

"God's Discipline = Our Holiness"
(Hebrews 12:4-11)
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Introduction:

NIV Hebrews 12:4-11

⁴*In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

⁵*And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:*

*"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

⁶*because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."*^{ix}

⁷*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

⁹*Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

It's been a while since we talked about holiness. How are we doing with it? We are five months into this year. Are you more holy? Maybe you started well, but sort-of lost some steam. Maybe you never got on the bandwagon at all. Maybe you are cruising along at a good holiness pace. Whichever one of these describes you, it isn't too late. Friends, holiness and the pursuit of it is not optional. It is an inseparable part of being a child of God, of being a Christian. So even when this year comes to a close and 2011 arrives and we focus on a different theme, we still need to be pursuing holiness. There will always be another sin to address, another character flaw to change, another temptation to resist. So folks, sorry, but quitting is not an option.

Holiness is so important to God because it is deeply rooted in his character. It is a part of who he is. Remember we learned that the holiness of God means two things. One is his complete otherness. Holiness = "who among the God's is like you?" Answer: no one. There is none like God. He is holy. The other side of the holiness of God is his absolute moral perfection. There is nothing wicked or evil or sinful when it comes to God. He is pure and always does what is right.

God is to us the beginning and end of holiness. He is the standard, the enabler, the reason, and the motivation for our holiness. In today's passage however, God gives us another reason for why we should be holy. The reason is the love of God for us.

The first thing we need to have is perspective (4).

⁴*In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

When we are knee deep in temptation and sin, having perspective might be the last thing on our mind. But it may be one of the most important things to possess. It's the perspective to say, "It's not as bad as I think." And "It could be a lot worse."

The author of Hebrews is saying that there is a temptation, a sin that is so intense that it can put our physical lives in danger. What exactly is that sin? Well, often times we think of sin as that inner struggle, the so-called demon within. And this is true for sure, but sometimes the sin is out there, in society, in culture and seeks to seep in like a fog at times and other times it comes crashing down like a hammer.

To the recipients of this letter it was persecution for being Christian, and in its ultimate form persecution can eventually take the lives of Christians, as it has since the time of Christ and still does today. Persecution can mean the loss of property, the loss of work, the loss of reputation. It can mean ridicule, exclusion, or isolation which might be the form it takes in our culture. To apply this a bit more broadly, one commentator (Lane) says the sin is that which is in opposition to the church. What is the sin that is against the church in Canada? Is it materialism? Is it complacency? Is it prayerlessness? Is it immorality? Is it parts of our society and government which espouses values that are contrary to the teachings of Scripture? Probably all of these things have the ability to derail a church, even ours. So you and I must maintain our vigil.

But something is implied in this verse. What the author is implying here is that holiness of body and spirit is more important than our physical well-being.

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Isn't this the implication? Didn't Jesus say similar things like:

If your eye....gouge.....if your hand...cut it off. He was using extreme figurative language, but he was dead serious about holiness.

And didn't he also say that if they hated me, they will also hate you? As his followers we shouldn't at all be surprised, not if, but when persecution comes.

Even Paul writes:

Ephesians 6:12

¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The battle we are in is a cosmic battle between good and evil and we're in the thick of it. This is the perspective we all must have.

But there's more to our struggles than just having perspective. Our struggles and suffering are a sign of sonship (5-8).

⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

*"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

⁶*because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."*

⁷*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?* ⁸*If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

The author of Hebrews quotes verses from Proverbs 3 which is the words of a loving father to his maturing son, teaching him life lessons, warnings and the like. Here the author is saying that our struggles prove that we are the children of God. This is where the love of God comes in as a motivation for our holiness.

At first, you may think this is ludicrous. How does suffering or persecution or trials prove that God loves me? Wouldn't blessings and gifts from God prove better prove that God loves me? Yes, the blessings and gifts of God are the ultimate expression of his love for us, but what comes with that is the chastisement and discipline of God that comes often comes in the form of suffering.

Jerry Bridges reminds us of several scripture passages that tell us that God brings blessing as well as suffering.

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14a

¹³ *Consider what God has done:
Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?*
¹⁴ *When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider:
God has made the one
as well as the other.*

Isaiah 45:7

⁷ *I form the light and create darkness,
I bring prosperity and create disaster;
I, the LORD, do all these things.*

Lamentations 3:37-38

³⁷ *Who can speak and have it happen
if the Lord has not decreed it?*
³⁸ *Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that both calamities and good things come?*

Amos 3:6

⁶ *When a trumpet sounds in a city,
do not the people tremble?
When disaster comes to a city,
has not the LORD caused it?*

But every parent knows that this is true. We give our children both corrective discipline and training discipline. Don't we? Corrective discipline comes in the form of punishment when kids do something wrong. And training discipline comes in the form of exercises to build up a character trait or habit. So you don't use the bible reading or going to church as a punishment, I hope. You instill those habits to build up their faith. Even if you are not a parent, you know of people, or maybe you yourself, who resented their parents for not disciplining them. And as adults, their cry is, "if only my parents had been a bit stricter, a bit less permissive and so on." Discipline is a sign that we are loved.

So when we are going through trials, when our holiness is being sharpened, the author says "NOT" to do three things.

1. Don't forget the father-child relationship. Nothing, no trial, will ever change that. Don't forget the verses, "Never will I leave you nor forsake you." "Surely I am with you always." "Nothing can separate me from the love of God.
2. Don't make light of. Don't treat it lightly. Don't shrug it off. Don't ignore it. Don't make like its not important. It may be the most important thing going on in your life at that

particular time. Here's how CS Lewis said it in his book *The Problem of Pain*. "C.S. Lewis writes in his book "The Problem of Pain"

"God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

3. Finally, Don't lose heart. Don't be discouraged. Don't get depressed. Don't let it overwhelm you.

Why? Because the Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son (or daughter). It is a proof that there exists a real living parent-child relationship between God and us. It proves we are his children.

So what then is the proper response to these trials?

We need to endure them. Receive it. Embrace it.

According to Jerry Bridges all hardship is for the purpose of corrective discipline. So for the Christians there is no pain without purpose. All of it has a divine purpose. The discipline mentioned here is corrective, loving discipline. Which includes training, instruction, and firm guidance with those of reproof, correction and punishment.

And we have as an example all the champions of faith in Hebrews 11 and we have the Son of God, Jesus himself, in the beginning of chapter 12 that had this attitude toward suffering and trials. We must share the same.

This is normal. We mustn't think it strange that God would be disciplining us. I don't waste my time disciplining and correcting my neighbor's children. They're not mine. The focus of all of my parenting energy is directed toward my own three children. Because they're mine.

In fact, if we are not disciplined, then we are not the children of God. Now that's a scary thought isn't it?

What is the struggle you are going through now? What is the suffering that is in your life? It is a sign of the love of God. It is a sign that we are his children.

The result of God's chastisement is our holiness (9-11).

⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

The author begins this section by comparing earthly fathers against God the father. Here are the differences:

Earthly fathers – temporal (for 18 yrs), as they thought best (at their discretion, according to their wisdom)

Spiritual father – eternal, for our good. Always. For the best and greatest purposes.

When we go through these difficult situations we can easily blame our circumstance as some event of chance—wrong place - wrong time, coincidence, fluke. But really, these are not viable options for people who believe in an omnipresent, all wise, and benevolent God.

Some of us might blame people. It's never our fault. If only I hadn't married him. If only I had a different boss. If only my child had a better temperament, and so on.

Other people blame themselves when bad things happen. It's because I didn't go to church or because I sinned, etc. Jerry Bridges brings out some really good wisdom regarding this.

"Can we tell if a particular adversity is related to some specific sin in our lives? Not with certainty, but it is my own belief that the Holy Spirit will bring such a connection to our attention if we need to know in order to deal with a particular sin. If nothing comes to mind, we can pray, asking God if there is something He wants us to consciously learn. Beyond that, however, it is vain to speculate as to why God has brought a particular hardship into our lives. Part of the sanctifying process of adversity is its mystery, that is, our inability to make any sense out of a particular hardship." (233-234 Discipline of Grace)

I love that last sentence. The struggle to make sense out of the hardship is part of the sanctifying process. Isn't that true? When a terrible suffering comes our way and we ask why and we can't understand why, but we look to the Lord for comfort, trusting over and over again, that he is good, his love endures forever. That is incredibly sanctifying.

As well, we know that God, our Father, in his sovereignty, places certain circumstances of suffering, conflict, people, trials in our lives. Why? To build within us a godly character. Character is everything. We are nothing without it.

So then, things like conflict become teaching moments. Jim Van Yperen said it just last weekend, "there is nothing like conflict to tell us who you are. Or conflict reveals our character." Isn't that true? Conflict tells us if we are evasive, passive, defensive or aggressive. All of which are improper responses to conflict. The only response to conflict is to speak the truth in love.

So at the end of the day all the trial, suffering, correction, even punishments exists for what reason? Our holiness.

The phrase "Share in his holiness" has had a couple opinions in terms of its meaning. 1. Eternally, when we die, when we go to heaven, we are completely holy and will fully share in the holiness of God. That's one idea. The other idea is 2. Presently, now, as we endure God's correction, we will taste and experience the holiness of God. We will receive a greater and increasing measure of his holiness in our lives, or another way to put it is that we will be sanctified. I don't know exactly which is the right one, but the bible speaks of both.

For example in Acts 14:22, Paul and his companions said,
"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,"

But at the same time, when God corrects us, we begin to taste and see that the Lord is good. We start to get a glimpse into the very holiness of God. And this can only happen through God's loving discipline.

So one conclusion from this teaching is two things, both deeply interdependent.

1. Holiness is of supreme importance in a Christian's life. Of all the things the author mentions as a goal of discipline, he singles out holiness. This is our goal. As our memory verse this month says, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."

2. God's discipline is necessary. We are a culture that avoids pain, suffering, discomfort, even inconvenience. Our culture would say treat it. Avoid it. Run away from it. Medicate it. God says, embrace it. This is for your own good.

For many of us when we go through suffering we ask "Why? Why God, why would you do this to me. What have I done to deserve this? After all I've done for you."

It's because we are still unteachable. Because our spirits still have not been broken. It's because we still believe that God exists for me, not me for God. Because we lack the spirituality of Job who said to wife, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

For others we say, "Why God? Why is this happening to me? What is it you are trying to teach me? What part of my character are you shaping?" "How might this be preparing me for some future good?" even, "Is there a certain sin I have committed and caused you great offense?" The psalmist wrote:

Psalm 119:67,71

*⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I obey your word.*

*⁷¹ It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.*

Paul wrote down God's response to him as he asked for God to take away his suffering. "My grace is sufficient for you."

So which person are you? The bitter complainer? Or the humble child?

Friends, not all suffering builds character. This is absolutely true. You can go through tremendous amounts of suffering and the end result can be extreme bitterness and resentment. What kind of suffering builds character? It's the suffering that we humbly acknowledge is from a loving God who gave us nothing less than his own Son, Jesus. That this suffering has as its goal, holiness and is for our benefit. I believe this is the person God wants you to be.