

God's Discipline

Hebrews 12:4-11

Imagine with me two children in the same family. Like all children, each of them misbehaves on occasion. When you discipline child #1, the reaction you get (through body language and words) is basically, "Leave me alone! I know I'm not perfect, but I don't need you to tell me how to act. You're not helping me; you're just making me mad."

Child #2 reacts very differently when disciplined. This child says, "Mom/Dad, thanks for being so committed to me. It's not very fun, but I know you're trying to teach me things that will make me a better person someday. I know you discipline me because you love me. Mom/Dad, you're the best."

Even though this has never ever happened in the history of humanity, every parent would love to have their kids respond to discipline like child #2, right? Kids who don't receive their parents' discipline are at a great disadvantage in this world. Today's passage tells us that God would also like it if **His** children would respond to **His** discipline like child #2. God is a heavenly Father who disciplines us because He loves us and wants us to grow up and have all the advantages of holiness.

On one level I suspect that we all agree in theory with this basic idea. But for at least a couple of reasons, the idea that God disciplines us for our good might be hard to hear and apply. First, you may not have had a healthy relationship (or any relationship) with your earthly father. If that's your situation, this passage may be hard to hear. That's actually my situation. I can't remember a single time that my father disciplined me growing up. I don't remember a single time when he corrected me or intentionally tried to teach me some life lesson. When I read that "we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them. . ." (12:9) my mind is blank; that just wasn't my experience.

Your situation may be a lot worse than mine. If your father was harsh or abusive in any way, you might have to unlearn some things about "fathers" before you can hear what the author is saying. You might have grown up believing that discipline is punishment for the past (vs. discipline being a way to train you for the future), or that discipline is an expression of anger (vs. an expression of love) or that God only disciplines us when we've messed up (vs. training/teaching us in any and every circumstance). You might need to unlearn some misconceptions before you can learn how God disciplines you as a wise, skillful, and compassionate heavenly Father.

Second, childhood is something that we "outgrow" in our earthly families. When you become an adult you relate to your parents more as peers. Consequently, as adults we find it hard to view ourselves as children whose heavenly Father is actively disciplining us and trying to teach us what we need to know. This is one reason it was so shocking that Jesus said to grown men and women, "Unless you become as little children you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Discipleship involves being re-parented. As children we need to adopt a stance of teachability and humility before God (instead of self-sufficiency).

Given these challenges, let's try to hear what the author is saying in this passage.

Receiving our heavenly Father's discipline. (*Hebrews 12:4-7*) After challenging us to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles" us in order to "run with endurance," the author talks about the Father's role in all of this. In verse 4 our author puts the Hebrews' experience in context.

4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

Back in chapter 10 the author had acknowledged that his readers had suffered for their faith (even joyfully). But in contrast to Jesus and some of the examples given in chapter 11 (11:37), they hadn't yet been required to shed their own blood in their "striving against sin" (i.e. sinful people). Even though they had suffered, they hadn't suffered as much as others who had run well. Yet they were thinking about dropping out of the race.

In verses 5 and 6 our author quotes from Proverbs 3. Remember that in the book of Proverbs a father is writing to his son as he is moving out into the world. Every year incoming freshman at K-State are given a book (e.g. Hunger Games or Ready Player One); my recommendation would be the book of Proverbs. It is tailor-made for someone who is leaving home for the first time: "watch out for people who want you to join them in all sorts of dangerous activities; watch out for women (or men) who try to seduce you; don't forget what you've been taught at home; seek wisdom like it's precious treasure." The author of Hebrews points out that Proverbs 3:11-12 is actually addressed to all believers, including his readers (including us!).

5 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;
6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,
And He scourges every son whom He receives."

Because the Hebrews weren't welcoming God's discipline, the author says that they had "forgotten" what Proverbs 3 says about God's discipline. They weren't mindful that God is continually training and teaching His children through everything that they experience. There's a sense in which we're responsible for what we "forget" because in Scripture we're repeatedly told to "remember" the character and works and words of God. And we certainly need to remember that He disciplines His children.

Proverbs 3:11-12 employs classic Hebrew parallelism; the first line makes a statement which the second line reiterates and clarifies. The first line in verse 5 (which is Proverbs 3:11) says, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord," and the second line restates and clarifies, "Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him." When God disciplines you, don't ignore it or blow it off. And don't "faint" in the sense of thinking that He's being harsh with you; your discipline hasn't involved bloodshed.

The first line of verse 6 (which is Proverbs 3:12) says, “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,” and the second line reiterates and clarifies, “And He scourges every son whom He receives.” God’s discipline is an expression of His love. God cares enough about our maturity that He takes the time and exerts the effort necessary to discipline us. He is even willing to let us experience pain if that is what will train us better than anything else.

This is probably as good a time as any to mention that when we are experiencing some type of suffering/pain, we need to be careful to ask the right question. Actually I don’t think there are any wrong questions; but we need to realize that God isn’t committed to answering every question. We tend to ask questions like, “Why did this happen to me?” or “God, why didn’t you stop this from happening to me?” or “Did God or Satan bring this suffering into my life?”

Those are legitimate questions, but today’s passage suggests that the **main** question we should be asking is, “Father, what are you trying to teach me through my suffering?” In the midst of everything we **don’t** know about our suffering, we **do** know that God is such a loving Father that He is disciplining us through that suffering.

In verse 7 the author shows the connection between “endurance” and God’s discipline.

7 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? 8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

When he says, “It is for discipline that you endure,” he is saying that one of the core reasons we need to endure/persevere through this life is because God is disciplining us. If we quit running with endurance the race set before us, we are actually rejecting God’s discipline; we are basically saying to Him that we don’t want to learn what He is teaching us. The author stresses here that whether we want Him to or not, God is going to keep dealing with us as any good father deals with his children.

Can you identify ways that God is disciplining you? You don’t have to make anything up; just think about the big things that are happening in your life (the things that are joyful, the things that are painful, and everything in between). This is where you pull out all the theology and Bible knowledge you’ve accumulated over the years. This is where you need to believe that God is disciplining you and trying to teach you the things that are advocated in Scripture.

What are “the sins that so easily entangle you” and keep you from running with endurance? God is disciplining you, teaching you to love Him more than that sin. Maybe He’s wanting to reveal to you a cluster of lies that surround that sin. Maybe He is trying to show you that you can’t lay aside that sin without His grace every single day. Those are biblical ideas that we know God wants to teach us.

How have you bumped up against your weaknesses this past week? When you experience weakness (of body or mind or will) you can rest assured that God is trying to

teach you that “His power is perfected in your weakness”; maybe God wants to teach you to quit being obsessed with your weaknesses; God wants to show you how His power is actually best displayed in the context of your weakness. This is what Scripture teaches in 2 Corinthians 12, therefore, we know that this is what God is teaching His children.

Those are just examples. Can you identify ways that God is disciplining you? After establishing that God disciplines us simply because He is a good heavenly Father, the author discusses the **fruit** of such discipline.

The Fruit of our heavenly Father’s Discipline. (Hebrews 12:9-11) In verses 9 and 10 the author appeals to the experience in a normal, healthy family in which a father does the best he can to train up his children.

9 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? 10 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.

“Bad dads” get lots of press, but there are many, many wonderful fathers whose children grow up respecting and loving them. Some of you, no doubt, grew up with deep respect for your fathers and with profound gratitude for what they contributed to your life. The author acknowledges in verse 10 that earthly fathers are fallible: “they disciplined us for a short time *as seemed best to them*”; they weren’t perfect, but they disciplined us out of the best discernment they had. And we received wisdom and direction for our lives.

Given this experience with earthly fathers, the author makes the appeal, “shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?” If we receive discipline from the fathers of our flesh, shouldn’t we also receive discipline from the Father of our spirits. . . and live! Just as Jesus came that we might have life in abundance, our heavenly Father disciplines us so that we might really live. The author states a complementary idea at the end of verse 10: *God “disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.”* Here he’s talking about holiness in the sense of sanctification, becoming progressively more godly and Christlike and spiritual. Just as God is full of life, when we share His holiness we are also full of life - we really live. This confirms that God’s discipline isn’t punishment; it’s forward-looking training in how to experience life.

An Aside: I’d like to share a key thought for those of you who are parents (or who want to be parents or who know any parents). My favorite book on parenting is *Like Dew Your Youth* by Eugene Peterson; the subtitle is “Growing Up with Your Teenager.” Peterson advocates viewing parenting as an apprenticeship in which parents **show** their children from their own lives how to walk with God. You have them look at your life - your successes, your failures, your virtues, your sins - so they can see first-hand how a real, live Christian negotiates this life. Sadly, however, many Christian parents have stopped growing and learning directly from God. Consequently they aren’t able to demonstrate how to walk with God by their

own lives; instead, all they do is narrate their children's lives. Instead of an apprenticeship, parenting becomes one long lecture.

Applying this perspective to today's passage, consider how much more powerful your discipline of your children would be if they could see how God is disciplining **you**. What if, for example, you were able to show your kids how God has been training you to put aside anger and anxiety when things don't go your way. Instead of telling them, "Don't get angry!" (in an angry voice), you could apprentice them: "Learn from my life how to lay aside the anger that will slow you down and trip you up as you run the race God has given you." Parents, if you aren't receiving **God's** discipline, it's highly unlikely that your children will receive **your** discipline.

In verse 11 our author challenges us to look past the discipline we experience to the fruit that that discipline will produce.

11 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.

In the moment discipline is "sorrowful"; it's no fun being disciplined. "Yet to those who have been trained by it" - those who actually submit to discipline instead of rejecting it - "afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

I can remember two ways that my mom disciplined us (four boys). Sometimes she would make us go out and harvest a "switch" from the privet hedge that grew in our yard; she would strip off the leaves and use the branch as a switch on the back of our legs (we wore really short shorts back then). Other times, when we got "lippy," she would threaten, "I'm gonna wash your mouth out with soap." She claims she never actually made good on that threat, but my oldest brother and I remember the taste of Dove soap in our mouths. She would lather up her hand with soap and then swab out our mouths.

The author of Hebrews certainly "nailed it": At the time, my mom's discipline was sorrowful, not joyful. I didn't walk away from her discipline thinking, "Mom, it's so satisfying to realize that you love me enough to wash my mouth out with soap." No, at the time her discipline was a pain. But we all learned some basic virtues through our mom's discipline. Looking back as an adult and as a parent, I'm so glad she disciplined us because of the fruit it produced.

I would say a similar thing about God's discipline. As a pastor, for example, I have experienced the type of hardships that all pastors and church leaders experience. Some of it was my fault; some of it wasn't; most of it was a combination. But God has been faithful to use every bit of it to teach me things and to train me in different ways.

As some of you know, about eight years ago we experienced a lot of conflict here at Faith; it was by far the most painful thing I've experienced as a pastor. For a couple of years nothing was fun/enjoyable about church life. It was very tempting to quit caring or to give up (or move away or whatever). I would **never** want to go through all of that pain

and turmoil again, but I wouldn't trade **anything** for what God taught me through those years. God disciplined me through the pain. God's discipline came through prayer, the Word, conversations with others, and counseling (lots of counseling). He humbled me; He showed me that I should care less about some things and more about other things; He showed me that my worth as a person isn't linked to how I think the church is doing; etc. That whole experience was painful, but it produced great fruit in my life.

Don't grow weary and lose heart when God disciplines you. If you endure, the sorrow will eventually give way to the peaceful fruit of righteousness. I would encourage you to discern from Scripture the fruit that God's discipline might produce in your life. If God is disciplining you in relation to some sin that "easily entangles you," catch a vision for what your life might be like if you actually learn from Him how to "lay it aside." Think of the peace you would experience instead of the turmoil that sin causes; think of the time and energy you could expend in other ways (instead of indulging that sin, dealing with that sin, and its fallout); think of the satisfaction you would have from knowing that God's grace is greater than your sin. In whatever way God is disciplining you, try to discern the fruit that His discipline might produce. That vision can be powerful in your life.

I'd like to close with a biblical example of someone who went through a painful, sorrowful experience of God's discipline and came out on the other side with "the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Case Study in Discipline: Pride and Humility. Judas and Peter are a great study in contrasts. They were both filled with pride in the days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. Judas was so very prideful that he believed that he knew better than God's own Son what was best; he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Peter was proud in a different way. He was proud enough to believe that he was more committed to Jesus than anybody else, and that he would die with Jesus if necessary. But he denied Jesus three times as predicted. We are told that Satan filled Judas (John 13:27) and that Satan demanded permission to sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31).

The contrast comes in how they responded. Judas took his own life, but Peter went out and wept tears of repentance. Peter received his heavenly Father's discipline and learned how to walk in humility. By the time Peter wrote the letter we call 1 Peter, he was a different man. He wrote things like, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. . ." (1 Peter 5:5). Peter was a changed man. Instead of walking in pride, he became a leading advocate of humility in the early church. That's the fruit of receiving God's discipline.

You and I can respond to God's discipline like Peter did. God is continually disciplining us because He loves us; that's what a good Father does. Let's pay attention to Him and learn from Him and experience His life.