

Discipline: God's Love on Display

In this series from Hebrews 12:3-6, we've looked at how God is preparing his children for all the struggles, trials, and disappointments that we'll face in this life. For the sake of clarity, it needs to be said that there are sometimes difficulties in our lives that happen simply because we live in a broken world. We can also experience suffering and disappointments because of the sins of others. And yet, the focus of this series is on God's fatherly discipline. Keep in mind that discipline pertains—not merely and only to that which is punitive—it also pertains to regular, positive training from the Scriptures, as well as life experiences that God has ordained for our ongoing growth. As we study the truths of Scripture, we learn that God not only trains his children by his Word, he trains us through a process of providential events that come into our lives—often as challenges and sometimes chastening hardships—all of this to mature us in our faith or trust in God which, necessarily, connects to growth in godliness. In an analogous way, Christian parents train their children by following the principles and precepts of God's word. Therefore, Christian children are to be trained in a myriad of biblically acceptable ways including formal education, training at home to help around the house, situations where a child is challenged by demanding experiences designed to spur different types of development and growth. We can also include discipline for disobedience, in age-appropriate ways, when needed.

19th century pastor and author, J.C. Ryle writes, "By affliction [God] teaches us many precious lessons, which, without it we should never learn. By affliction He shows us our emptiness and weakness, draws us to the throne of grace, purifies our affections, weans us from the world, makes us long for heaven. In the resurrection morning we shall all say, 'It is good for me that I was afflicted.' We shall thank God for every storm." It's important to note that biblically healthy growth requires a *proper response* to God's fatherly discipline.

Now, having said that God "disciplines" us, verse 5 gives us two examples of ways in which we're *not to respond* to the trials and suffering that comes into our lives. I'll note also that verses 5-6 come from the Old Testament book of Proverbs 3:11-12. One wrong way that we could respond to "discipline" is to "regard it lightly." (vs. 5) This phrase, as you might imagine, means to not take seriously the ways in which God may be working in the challenges and trials that come into your life. This person disregards the intent of God to train us in suffering. He or she is unwilling to seek to learn the lessons that God desires to teach. The practical outworking of this attitude is when we're just wanting to get this over with. The only prayer this Christian ever prays in times of suffering is, "Lord, just take this away from me as fast as you can."

Another way that we're *not to respond* when God brings trials and suffering is in becoming "weary." (vs. 5) The word "weary" can speak of being "tired" but here it refers to "losing courage." One New Testament scholar has written that—instead of the courage to trust God in the midst of struggles—this person "responds with self-pity, or anger." This is the person whose primary response is, "What did I do to deserve this?" There's no joy to be found, only unhappiness. There's no thankfulness for what God intends to do but, over time, there's built up bitterness. What's a better way to think of the challenges that come to us?

Look with me now in verse 6: “For the Lord disciplines *the one he loves*, and chastises every *son* whom he receives.” We saw the phrase “My son...”, at the beginning of verse 5. Our author is giving us an incredibly comforting truth. Rather than thinking of the suffering that we go through as only something difficult and negative (i.e. “I don’t deserve this”), we’re to think of this as *coming to us because of God’s love for his children!* Sadly, in our day, many people have bought into the secular psychology of child rearing that says in effect, “I show my love to my children by *never* punishing them for disobedience.”

We’re told that if we spank our children, it will cause psychological problems in their development, resulting in immature and dysfunctional adults. In fact, in some parts of society, appropriately spanking our children is seen as *child abuse*. But scripture gives us a very different picture. In Proverbs 13:24 we read: “Whoever spares the rod *hates his son*, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.” This is exactly what God does in our lives. “Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. So, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.” (Deuteronomy 8:5-6) Theologian and author, J.I. Packer, in his book “Knowing God,” writes: “This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort or another. It is to ensure that we shall learn to hold him fast...God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore, He takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Him...”

How can we apply what we’ve seen from this passage?

Application:

—God our Father disciplines his children because of his love for us. God’s discipline, rightly responded to, brings healthy, spiritual growth in our lives.

—Healthy spiritual growth includes the *positive* training of growing in our knowledge of God through his word and the—at least in the moment it seems—*negative* training of trials, difficulty and suffering.

—How should we respond?

a. As we saw in verse 6, we want to *think seriously* (‘do not regard lightly’) about the lessons that God may be teaching us. We need to pray—not merely and only that God would immediately take away our suffering—but that we would suffer as long as God intends. Our suffering should not be met with discontentment or despair, but we want to find joy in his fatherly love for us no matter what comes.

b. Secondly, rather than being angry in the moment or growing bitter over time, we need to be regularly gathered for worship and availing ourselves to the means of grace; taking in God’s Word preached and taught; meditating on God’s goodness and pondering what God may be doing in our suffering and even whether or not our sin, in any way, may have contributed to what we’re going through. Through godly discipline, God’s love for his children is on display.

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