

Different Degrees Of Punishment

Luke 12:48 says, "But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

Does this verse teach that there will be different degrees of punishment? Under the Old Law, a person's accountability to God depended on their level of knowledge. Leviticus 4:2 says, "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done, and shall do against any of them" God gave instructions for the sin offering that was to be made if someone sins unintentionally. In 5:15-17, the Lord explained His trespass offering for someone who had sinned unintentionally. In v. 17, it says, "And if a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord; though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity." Numbers 15:29-30 states that the Israelites would have one law for someone who sins unintentionally and one for the deliberate sinner.

In the New Testament, Jesus taught the parable of the faithful steward (Luke 12:42-48). In vv. 47-48, Jesus said that the slave who knew his master's will and did not do it will be beaten with many stripes but the one who did not know his master's will would receive a less severe punishment. Also, in Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus taught the parable of the servants and the talents. Those servants who had increased their master's possessions were honored, but the lazy servant was condemned. That slave knew better, but did not do anything to help his master. James exhorts the brethren in 3:1 by saying, "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation."

This agrees with teaching in 2 Peter 2:20-21: "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them." How is the latter end worse? Because they were once "enlightened," "have tasted," and were "partakers of the Holy Ghost" (Hebrews 6:4). To then walk away will result in a bitter punishment. The rich man knew he had the chance to respond while he lived, for he wanted this for his family (Luke 16:25, 27-31). The point in these passages, including Luke 12:48, is not so much differing degrees of punishment, but the fact that the greater the powers and opportunities entrusted to us, the larger the service the Lord requires. The parable of the faithful steward was directed to those who listened with delight to Jesus, but were careless about learning His meaning. The illustration of judgment in vv. 47-48 is simply part of the parabolic imagery.

Kyle Campbell