

“PUNISH THE EVIL, REWARD THE GOOD?”

by Lyz Weaver

KEY VERSE:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Matthew 5:43-45

FAITH STORY:

Deuteronomy 28 & Psalm 73

FAITH FOCUS:

God rewards the righteous and punishes the evil, right? But then how do we explain the suffering of those who are obedient to God? What about evil that goes unpunished? There is scripture, such as Deuteronomy 28, that supports the view that God rewards the righteous and punishes the evil. This is known as the Deuteronomistic view, or DH theology. There is scripture that also laments that the righteous suffer and the evil prosper. Let’s investigate together how to combine these two views in order to gain a better understanding of our own beliefs.

SESSION GOAL:

Gain an understanding of DH theology and how it is incorporated into our own faith.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to name two characteristics of DH theology.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Small tootsie rolls (enough for two each)
- 2 Full-size candy bars (enough for entire class)
- 3 Paper and pens
- 4 Bibles for each student

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5 minutes)

Allow students to spend a few minutes chit-chatting as they settle into class. Join the conversation when it feels comfortable, and say that you have a question for them.

Say: “Raise your hand if you got all your homework done this week.” Give those that raise their hands a tootsie roll. **Then say:** “Raise your hand if you helped out at home this week without being asked.” Again give tootsie rolls to those who raised their hands. Finally, ask those who have not yet raised their hands to do so. Give all that raise their hands this time a large candy bar.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Discuss: *How did it feel for those who didn't "perform" as well to be rewarded more than those who "performed" well?*

Ask students to stand if they believe the following statement is true: God rewards the righteous and punishes all evil.

Discuss why they answered the way they did.

Then say: *Let's spend some time together today discovering what the Bible has to say about this issue*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15 minutes)

Divide the class into four groups. Ask each group to read one of the following passages: Deut.28:1-14, Deut. 28:15-46, Deut: 28:47-68, and Psalm 73. Ask each group to discuss and write down where they see reward or punishment for the action of the people. When the groups are done, bring them together and have each group share their findings with the class.

APPLY: (20 minutes)

Present the entire group with a brief description of forum theater (included in this material) and give each student a copy of the "Down and Out" forum theater drama, or encourage students to write their own if you have time. Give students 2-3 minutes to read it over and then ask for 3 volunteers to act out the scene. Facilitate the forum theater as outlined in the included information.

NOTE TO TEACHER: You may want to keep the forum theater instructions handy to incorporate into other lessons you teach.

RESPOND: (5 minutes)

Take the last 5 minutes of class time to debrief on the drama. Allow students to reflect on the role they had and how they felt in each role. Talk briefly about how the drama is an example of the DH theology taken to an unhealthy extreme that leaves little room for grace and unconditional love. Answer any remaining questions that the students may have.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

One of the most difficult aspects of our faith is answering questions about suffering. *Why do people suffer, particularly faithful people? Does God cause suffering, and is there a reason for it?*

The Bible gives several answers to these questions. One answer is called the Deuteronomist view of history or the Deuteonomistic historical theology, many times shortened to DH theology. This theology is so named because of its clear articulation in the book of Deuteronomy. This view of God and how God works can be simply put: God rewards or blesses those who are faithful and God curses those who are unfaithful or disobedient. This blessing or cursing is "this worldly." That is, the blessings or curses happen while we are

alive and are usually of the material or physical nature. Many Christians today would have a modified DH theology. Faithful people may be (will be?) rewarded and disobedient people may be (will be) cursed in the afterlife; those rewards or curses may not be reflected here on earth.

This theology undergirds much of the prophets' explanations about why terrible things happen to the Israelites. Josiah rents his royal garments in agony when he discovers that his people have been disobedient. Disobedience only causes one thing—punishment. (II Kings 22) Even in the time of Jesus, most believed that people became sick because they were sinners and God was punishing them.

But God is a complex God, and one theology can't contain all of who God is. While on one hand the Deuteronomistic view stands in the Bible and our lives can work in that way sometimes, the Bible also challenges that view. Psalm 73 and many other poetic writings cry out about the injustice when innocent people suffer. Job, in the middle of his suffering, knows that something beyond a simplistic DH theology is at work. Even Jesus says in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." (Matthew 5:10) It is clear, especially in the New Testament, that faithful people do suffer. Passages like Luke 9:23, I Peter 4:12, Ephesians 6:16 and Hebrews 11:35-38 challenge a view that good people are always blessed by God.

“PUNISH THE EVIL, REWARD THE GOOD?” • Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is a sort of fight or game, and like all forms of game or fight, there are rules. They can be modified, but they still exist, to ensure that all the players are involved in the same enterprise, and to facilitate the generation of serious and fruitful discussion.

Dramaturgy

1 The text must clearly delineate the nature of each character. It must identify them precisely, so that the spect-actors can easily recognize each one's ideology.

The original solutions proposed by the protagonist must contain at least one moral error, which will be analyzed during the forum session. These errors must be clearly expressed and carefully rehearsed, in well-defined situations. This is because Forum Theatre is not propaganda theatre; it is not the old didactic theatre. It is pedagogical in the sense that we all learn together, actors and audience. The play must present a mistake, a failure, so that the spect-actors will be spurred into finding solutions and inventing new ways of confronting oppression. We pose good questions, but the audience must supply good answers.

Staging

1 The actors must have physical styles of playing that successfully articulate the character's ideology, work, social function, profession, etc. It is important that there is a logic to the character's evolution, and that they do things, or else the audience will be inclined to take their seats and do the “forum” without action, like a radio forum.

2 Every show must find the most suitable means of “expression” for its particular subject matter; preferably this should be found by common consent with the public, either in the course of the presentation or by prior research.

3 Each character must be presented “visually” in such a way as to be recognizable independently of their spoken script. The costumes must be easy for the spect-actors to get in and out of, with a minimum of fuss.

The Performance Game

The performance is an artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actor.

1 To start off with, the show is performed as if it were a conventional play. A certain image of the world is presented.

2 The spect-actors are asked if they agree with the solutions advanced by the protagonist; they will probably say no. The audience is then told that the play is going to be done a second time, exactly as it was done the first time. The actors will try to bring the piece to the same end as before, and the spect-actors (the audience) are to try to change it, showing that new solutions are possible and valid. In other words, the actors stand for a particular vision of the world and consequently will try to maintain that world as it is and ensure that things go exactly the same way ...at least until a spect-actor intervenes and changes the vision of the

world as it is into a world as it could be. It is vital to generate a degree of tension among the spect-actors. If no one changes the world, it will stay as it is; if no one changes the play, it will come to the same end as before.

3 The audience is informed that the first step is to take the protagonist's place whenever he or she is making a mistake, in order to try to bring about a better solution. All they have to do is raise their hand and the joker (facilitator) will stop the play. The actors will freeze where they are without changing position. The spect-actor states what she thought went wrong, and then must say where she wants the scene taken from, indicating the relevant phrase, moment or movement (whichever is easiest). The actors then start the scene again from the prescribed point, with the spectator taking the place of one of the protagonists.

4 The actor who has been replaced doesn't immediately retire from the game; he stays on the sidelines as sort of coach or supporter, to encourage the spect-actors and correct them if they start to go wrong. In other words, the replaced actor is to remind the spect-actor not to stray too far from the original character. When the spect-actor becomes a player in the drama, the other actors do not automatically change from their oppressive ways. They should intensify their oppression, to show how difficult it is to change reality. The game is spect-actors trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world against actors trying to hold them back. The goal of the forum is not to win, but to learn and to train. The spect-actors, but acting out their ideas, train for real life action; and actors and audience alike, by playing, learn the possible consequences of their actions. They learn the arsenal of oppression and the possible tactics and strategies of the oppressed.

5 If the spect-actor gives in, he or she drops out of the game, the actor takes up the role again, and the piece rapidly heads back towards the already known ending. Another spect-actor can then stop the drama, say what is wrong, say where he wants the play taken from, and the play will start again from that point. A new solution will be tried out.

6 At some point the spect-actors may eventually manage to break the oppression imposed by the actors. The actors must give in, one after another or all together. From this moment on, the spect-actors are invited to replace anyone they like (as opposed to before when they could only change protagonists). They can do this to show new forms of oppression, which perhaps the actors are unaware of.

7 One person functions as the joker, or the facilitator of the game. He is the wild card, the leader of the game. It is up to him to explain the rules of the game, to correct errors made, and to encourage both parties not to stop playing. Indeed, the effect of the forum is all the more powerful if it is made entirely clear to the audience that if they don't change the world, no one will change it for them, and everything will inevitably turn out exactly the same, which is the last thing we want to happen.

8 The knowledge that results from this investigation will, of necessity, be the best that that particular human group can attain at that time. The joker is not the president of a conference; she is not the custodian of truth. The joker's job is simply to try to ensure that those who know a little more get the chance to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more and show what they are capable of.

Forum Theatre Writing the Drama

- Recognizable characters. Each one's ideology must be clearly defined and seen.
- At least one moral error. The play must contain at least one unbiblical problem that is portrayed in the play as the solution.
- At the same time, make it real, which means writing in some complexity. Don't make the problem so obvious and so easily solved that we are just hitting the audience over the head with a "hammer."
- Keep them moving. Include actions as well as dialog.
- If you use props or costumes, keep them simple.

Playing the Game

- The joker (facilitator) explains the following rules. He or she also keeps the game moving, and makes sure the rules are followed.
- The audience is not an audience. Everyone is a spect-actor, instead of a spectator. Everyone can and should be prepared to enter the drama. You may want to "warm up" the audience with body exercises.
- To begin the game, the joker explains all the rules below, and the play is acted out without stopping it or comment.
- Then the joker asks the spect-actors to raise their hand every time they see something wrong in the play as the play is acted out again.
- As soon as someone in the audience raises their hand, the joker stops the action, and asks that person to describe what was wrong.
- After the explanation, the spect-actor is invited to replace one of the actors on stage, in order to change the situation. The spect-actor may not replace the antagonist. Why? Life doesn't work like that. We can't ever change the bully; we can only change how we respond to the bully.
- The spect-actor indicates where the play to begin, and the actors take it from that spot.
- The actors do not comply with the new solution or the new way of being of the spect-actor, at least not immediately. They hold on to their oppressive ways for as long as they can while still being "real."
- At this point, other audience members can stop the drama by raising their hand and also join the play, except for the part of the antagonist. The joker may choose, however, to simply allow each spect-actor on stage to work through his or her own solution one at a time. It depends on how the play is working.
- The joker must not let the play end too easily or too quickly. The tension of complex situations and the reality of oppression should be felt.
- When those tensions and complexities have been sufficiently played out, the joker calls the drama ended, and goes on to another situation, or the game ends.

Down and Out

Pat has just been admitted to the hospital for unexplained headaches that have been off and on for months. Terry, a good friend, comes to see Pat. Pat has just learned that the tests to determine the source of the headaches has showed that Pat has an inoperable brain tumor. Terry knows the diagnosis and has come to support Pat.

Pat: So, you heard that there's nothing they can do?

Terry: Oh, Pat, I'm so sorryI wish the news would have been different.. I can't imagine what you must be feeling....

Pat: It feels like a bad dream...you hear of this happening, but I never thought that it would be me...

Terry: I wonder what God is trying to tell you...there must be a reason He's allowed this to happen...

Pat: I don't think God did this to me, do you?

Terry: Well, how else do you explain it...do you have some unresolved sin in your life?

Pat: (crying quietly now) I guess I haven't had time yet to think about that.....