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Obeying to Avoid Punishment

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Obeying to Avoid Punishment

Jesus said that He “came that [those who follow him] may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, NASB). Living to just not get in trouble, however, is pretty far from abundant life.

 Retro Grunge Principal Office

Imagine a teacher whose ideal student is simply one who doesn't get sent to the principal's office. We would question whether that teacher had forgotten that the point of school is to learn, not just avoid trouble.

But we can easily slide into this very mentality when we start believing that God is a score-keeper and as long as we aren't doing too badly or not as badly as those around us, we're still in His good favor.

This can happen in an accountability setting where if we're asked the question, “How was this week?” we answer, “Good, I didn't really mess up.” It's subtle, but we often slip into describing our “spiritual walk” in terms of how good or bad our recent behavior has been.

It is true, though, that God does, and will, rightfully judge people for how they have lived. His people have always taken comfort in and been convicted by the fact that justice will be done whether now or for all eternity.

The book of Romans discusses this judgment through the first 3 chapters—here are the highlights:

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness”

- Romans 1:18

“But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Romans 2:5

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

- Romans 3:23-34, NIV

So while it is true that God’s judgment is real and very scary, it is equally true that through Jesus we have been forgiven and cleared of all the charges God could have brought against us!

One part of the abundant life Jesus promises His followers is the absolute joy of freedom from condemnation! It’s incredible!

Later on, in Romans 8:1 we read, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (NIV)

We are free to really live because we don’t have to live in fear of punishment! This is the delightful, though hard to accept, the scandal of grace. We did not, by our own effort, deserve to be forgiven. But from an overflow of love, Jesus took the punishment for our sin upon Himself!

When we respond to this outpouring of grace in faith, by trusting Jesus, our focus no longer needs to be avoiding punishment. But instead, we fixate on growing closer to Him, loving Him, trusting Him, and worshiping Him.