

Hebrews 12:3-17

When God Disciplines in Love

C. S. Lewis said, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (*The Problem of Pain*, p. 81).

The Psalmist profited from his afflictions. "It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes" (Psalm 119:71).

Discipline is evidence that God accepts us as His children.

God disciplines us so we will grow spiritually. The Lord God seeks to develop our intimate walk with Him, encourage us to be more Christ-like, and to have victory over the power of sin in our daily life.

God sends trials and hardships designed to strengthen our faith in Him.

"For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 12:3-8 NASB95). All Scripture quotes are from New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

The Need for Discipline in our Spiritual Lives

No one enjoys hostile persecution from the ungodly. Jesus patiently endured it and set the perfect example for His believers. He suffered the shame of the cross to accomplish our redemption. We are assured that because we are His disciples we, too, shall endure hostility by those who oppose Him. When this persecution comes we should have the assurance that God is treating us as His sons and daughters. In our case God overrides and turns the hostility to our gain to cause us to grow in Christ-likeness. God uses it to chastise the Christian and bring about intended correction needed in our lives. The Christian who is truly wise understands that God's method of using hardships in training and disciplining are to be taken as the reality a beloved child of God. Their reproof is to be counted as a profitable thing. The person who is not disciplined is not His child.

The writer of Proverbs said long ago, "He who withholds his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him diligently" (Proverbs 13:24). "The ancient world found it incomprehensible that a father could possibly love his child and not punish him," writes R. Kent Hughes. Is this the reason committed Christians appear to experience more pressures in life than non-committed believers?

If we have been loved by our parents we have been disciplined. Stop and imagine what your life would be like if no one had ever disciplined you. We would be the most arrogant, selfish, and self-centered, out of control people around. Much of the problems we face in American homes today, and as a nation, are the result of lack of discipline in homes. No human disciplinarian is perfect, but it is better than no discipline. It is necessary for the healthy development of the individual.

Donald Guthrie observes, "A father who neglects to discipline a son is deficient in his capacity as father, and a son who escapes all discipline is losing out on his sonship. This is a principle which would not be recognized by all schools of thought in this modern age where permissiveness has such powerful influence. The authority of parents has been so eroded that discipline rarely if ever comes into play. It has generally ceased to be a part

of sonship. It is small wonder that those brought up in such an atmosphere find genuine difficulty in understanding the discipline of God" (*The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 249).

Discipline is proof of God's love.

Discipline is the common experience of all children. Every child of God is subject to the Father's discipline. "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6). His discipline proves that we are His true spiritual children. Spicq noted that when persecution comes it should have the ringing assurance in our hearts, "God is treating you as a son."

Even Jesus, God's unique one of a kind Son "learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). But we must ever keep in mind He was without sin. Jesus' suffering was unique and never to be repeated.

"Discipline" (*paideia*) denotes training of a child, and includes instruction, correction, chastening. It would naturally include correction and punishment as needed. Note how many times this word is used in this paragraph.

We should be careful to note the difference between chastisement or discipline and judgment.

Difference between God's discipline and judgment

Only true believers experience the discipline of the heavenly Father. "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 12:7-8). On the other hand, the true child of God does not experience God's condemnation. That is reserved for the Devil and his children. "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). Chastening and judgment are two entirely different subjects. "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15)

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:12-14). I have been around humble believers who rejoice because they share in Christ's sufferings and it is convicting and contagious. They have a fire in their bones that exalts the Lord Jesus and glorifies His holy presence.

The Father's discipline of His children

In verses nine and following, the writer of Hebrews argues from the lesser, the experience of human fathers, to the greater which is our spiritual relationship to God the Father. Our earthly fathers disciplined us for a short time to produce character. Our earthly parents had limited knowledge and goals, but our heavenly Father disciplines us for the best character. He knows us better than we know ourselves and has the highest goals for our character that we should share in His holiness. It issues in everlasting glory and joy in His presence.

"Father of spirits" is simply a designation for the Lord God as our spiritual Father in heaven. The cults come up with a lot of far-out ideas reading all kinds of weird ideas not in the writer's mind. This is a simple contrast between our earthly fathers and our spiritual heavenly Father. John Calvin said it correctly, "God is the Father both of soul and body, and properly speaking the only one." Keil and Delitzsch, the Hebrew scholars said, "the God of the spirits of all flesh." He is "the Creator and Preserver of all being, who has given and still gives life and breath to all flesh, is God of the spirits of all flesh." John Brown wrote, "the Father of spirits is our spiritual Father, as opposed to our natural fathers—He to whom we are indebted for spiritual and eternal life."

The Goal of Discipline

Chastisement is the holy discipline of the heavenly Father. "Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share

His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Hebrews 12:9-17).

God's goal is that we will bear fruit of righteousness. In the allegory of the vine Jesus teaches that the Father wants us to produce an abundant harvest of fruit. The vinedresser "cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2). The subject of the passage is sanctification, not salvation. When the vinedresser has finished cutting away the old branches, the only thing left are the essential branches that will produce an abundant harvest at the end of the season. The divine Vinedresser is at work in our lives using discipline to cut away all that is worthless and useless spiritually.

God wants us to be holy.

"Positive holiness" is the emphasis in this passage. F. F. Bruce says, "the emphasis is rather different from that found earlier in the epistle where the sanctification procured for believers by the sacrifice of Christ is that cleansing of conscience which fits them to approach God in worship. That was the initial gift of holiness; the holiness mentioned here is rather the goal for which God is preparing His people—that entire sanctification which is consummated in their manifestation with Christ in glory. But this consummation is not attained 'sudden, in a minute' . . ." (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 359).

God designs discipline for what is best for us. He disciplines us so we will produce righteousness. His goal is holiness. Chastisement has an amazing way of correcting our wrong thinking, attitudes and behavior. God uses it to bring about behavioral changes in our lives. "But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:32).

The heavenly father is the source of eternal life. How tragic when people turn away from Him. How many tragically drop out when the hardship and discipline comes. I have observed through the years that for some the pressures of life cause them to flee to Jesus' loving arms, while others use it as an excuse to drop out of the Christian race giving evidence that they never did belong to Him.

God sanctifies those whom he redeems.

One of the ways God sanctifies us from the power of sin is by His chastening. God has called us to holiness. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality . . . For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3, 7). Chastisement is part of God's sanctifying work. God sanctifies those whom He redeems. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Hebrews 2:11). "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). God will not give up on us if we are truly His children because no one will see the Lord and stand in His presence apart from His holiness.

We need to always distinguish the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is our legal standing with God based upon the saving death of Christ. The believing sinner is declared to be right with God based upon that sacrifice. It is a foreign, alien righteousness in the sense that we do not merit or earn that right standing with God in any manner. It is God's provision for the believing sinner. God declares the sinner right with Him the very moment that sinner believes or receives Christ as their Savior. The infinite payment that satisfies the righteous demands of a holy God forever were paid in full for all who believe on Christ. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption

which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:23-26).

Sanctification begins the moment a person is justified by faith. It is the moment by moment separation from sin to God and continues throughout this earthly life. Positionally we are separated to God and are His possession for all eternity. All believers obtained God's holiness judicially, past sanctification, but here the writer is concerned with our present sanctification which takes place daily. Then one day our sanctification will be consummated and we will be perfect, just like Jesus Christ. That will happen when we see Jesus face to face in heaven. We will one day be glorified with Christ in heaven.

Since we are not yet perfect in our Christ-likeness we need the discipline of God. Every believer experiences this discipline because God loves us and wants us to be like Him. His goal is "that we may be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 2:10). The apostle Peter wrote: be ". . . like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior" (1 Peter 1:15). Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The LORD God is holy.

"Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The holiness God seeks is inward, in the heart. "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood And has not sworn deceitfully" (Psalm 24:4).

Why is holiness so important?

"Sanctification" or "holy" in v. 14 is the Greek word *hagiasmos*. It has the same root as the adjective *hagios* meaning "holy," "separated." The root meaning is always separation. The Christian lives in the world, but he must always be different or separated from it. His attitudes, standards, values behavior is different from the worlds. B. F. Westcott said, *hagiasmos* is "the preparation for the presence of God." Our blessed hope is that one day we will see Him just as He is and we will be like Him. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Come. The unholy life is just the opposite. It is a life without the awareness of God. The attitudes, thinking, values, standards, behavior is focused on this world.

Obviously, God rejects hypocrites who put on a public display of self-righteousness. Only the pure in heart will see God. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). The apostle John states our blessed hope: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). To see the LORD God is to be like Him in His holiness. Only those who are holy will be admitted into His presence.

"Peace and holiness are two sides of the same coin. Holiness is not the state of perfection already attained. Rather, the word in the original Greek refers to the sanctifying process that occurs in the life of the believer. To put it differently, the believer reflects God's virtues. In so doing, he becomes more and more like Christ who through the Holy Spirit continues to work in the believer's heart. . . Jesus is the one who makes the believer holy (Heb. 2:11), Therefore, we as believers must do everything in our power to obtain holiness" (William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, pp. 384-385).

How do we become holy in God's eyes?

The only way sinners will ever be holy in God's eyes is achieved in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice for our sins. God the Father made Jesus our sanctification. The apostle Paul wrote: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Jesus is my wisdom. Jesus is my righteousness. Jesus is therefore my sanctification.

Every believer stands clothed in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). And there is the righteousness imparted to the believer as the Holy Spirit dwells within changing us from the inside out.

The apostle Paul encouraged Timothy to pursue holiness. "Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22). How do you do that? The Holy Spirit brings about these changes as we yield to His presence working in our daily lives. "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

When there is disharmony in a church you can be sure there is unholiness within.

"If some incipient sin manifests itself in their midst, it must be eradicated at once; if it is tolerated, this is a sure way of falling short of God's grace, for the whole community will then be contaminated. Such a sin is called a 'root of bitterness' . . ." (F. F. Bruce, *ibid*, p. 365).

The "chastening" and "scourging" has nothing to do with the payment for the penalty of sin. "The wages of sin is death . . ." Jesus died that death as our substitute. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was the righteous and perfect payment for our penalty of sin. Our sin debt has been paid in full by the death of Christ on the cross. God does not punish us; He punished Jesus Christ on the cross when He poured out His wrath on Him in our stead. Jesus is our sin-bearer who bore God's wrath for us, so that we would never bear that judgment. God does not punish us; He punished His Son on our behalf.

However hardships and pressures in life are aids to bring us to a closer fellowship with God. The Lord's chastening is designed to lead us to confess our sins, repent and grow in Christ-likeness. It is part of our training in godliness. God is shaping us, fashioning us, forming us into the likeness of Christ. Any attitude, imagination, desire, behavior, thought process that is not Christ-like will be brought under the discipline of God.

"All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11). This reminds us of Paul's admonition: "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). "The righteousness produced by discipline is that perfect righteousness which, imputed in justification and striven for in the Christian race, is fully imparted when at last the victor stands before his exalted Lord face to face (1 John 3:2); for it is indeed nothing other than the unblemished righteousness of Christ Himself" (Philip Hughes, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 533).

It is important to note that not all chastisement is because the believer is living in sin. True, we are all sinners, and God is working to draw us to Himself. He causes us to confess our sins. He convicts us of sin, causes us to confess them and repent. But He brings these pressures into our lives so we will grow in His grace and likeness.

God is in control of our discipline.

God's chastening is directed by His sovereign goal in our lives. God will not allow anything to touch us that has not already gone through His loving hands. God is more loving and demanding than any earthly parent.

God is in ultimate control of "all things" that work together for the good and wellbeing of His children. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:28-29). We get preoccupied with our happiness, physical wellbeing, material prosperity, but God is concerned about our spiritual wellbeing, our Christ-likeness.

He loves us with an infinite love and He has infinite power to bring about His eternal purpose in our lives. I often hear sincere well-meaning individuals say that sufferings are sent by God as punishment for sin. However, Jesus Christ, God's unique one of a kind Son, knew no sin, but learned obedience through His suffering. Believers should have this mind set regarding suffering. God's education program for His children includes discipline and it comes in many different forms. God does not vent His anger; He brings us to spiritual maturity and promotes holy living.

"The hostility of ungodly men is always difficult to endure, but it is overruled and turned to our advantage by God and it should be accepted, even gratefully, as chastisement from the hand of the Heavenly Father intended for the correction and benefit of those whom He receives as sons," declares Philip Hughes, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 528).

F. F. Bruce notes, "The man who accepts discipline at the hand of God as something designed by his heavenly Father for his good will cease to feel resentful and rebellious; he had 'stilled and quieted' his soul (cf. Ps. 131:2), which thus provides fertile soil for the cultivation of a righteous life, responsive to the will of God."

John Piper writes, "This whole passage is built on another answer to the question: Where does this suffering come from? And who's doing this? And who's in charge? The main answer of the passage is that God is in charge here, and that he is in ultimate control of these afflictions and that they are in fact the loving discipline of a perfect heavenly father. That's the burden of this passage."

Piper continues: "It says that God is disciplining us; he is teaching us and correcting us and transforming us. In other words, God has a purpose and a design in what is happening to us. God is the ultimate doer here. Verse 6b goes so far as to say, "[God] scourges every son whom he receives." Who is scourging? Who is whipping? (See 11:36). God is. God is not a passive observer in our lives while sinners and Satan beat us up. He rules over sinners and Satan, and they unwittingly, and with no less fault or guilt, fulfil his wise and loving purposes of discipline in our lives."

Piper adds, ". . . some Christians simply will not believe. They say that God is not in charge of the evil that happens to us. That he has given the world over to Satan and the free will of man. But it will not work in this passage. The hostility of sinners is real and it is wrong and responsible and guilty. But it is also - and this is a great hope for us - it is also the loving, painful discipline of our Father in heaven. God is not coming to his children late after the attack, and saying, "I can make this turn for good." That is not discipline. That is repair. It's the difference between the surgeon who plans the incision for our good, and the emergency room doctor who sews us up after a freak accident. This text says, God is the doctor planning our surgery, not the doctor repairing our lacerations." (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/the-painful-discipline-of-our-heavenly-father>).

Why does the author mention Esau?

Esau rejected his birthright. He brought judgment upon himself and became an embittered person. He did not go to God with true repentance that leads to salvation. He is an example of the earthbound. He had no interest in the things of God until the end. He was bound by earthly pleasures. When it came to repentance there was no change of mind. The word repent in the Greek means a change of mind. There are certain choices we make in life that have eternal consequences. There is a certain finality in life, and the decisions you make determine where you will spend eternity. God can and will forgive when we repent and put our trust in the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. But when we reject God's saving grace we must abide forever by that choice.

How do you respond to God's discipline in your life?

What is God teaching me in this experience?

The right response to divine discipline promotes our sanctification.

The Christian who accepts discipline at the hand of a loving heavenly Father as something designed for his good will cease to feel bitterness and rebellious toward God. He will grow in righteousness and respond to the will of God.

One day we will stand before the Lord and give account of how we have lived our lives here on the earth. "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (1 Corinthians 4:5). Like the apostle Paul, I do not want to run the race and then be disqualified. It is worth the discipline and chastisement now so that we can declare: ". . . the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Discipline requires humility on our part. We can get angry and resent God for His disciplining hand. We can accept it with self-pity thinking we are like everyone else and we really don't deserve it. Why pick on me? We can respond to it with a grateful submissive attitude in appreciation of God's love, grace and purpose that we become holy in our daily lives.

Some Abiding Principles and Practical Applications

"The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thess. 2:3).

"The world has yet to see what God can do with, and for, and through a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him," said Henry Varley. By God's grace I will be that man. We need a Spirit-produced love for Christ. I pray that He will create a hunger in our hearts for Him.

Holiness is being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

God the Father disciplines us for our good and His glory. He brings into our lives whatever is necessary to accomplish His eternal purpose which is Christ-likeness. These painful experiences cause us to grow in His likeness.

The mature Christian is the disciplined Christian.

Hugh Latimer said affliction stirs up in us a desire to be like Christ. When everything is going our way we care not for Christ, "but when we be in tribulation, and cast into prison, then we have a desire to Him; then we learn to call upon Him; then we hunger and thirst after Him; then we are desirous to feed upon Him. As long as we be in health and prosperity we care not for Him; we be slothful" (Hugh Latimer, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 463). Do you hunger and thirst for Christ?

Fiery trials purify our faith as gold is tested and purified by fire.

We are always in training. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to knock off the rough edges of our character, convict us of sin, bring us to repentance, and submission to the Father's will. When we do not respond to His gentle wooing, He will use whatever hardship necessary to accomplish His goal in our lives. He will put us through the fire to make us holy. His goal is our holiness; not our happiness.

Suffering is only rightly understood when seen as our heavenly Father's discipline.

Suffering is evidence that God's truly loves us. It is essential that we view our sufferings as the Lord's discipline rather than His displeasure or judgment. He knows what is best for us.

We need to build up our faith so we can work effectively and run without stumbling.

God sends trials and hardships designed to strengthen our faith in Him. The renewing of our faith and spiritual power comes as we draw upon our spiritual resources in the Word of God applied to our hearts by our Great High Priest.

Tertullian said, "You can judge the quality of their faith from the way they behave. Discipline is an index to doctrine."

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