, critiqued the book. He called it a great book and said, "It's well within the bounds of Orthodox Christianity." He said the real fight is between generous Orthodoxy and stingy Orthodoxy. He said, "There are stingy people who just want to consign many others to hell—and only a few to heaven—and take delight in the idea." Rob Bell allows for a lot of mystery in how Jesus reaches people.

I guess we would fall under the generous Orthodoxy category, because not believing in eternal punishment is generous Orthodoxy. I would call it what we call ourselves—positive, practical, and progressive Christians. If I had to, I would categorize Christians into two categories: static Christians, who align with a particular tradition or idea and don't want to budge from it, no matter how many scholars or manuscripts come out; and then there are the questioning Christians. It's a good thing to question. It means we are part of the growing edge. Inquiry is an important thing.

Abraham Lincoln said, "If I had six hours to chop down a tree, I would spend the first four hours sharpening the axe." You and I are instruments of God's word and Jesus' universal teachings. It's important that we keep ourselves sharp, which is done through prayer, questioning, and reflection. It's safe.

We could ask, "Why am I here?" It's important to always have a grasp on that question. The reason we're here is to take the freedom we've been given—our freedom of will and choice—to direct our attention and focus toward becoming, in expression, that which we are held to be in the mind of God. There is an ideal that you and I were created to complete and fulfill. There is the Divine seed that is within us, the same way an acorn has the content within it to become a

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mighty oak. The acorn is the equivalent of the image and likeness that the Old Testament says we were created in. It's the equivalent of the Christ in you—your hope of glory.

You may not be expressing it yet, but it's in you—the seed of God, the ideal, the Divine blueprint. Therefore, you are here to make whatever strides you can in that direction. You have to do it consciously. No one's going to force you. It has to come from within you. You are your own soul, making your own path. This is your life that's been gifted you. You wanted to be here; now you are about to be that process. We can simply say that you're here to become a better person and to put on the Christ nature. You are all Christs in the making. We may not make it by the time we have our wave crash upon the shore, but that's what we're to be about. That's why Jesus came—for us to incorporate all that He modeled.

We take on as much as we can, but our intention and our purity of intent is important to know that that's why we're here. We get pulled into other areas of the external and forget the internal. That's the great challenge on that path.

Punishment, then, is something that is self-inflicted. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. We've said that God does not punish in any direct way, but there are laws. There are physical, mental, and spiritual laws. They're all interconnected, but we break them up to better understand the order of the universe.

There are the physical laws, which are our physical body. We have to take care of it. Excess does not help its longevity. Gravity is a physical law—we cannot leap tall buildings in a single bound. We don't stick our finger into an electrical socket if we understand the laws of electricity.

There are mental laws—the law of cause and effect. Thought is creative, so we are here to create good, because the nature of God is good. We are to use our mental capacities and laws to become better people and make strides. Our thoughts of hate, resentment, jealousy, and selfishness create our own inner suffering. It does not feel happy inside to have that going on.

Spiritual laws have to do with love, compassion, forgiveness, and oneness. We want to incorporate these things which allow us to feel richer and more connected. The more we're aligned with the principles, teachings, and spiritual faculties that are within us—like a weak muscle that has to be strengthened through use—the more we feel connected to the Divine. The energies of life begin to broaden in us.

We do not believe in eternal punishment because we believe the truth that God is love. The nature of God is always to help, assist, and love us. At the same time, life is just and has justice built into it through laws and principles. The non-existence of eternal punishment does not mean there are no consequences or temporary penalties. The law is just, impartial, and merciful. It places no fixed duration of time of punishment. It's left up to us, because it requires a change and shift in our focus—from out of alignment, into alignment with certain laws and principles. Man

suffered the consequences of his errors. God has provided man with these laws. Built into these laws is the wisdom to make himself happy and fulfilled, if he observes them.

With these laws, justice and peace could be established in our world. All help could come to each other, as opposed to harming one another. The strong should uphold the weak, as opposed to crushing them. Many of the evils that are brought on through abuse and excesses of all kinds could be avoided in our world. All of the miseries in the world stem from the violation of God's laws. To live in opposition to them has its consequences.

Man suffers based on the consequences of those errors. If we break the law, the penalty becomes proportional to the seriousness of the offence. In other words, jumping off a ladder will not have repercussions as serious as jumping off a cliff. The different things we do have different levels of seriousness and consequence. The duration of the penalty or suffering regarding an error has everything to do with one's willingness to change—to make a shift. Miracle says to choose higher. Suffering will be perpetual if the person persists in holding that resentment or refuses to forgive or hangs onto the negative energy. Each person is constantly choosing their own destiny. One can shorten their suffering or they can prolong it indefinitely if they want. I've seen people whose happiness or unhappiness depends on their willingness to move in the direction of good—purifying one's consciousness.

Man has been given the free will to either keep the law or violate it. That's what it comes down to. Thank God that there are people in the world who are consciously choosing to be a light—to move in the direction of making progress, being a better person, finding out what the laws and principles are, and offsetting the people who are unaware and don't have a concept of the spirituality of their destiny. They may be caught up in various forms of darkness and selfishness. The world is a mix of all of these people. We can't worry all the time about those who are not awake. Most importantly, we need to look at what we're doing to become more of a light in the world. By being that light, I help offset some of the darkness in the world. I don't need to know exactly how or where, but I just know that is a truth. Jesus and all of the great teachers said that the darkness cannot win where there is light. If you are being a light, you are helping the world.

The miserable, unhappy soul can always save himself because God's laws make that possible. All that's lacking is a person's will-power, strength, courage, and waking up to the fact that they have purpose and meaning in their life. Prayer comes in as an important aspect. It is what connects us to the cosmic circuitry—the cosmic currents of the universe. Prayer connects us; that's what it's for. It's important for us to acknowledge the help of God that is all around us at all times. A person can look outside themselves and depend on the outer world, but the more one is inclined to look inside, to know there is a power around them that they can access, the more power they gain—the more opportunity for happiness and fulfillment. A prayer life opens the spiritual faculties and allows that to happen.

We are all told that at birth we received a guardian angel—a good spirit that is link to you for your life, there to protect you. It plays a role much like a mother or father does to a child. It's

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there to assist us along the path of goodness and help us progress as we go through the various tests and challenges of life. It's there to remind us who we are. It could be the voice of conscious or the voice of intuition, but it's there. It's one of the ways in which God works. It's all God.

It's stated by those who are knowledgeable of angels that there are also less elevated angels. You actually draw in legions of angels the more you awaken and the more you purify yourself and align yourself. It all has to do with a person's consciousness.

There is a real advantage to the person who has taken the initiative to build a prayer life, to connect, and to be in conversation at all times. When something good happens, they know it's the presence of God that has helped them. They're not congratulating themselves. It's due to your guardian angel or some aspect of the Divine that was there to help you see it through. You can remember times in your life when that has happened.

The more you praise, acknowledge, give thanks, express gratitude, look to it, and call it forth in you, the bigger and more powerful it becomes. Prayers to not remove the wrong, but turn us away from the bad thoughts or the repercussions. Prayer does not prevent the fulfilling of the law or suspend the course of laws, but it stops us. It turns us away and helps us to be guided to our free will and new choices. There is always that which is available of good counsel. All you have to do is pause, know that it's there, act on it, and give thanks for it.

Punishment or prayer? Punishment is self-inflicted. Prayer connects us with the wisdom and the power of the Divine. Go see it, be it, live it. God bless you all.

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