

Discipline Is Not Punishment

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Punishment is the negative side of justice and discipline is the rigorous side of training. Don't confuse the two. Only God and the courts of valid governments should punish people for the sake of justice. All other people in all other institutions—including the family—should discipline for the sake of growth.

Punishment as Justice

Justice is personified in our culture as a blindfolded goddess with a sword at her side and scales in her hand.

The blindfold symbolizes the impartiality of justice in which the position or wealth of a person will not sway a verdict. Ideally, no one is above or below the law. The president of the United States is as subject to laws as any clerk.

The sword means that government is ready and able to swiftly punish criminals so that all citizens can live in peace and safety. From a police officer firing her pistol to the verdict of a jury trial, government is ready to punish criminals.

The scales show that punishment will fit the crime. People often think that the statement in the ancient Israeli legal system, "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Exodus 21:24), is harsh and barbaric. The statement is neither, rather it states a principle of judgment—the scales of justice should be balanced or justice has not been done. When a person steals a car, he should not be required to repay with a bicycle which is too mild nor with his life which is too harsh. When a person harms a mayor, she should not be punished any more or less harshly than when she does the same harm to an ice-cream vendor. Justice requires that punishment fitting a crime be administered equally to all.

Scripture consistently teaches—and our common sense tells us—that God is the ultimate judge who will ensure that justice prevails throughout the universe. In our frailty and imperfections as humans we can only strive for justice in our courts, but God will ultimately have justice. As individuals our goal is to learn and to help others learn to be the best persons we can be.



Discipline As Training

Discipline has always meant training—even from the beginnings of the word in Latin. The goal of punishment is to balance the scales of justice, whereas the goal of discipline is to

train, correct, or help a person to learn.

Parents should discipline their children—not punish. Administrative actions in police departments should discipline employees—not punish. All actions of all people in all agencies other courts should discipline—not punish.

The goal of parents in rearing their children is to nurture, educate and train them to be happy and productive people in their communities. When a child misbehaves, a parent doesn't want to simply punish. A parent wants to correct a child for the child's own good. When a child misbehaves at school, a teacher wants to use his unique skills and position to help the child to learn, to live with others and to be productive.

Police supervisors should not punish officers. Instead, they should devote their energies to training officers to be the best law enforcement officers in the world. If officers do anything that truly deserve punishment, then they should be subject to the court system.

Police agencies should not substitute administrative actions for court actions which have all the protections of due process. Court actions punish, but administrative actions train. Since many administrators choose to use administrative actions to punish rather than train, we have technical arbitrations resembling criminal trials rather than reviews to ensure consistent labor practices. Arbitrations will proliferate and grow in complexity and expense as long as administrators use administrative actions for punishment instead of training.

Unless a person has received a divine commission to ensure justice, he should not place himself in the position of God or the courts by punishing anyone under his authority. A person's proper goal in dealing with people under his authority is to help them learn to be the best people or employees that they can possibly be.

Positive And Negative Discipline

Negative discipline is not punishment. The goal of negative discipline is the same as positive discipline—to train a person. For example, it is not wrong for someone to step into the street in front of her house, and she should not be punished for this common and necessary act. Accordingly, a four year old child has done nothing wrong when she steps off the curb in front of her house. If a parent warns a child not to step off the curb and she continues, then the parent might spank the child. The parent is not punishing the child, and in fact, the child did nothing wrong such as stealing that could deserve punishment. The parent is using negative discipline to train the child about safety so that she will not be killed by a car and will someday be old enough to recognize dangerous situations on her own without the help of parents. The spanking was negative discipline for the good of the child—not punishment to balance the scales of justice.

When a person must affect the attitude or actions of a subordinate, he must discipline the subordinate. He must teach and train—not punish. His decision is whether to use positive or negative discipline. Positive discipline often requires more thought and effort from a superior, but it usually has more profound and lasting results.

Punishment and negative discipline might seem to be easier, quicker and more effective, but the cumulative results are crippled morale and productivity. Actually, when applied properly with the goal of training, negative discipline requires equal thought and effort as positive discipline. The problem is that many superiors fall into a punishment mentality which is fueled by time pressures, natural laziness, and a perverse bent in human nature.

When a situation goes awry, responsible people tend to look for who to blame because they don't want to fade heat or be unduly disturbed. The fixing of blame has the appearance that something is being done about a problem, but the appearance is an illusion.

Finding solutions is much better than finding fault. After a person finds fault, the original problem still remains. If a supervisor finds the solution first, then the problem is gone and finding fault is not so important. Plus, as an officer sees a supervisor solve a problem, the officer learns. The supervisor will have fewer problems in the future because subordinates have learned to solve problems—not to continue in the same mistakes.

Police supervisors have an added inducement to the punishment mentality. The police are the beginning of the criminal justice system. Their job is to arrest criminals so that they can be punished by the courts. Police officers live daily with an attitude of punishment for wrongdoers. When they promote, they carry this attitude with them and often keep it for their entire careers. Police officers are oriented to obeying laws and rules and to punishing violations. When someone breaks a law, he has done wrong and should be punished—a very proper attitude for law enforcement officers when dealing with criminals. But that attitude is inadequate when dealing with subordinates and children.

Most police officers recognize that they can't deal with their children in the same way as they deal with criminals—though they often fall into this trap. All police officers can cite examples of failed marriages and rebellious children when officers carry a legal attitude into their family life. Love and discipline in the home are a very different from justice in society.

Supervisors often make a mistake with their subordinates similar to the mistake that officers make at home. They treat subordinates like criminals. They want to punish officers when they violate a rule or department order rather than train them. Supervisors and departments that punish officers with administrative actions rather than train them are brewing dissatisfaction, dissensions and problems similar to a family being treated like criminals.

A major weakness in punishment disguised as negative discipline is that it does not point a person to desired behavior. Punishment can be effective for a while in stopping certain behaviors, but it doesn't teach and guide a person into effective behavior. For example, a supervisor might give days off without pay to an officer for being "rude" to people when she stops them for traffic violations. One problem is that the loss of money does not teach the officer how to act toward citizens when she stops them. A supervisor's time would be better spent teaching the officer how to interact with citizens and why positive interaction is better than "rudeness".

Another problem is that subordinates become angry when they don't fully understand or agree with the reasons for their punishment. Police work is hard enough without adding feelings of betrayal, resentment and anger for officers to carry in them from call to call.

Discipline By Example

The ultimate goal of discipline is for a person to be self-disciplined and the best way to discipline subordinates is by example. Example has always been the best way to teach and train. A self-disciplined supervisor showing her subordinates how to be outstanding police officers by how she does her job is worth more than all academies and other forms of training.

If an agency wants its employees to interact with citizens with competency, consistency, compassion, fairness and professionalism, then the leaders in that agency must competently treat employees as professionals with consistency, compassion, and fairness. If an agency is satisfied with a lesser level of service to citizens, then administrators can treat employees arbitrarily as serfs with inconsistency, no compassion, and lack of fairness. Laziness and fear are usually at the root of an agency that operates in such a manner.

Self-discipline is our goal. A person who is self-disciplined finds happiness because

he achieves his goals and contributes to society. A self-disciplined person is a person who has learned to learn. He has learned how to evaluate his own attitudes and behaviors and has learned the habits necessary to correct himself, so that he can be the person he chooses to be. No one can train a self-disciplined person better than he can train himself, and no one is a better trainer than the example of a self-disciplined person.

We are very fortunate that God is the ultimate self-disciplined person. He keeps the universe running by love in justice because of who He is. He provided our ultimate example of discipline when Jesus, as a dying man, said from the cross, "Father, forgive them: for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

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