

Is it the Gospel Message of 12 Step Programs, or is it the Gospel Message of Jesus Christ?

A common objection which is received from people affiliated with "Christianized" 12 step programs and a few affiliated with secular 12 step programs who have a Christian background is the following, "You should not openly talk about God's justice and eternal hell towards people in 12 step groups. To do so is simply preaching 'hellfire' and 'brimstone' and will only scare members away into thinking God is a 'punishing' God. You must understand our God is a god of love and forgiveness which is how he should be represented in 12 step meeting locations. To simply speak of God's justice and eternal hell is a negative motive to scare people away from 12 step programs."

The reason for this section is to answer this objection in a manner which is Biblical and reasonable according to the sound word of God. The goal is to "balance out the scales" of God's word that both sides of His character, that is His grace, mercy, and forgiveness as well as His justice and wrath, should be taught to 12 step members in order for them to make a reasonable decision whether they truly want to follow and disciple with Jesus Christ or follow their own inclinations and live life their own way. Additionally, it is to avoid any misunderstandings of our position that people believe we are being too "negative" when in reality, our goal is to only teach the full truth of God's word in His love over those lost and dying in sin.

First, we need to answer the question what is the Gospel message? The Gospel message is simply the death, burial, and ultimate resurrection of Jesus Christ, that He is still alive, and offers forgiveness of sins to those who repent of their sins and fully trust in Him as Lord and Savior (read Matthew 27:32 - 28:15; Mark 15:21 - 16:8; Luke 23:26 - 24:12; John 19:16 - 20:10; John 3:16; Acts 1: 2-3 (Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection); 1 Corinthians 15: 1-4; 1 John 4: 9-10). The word "Gospel" simply means "good news", that is the good news that Jesus died for the sins of humanity, was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead defeating death once and for all.

Now, let me answer the question, "should we not just tell others only about God's love and forgiveness? Won't telling other people about His justice and wrath prevent people from following Jesus Christ?" The following are Bible verses both on God's grace and mercy and also on His justice and wrath: (Note: These verses are by no means a comprehensive listing of all verses in the Bible pertaining to these topics. Should you desire all verses related to these subjects, it is advised to consult Strong's Concordance which contains a complete listing of all verses on these topics. A small sample of verses have been picked to give people an idea how God is gracious and merciful but is also just and full of wrath according to His word) Bible verses on God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness (taken from <http://www.topbibleverses.com>):

"Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall."

Psalm 55:22 New International Version "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence."

Isaiah 43:25-26 New International Version "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"

Romans 8:1 New International Version "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.""
Isaiah 1:18 New International Version "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

Psalm 103:12 New International Version "The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;"

Daniel 9:9 New International Version "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Colossians 1:13-14 New International Version Bible verses on God's justice and wrath (taken from <http://www.biblegateway.com>)

Romans 1:18 God's Wrath Against Sinful Humanity = "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,"

John 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

2 Chronicles 36:16 "But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy."

Romans 2:5 "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."

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 New International Version (NIV) 8 "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

Listen carefully to 2 Timothy 3: 16-17, "ALL scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (New Revised Standard Version).

Do you see how this particular scripture makes it clear that ALL scripture is inspired by God (not some or parts of scripture)? Here is the issue - most or all 12 step programs, regardless of whether they are "Christianized" or secular, tell their membership everything about God's love, mercy, and grace, but almost NEVER warn their membership that there is wrath from God for those who willfully choose to live in sin and disobedience.

Let us have a discussion as to why it is important to "balance out the scales" of God's word. First, there are disadvantages to exclusively promoting one aspect of God's character over another. For example, people who solely (only) promote God's love, mercy, and grace will falsely make people believe that God is always forgiving and merciful and that for God to display His wrath and justice upon those who constantly live in sin is outside His character. Many of these people who promote such a position will have a standard belief system that says, "My god is a god of love and could never judge someone to an eternity in hell. He is too loving and gracious to even do such a thing." Notice how God is spelled in lower case "g" in the preceding sentence. They are right to some degree. The reason why their "god" would never judge and send people to an eternity in hell is simply because their "god" does not exist. It is simply a figment of their imagination. To do so violates the second of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20:4) Many people hold to this belief system for several reasons. First, they do not want to accept God must punish sin and ultimately refuse to take personal responsibility for their sins against God's holiness. Second, people who hold to this position believe that since God cannot punish sin, it gives them an "excuse" to keep on sinning. They believe God will simply "overshadow" their deliberate, willful sins and grant them grace when in reality they deserve God's justice and wrath for such continued disobedience. Simply put, they look at the cross of Jesus Christ and believe that because of the atoning death exhibited by Jesus Christ to offer forgiveness of sins, it gives them an excuse to keep on sinning. They reason, "God offered me forgiveness of my sins at the cross of Jesus Christ. Doesn't that give me an excuse to continue sinning since I am now forgiven." Such a position is dangerous in light of the warnings in God's word that God is indeed just and must punish unrepentant and persistent sin. Read the following Bible verses and decide for yourself:

Luke 13: 1-5 1 "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Romans 1:20 20 "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

Romans 6: 1-2 1 "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Hebrews 10: 26-31 26 "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

1 John 3: 4-10 4 "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. 6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. 7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister."

It is also dangerous to promote a position that God is a punishing God eager to condemn those who are constantly living in sin. These people usually believe God is sitting in heaven and puts a "checkmark" by someone's name everytime he or she commits a sin against Him. Just as with those who solely promote God as all merciful and forgiving but never full of wrath and justice, people who promote God as all wrathful and full of justice but never full of mercy and grace have made an idol or a figment of their imagination of how they would like God to be. However, the following verses tells us God is actually eager to forgive those who honestly come to Him in a broken spirit desiring to be totally forgiven of their sins:

John 6:37 37 "All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

2 Peter 3:9 9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Since we now have put the issue into proper perspective and see the dangers of promoting one extreme of His character over the other, let us now see the unfortunate results of people who make decisions for Christ under both extremities of His grace and mercy and also His wrath and judgment. People who are told that God is always forgiving and merciful but never full of wrath and vengeance upon unrepentant sin, will make a "decision" to follow Jesus that they can continue to live in sin and still be "recipients" of God's blessings and grace. Many times, such "decisions" for Christ will ultimately result in backsliding or false conversions. Those hearing everything about His grace and mercy obviously will not bear fruit of the Spirit in their lives but their conduct will simply show manifestations of the works of the flesh (read 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10; Galatians 5: 19-21; Revelation 21:8). As we have already established according to God's

word, people who continue to willfully sin against God and His grace do not belong to God, but are really children of the devil (reread 1 John 3: 4-10 if necessary). Jesus warned that many will call Him "Lord" by mouth, but are actually children of the devil headed to an eternity in hell by the way they live. They may profess to be Christians, but their choices and works reveal that they are still under God's wrath and justice. Read further:

Matthew 7: 21-23 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Luke 6:46 46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

On the other hand, people who make decisions for Christ through "hellfire" and "brimstone" teachings will only conduct themselves to make decisions after their conversion out of fear that God will punish them for disobedience. For instance, a person may say, "Oh no, I accidentally used God's name in vain, and last night I came forward and made a decision for Christ after Pastor John Doe's message that God is a punishing God and never full of grace. I pray and hope God can forgive me for this one act of using His name in vain?" Ultimately, just like people who made a decision to follow Jesus Christ through a teaching that God is all "merciful and forgiving", people who make decisions for Christ through "hellfire" and "brimstone" will likewise backslide and be false converts.

They will make decisions and choices out of fear that God will punish their every sin against His holiness. Let me use an illustration why it is important to "balance out the scales" of God's word in evangelism. Pretend you have a small child who becomes sick one day and needs medication to stay alive. The parent of the child goes against the advice of the doctor to obtain a medication that is rather harsh in taste but is still effective in healing and treating the underlying symptoms. Rather, the parent decides to buy an over-the-counter medicine that lacks the essential ingredients of the prescribed medicine and instead has a taste that is much more pleasant. The child eventually dies as the medicine bought by the parent fails to heal and effectively treat the symptoms of the illness. Had the parent followed the instructions of the doctor and bought the prescribed medication, the child would have lived. Just as with the parent that supplied the child with the wrong medicine, a watered-down message of God's word to one extreme or the other ultimately does more damage than good and produces false converts and backsliders. People that make decisions for Christ because they were taught God is not just upon deliberate sin will continue to sin because they believe that they have an excuse to sin because of God's grace and mercy shown at the cross.

People who make decisions for Christ because they were taught God is never gracious but always just and punishing will continue to sin because their fear leads them to believe God is eager to continue to punish them for sin. What do you think would happen if bodybuilders used unequal amounts of weight on bench presses and squats? What if one bodybuilder put 200 pounds on one end of the barbell and 100 pounds on the other end for bench pressing 300 pounds? That bodybuilder is asking for a disaster and a trip to the emergency room of the

hospital! Finally, I would like to address a question with this issue regarding people who come from backgrounds where they believe God's character goes to one extreme or the other and does not see the balance of the scales.

Some people reading this may object, "What about people who had overbearing fathers growing up and see God as a punishing God? Are you saying you should focus on God's wrath and justice with them?" Others may object, "What about people who have repeatedly abused God's grace and believe they have an excuse to keep on sinning? Are you saying it is wrong and unscriptural to share with them God's grace and mercy one more time?" We must have a proper response to a person's current understanding of their perception of God. If a person sees God as all punishing, it is a great opportunity to show them God's love by actually doing an act of mercy for them and then explaining to them what God's word says about His grace upon those who do not deserve it.

However, a person who repeatedly has been abusing God's grace and firmly believes they can continue to sin without bearing eternal consequences should be firmly warned that God must punish sin and if they refuse to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will result in an eternity in hell. There is a specific reason why I bring this up in this 12 step program critique. Most or all 12 step programs promote God as "all loving, forgiving, and merciful." In my own experience in 12 step programs, not one time did I ever hear a teaching on God's justice and eternal hell. For 12 step programs to exhibit only one side of God's character, but not the other side of the story cheats and deceives people they can continue to sin, be alright with God, and expect His grace in eternity. Such is far from the truth from God's word. It is for this reason why it was mentioned earlier that 12 step members usually substitute one sin for another.

I firmly believe they do so because many of them think they have an excuse to keep on sinning because of God's mercy and grace. People affiliated with 12 step programs would be wise to heed the warning God tells us in 2 Thessalonians 2: 11-12, "11For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness." Many people would prefer to have their ears "itched" with lies than have the truth spoken over their spiritual conditions. 2 Timothy 4: 3-4 tells us, "3For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." It is my earnest prayer that 12 step programs will cease telling lies to their members where they truly stand before God and start speaking the truth in His love. Many 12 step members have already become false converts, and many more will backslide unless they are told the full counsel of God's word over their spiritual conditions.