

"Defining Discipline"

Hebrews 12:1-14

Tonight we will consider our Epistle lesson, Hebrews 12, focusing on the subject of God's **discipline** in our lives.

Discipline – It's really not a word that gives us the **warm fuzzies**, is it? I can't help but think of Maria, in the movie *The Sound of Music*, singing, with her beautiful voice about her some of her favorite things – things like:

*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens.*

Discipline just doesn't fit on a list like that, does it? There really is nothing "cute-sounding" about it. Who of us here, tonight, would say, " Oh yes, God's discipline! Love it! It's one of my favorite things in my walk with Jesus!"

No, you would not find this topic turning up on anyone's "favorites' list" – nor should it, for our text tonight makes it very clear that **discipline not a pleasant experience – in fact, it's painful!**

However, even though it seems to be a bit of a bummer, it is a subject we cannot ignore. We must consider it and be informed – for if we are a child of God, our text tells us, discipline from our heavenly Father is something we **will** experience.

As I considered our text from Hebrews 12 for tonight -- There were some questions that came to mind:

- What, exactly, is God's discipline? What is its purpose? How do I get through it?

Before we tackle these questions – let's consider some background:

This letter, that we call Hebrews, was written to early believers, most of them, it seems, who had converted from the Jewish faith to follow Christ --

But these early Christ-followers were caught in some very difficult circumstances. Following Jesus had come at great personal cost to them. Severe persecution, public insult, and suffering that included the loss of jobs, homes and possessions as well as strained and broken family relationships, because of their faith, had become commonplace – and all this hardship was taking a toll on their souls.

Some of them, as Bill reminded us last week, were becoming so weary and discouraged from the trials they were experiencing, that they seriously considered giving up the Christian faith and perhaps returning to Judaism.

And so this letter was written to **encourage** and also to **warn**. The author acknowledges the difficulties they are in, but tells them that **giving up is not an option**.

Instead, the message is:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Don't grow weary or lose heart!
Endure hardship. Why? Because what you're really experiencing is the **Father's discipline**.
The hard times you are in is really **God working in your life!**

This is probably not what these early believers expected to hear –

So what about us today? Regardless of the cause, suffering and hard times can lead to **disappointment, discouragement and doubt**.

What are you – or those you love -- struggling with tonight?

- a chronic health condition?
- a serious illness?
- a difficult relationship you can't escape?
- unemployment or some other financial crises?
- family or marriage difficulties?
- a rebellious child?
- a stressful work situation?
- the aftermath of a terrible accident?
- or some deep personal pain that hardly anyone knows about?

This list is endless – we can all fill in the blank with something --

So yes, we too, may at times find ourselves in the same frame of mind as these early Christians when the difficulties of life so close in on us that our weary souls cry, *"Enough! When is this ever going to end? I'm so tired of this – I just wish this would all go away!"*

And if, by God's grace, you are in a good place tonight – well then, praise God! – but we all know that sooner or later the difficulties will come –to us or those we love – we can expect them – they are part of life.

So, we find that the message about God's discipline written to these early believers in the midst of their difficult circumstances applies to us to.

Listen again to some of the verses from our reading tonight:

*My child, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
And do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
Because the Lord disciplines those he loves
And he punishes everyone he accepts as a child.*

*Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as children.
for God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*

*No 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.*

Discipline can be a tricky word:

For many of us, the word may have a very narrow definition.

This was demonstrated to me, when our oldest son, Ben -- who is now grown -- came to my desk one night when he was in the 4th or 5th grade, asking for help with a homework problem. While he waited for me to finish whatever it was I was doing so I could help him his eyes apparently caught the title of a book that was laying on my desk -- Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* -- for suddenly I heard a rather anxious, distressed voice say, "Gee, Mom, it's bad enough that you have to **discipline** us, let alone **celebrate** it!"

You see, for Ben, the word discipline had only one meaning. It met to **correct, chastise, or punish** for wrong behavior. But that is only **ONE** meaning of the word discipline.

Discipline can also mean "**to train, to instruct -- or even to shape or mold to get a desired result.**"

So when we speak of God's discipline in our lives, it is most helpful to realize that we are not **ONLY** talking about the **discipline of correction**.

This, I think, is a very important distinction to make.

I must admit, there have been times in the past, when I have found the concept of God's discipline very confusing because I held a narrow definition of the word.

If I was being disciplined, I reasoned, then I should be able to recognize the corresponding sin that God was correcting me for. But often, I couldn't. Not because I was perfect or sinless, of course but, frankly, I often didn't see any connection between the **painful and difficult situation** I was in and my specific behavior.

It left me grasping at straws. Could **this** be what God was correcting for? Or maybe it was **that**? Or maybe it was a sin I wasn't even aware of yet.

It made me feel a little bit like a child who asked their parent **why** they were given a time out and the parent answered, "You figure it out!"

I think we would all agree, not a good parenting technique -- and not a behavior that would build trust between parent and child!

When I finally realized that God's discipline was so much more Him just correcting me for those sinful patterns and habits in my life, (as important as that is) it freed me to really appreciate -- although **not enjoy** -- but at least **appreciate** what he was doing in my life -- and it allowed me to then respond appropriately.

So what, exactly, is God's discipline? I think in our text tonight we see at least **3 types of discipline**.

We might call these:

- The discipline of **correction**
- The discipline of **training**, and
- The discipline of **suffering**.

These types of discipline are not always completely separate in our lives for they surely may overlap, but I think it is very helpful to pull them apart in order to see **how** and **why** God uses each of them.

I've already mentioned the **discipline of correction** the type of discipline, I think, we are most familiar with and in a sense, it's self-explanatory – but I'll make a few comments about it.

Our text uses the words **rebuke**, **chastise** and **punish** And, regardless of the words we use to name it as a good Father, God **must** and **will** correct us for the **sin** in our lives.

Sin is essentially going our own way, instead of God's way but sin is much more than just a black mark on our record Sin is more like a cancer – an active, destructive force that will destroy us if left untreated.

James reminds us that when sin is **full-grown** it gives **birth** to death – Interesting words – *full-grown, birth* Sin is **alive** and sin **grows** --

So it makes perfect sense that our heavenly Father out of his deep love and concern for us will not let **sinful habits and patterns in our lives** go unchallenged. He will correct us – and we all know from experience that being under the conviction of the Holy Spirit is not a pleasant place to be and can, in fact, be quite painful. (I'm sure we could share some war stories about this!) But it is that **same pain** that often leads us to **confession, repentance** and **restoration**.

And that, of course, is the purpose of the **discipline of correction** Our Father is bringing us back to Himself in whatever way God chooses to correct us –

It might be through his written or spoken **Word** or letting us experience the consequences of our behavior (someone has wisely said: We are not punished FOR the sin, but BY the sin)

So – however his **conviction** come to us-- we can be sure that it will always be **specific** (the Holy Spirit will always reveal exactly what our sin is) and the purpose of his correction is always **restoration** -- not punishment; not condemnation.

So, that is the discipline of **correction**. But what about the **discipline of training**? Listen to some of the verses from our text as they read in *The Message*:

*This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's **training**, the normal experience of children. . . .
At the time, discipline isn't much fun.
It always feels like it's going against the grain.
Later, of course, it pays off handsomely,
for it's the **well-trained** who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.*

If we experience the **discipline of correction** because we have done something **wrong**, you could say that we experience the **discipline of training** because we have done something **right!**

Sometimes this type of discipline is called **pruning** and we are pruned, Jesus tells us, because we are **already bearing fruit** and pruning or training makes us even more fruitful!

The **discipline of training** is when God asks us to do the hard and difficult thing – yes, even the painful thing, in order to **train** us and **grow** us for what is ahead – both in this life and the one to come.

We see examples all through scripture where God led his children into difficult painful situations in order to train, shape, mold and grow the person. Many of the saints listed in Faith's Hall of Fame – Hebrews chapter 11 -- that Bill preached on last week, are examples of the **discipline of training**.

For example: God gave Abraham the promise of a child but then God had him wait 25 years before the promise became a reality. That was a hard 25 years to walk through, but God was training Abraham during that time.

After receiving the blessing of his son Isaac and enjoying him for a few years, God then asked Abraham to sacrifice his son! Another difficult and painful situation intentionally brought on by God.

But, with perfect hindsight, we know all of this was necessary -- getting Abraham ready for what God has planned for him – to become a **great example of faith** to those who came after him and to become the **Father of a great nation** that would bring salvation to all people.

Think of David who was anointed king over Israel by the prophet Samuel at God's direction and then spent years in the desert **running for his life** from King Saul. From the Psalms, we know that this was a very hard and difficult time for David. He feared he would die. But again, a necessary thing that shaped and molded David's character and taught him complete dependence on God.

There are also the lives of Noah, Moses, Joseph, Rahab, and Gideon – Details of the stories we don't have time to mention tonight – but people from who God asked costly and painful obedience – so that he could train them and make them to be so much more than they were.

We've all heard the phrase –
God loves us the way we are, but too much to leave us that way--
A cliché really -- but cliché because it's true!

I just read this week an address that may well be John Stott's last public sermon.
(He is 86 years old and has "officially" retired.)

In this sermon, he asked the question, "What is God's purpose for His people?" After mentioning several possible answers to this question – this is what he said:

*"I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth and it is – **God wants His people to become like Christ. Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God.** . . .*

God's overarching purpose is to bring all his children to **Christlikeness** -- And he will stop at nothing to accomplish this – Even if it means us experiencing painful training – because Christlikeness is that important – it has eternal consequences.

No pain, no gain, we often say -- If we are children of God, we can expect the **discipline of training** in our lives.

And now we come to what I call the **discipline of suffering** – While it is true that all discipline is not pleasant, but painful and therefore involves suffering, I think it is sometimes important to distinguish between the **causes** of our suffering.

I see the **discipline of suffering** as the suffering that comes to us just because we live in a fallen and broken world, a world permanently tainted by sin.

We like to see **cause** and **effect** in our lives – but sometimes our suffering has no cause other than the fact that we live in a fallen creation.

In Romans we are reminded that sin not only has personal consequences, but that **everything in creation** is affected as all of creation **groans** under the weight of sin.

We don't live in the perfect world that God originally created and blessed humans beings with. We live in a **suffering place** where things like sickness, disease, accidents, disasters, violence and the kingdom of darkness often hold sway – at least temporarily –

We are reminded each time we pray the Lord's Prayer that we live in a world where God's will is **NOT ALWAYS** done.

We live in a **suffering place** and God allows this suffering to **sometimes** touch our lives – even though it technically does not come from his hand, nor was it his **original plan** or his **design**.

The **good news** is that even this type of suffering is no accident for the child of God and our Father will even use the pain caused by this fallen world to **stretch** us and to **train** us and to **grow** us so that we may share in God's holiness.

We call this **redemptive suffering** – "senseless" suffering that seems to have no known cause, but suffering that is **given a purpose** in the hands of Jesus, our wonderful Redeemer.

Redemptive suffering is God *working all things together for good in our lives* – To quote from Stott again:

Suffering is part of God's process of making us like Christ. Whether we suffer from a disappointment, a frustration or some other painful tragedy, we need to try to see this in the light of Romans 8:28-29. According to Romans 8:28, God is always working for the good of his people, and according to Romans 8:29, this good purpose is to make us like Christ. (end quote)

So, what have we learned about God's discipline?

We can see that the **whole point** of God disciplining us and the **whole point** of our **enduring** that discipline, **accepting** it, **submitting** to it, **cooperating** with it – (whether it be the discipline of correction, of training or suffering) –

The whole point is that we may become something **we are not yet**, but something we **should be and need to be** More like **Christ**, more **mature**, more **dependent** on God, **deeper** and **stronger** and **greater** men and women of **faith, people** who are more in love with Jesus.

Discipline changes us. If there was a less painful way to bring the change, I'm sure our loving Father would use it, but sometimes there is **no other way** to get the needed results.

There are no shortcuts on the path of discipline -- but if we endure, **we become someone we could not become any other way.**

I recently read an inspiring article written by commentator and broadcaster Tony Snow, who now serves as press secretary for the Bush administration. Snow was diagnosed with colon cancer and a year after treatment, he experienced a recurrence of the cancer. He has just recently returned to work after his second round of treatment.

He was asked what spiritual lessons he had learned through his ordeal and I loved one of his comments. I think it is worth sharing . . .

*We want lives of simple, predictable ease – smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see – but God loves to go off-road. He provokes us with twists and turns. He places us in predicaments that seem to defy our endurance and comprehension – and yet don't. By his love and grace, we persevere. **The challenges that make our hearts leap and our stomachs churn invariably strengthen our faith and grant measures of wisdom and joy we would not experience otherwise . . . (Repeat)***

It's a **paradox**, isn't it? After having endured, we find ourselves saying: *I never want to go through the pain and difficulty of that experience again, but I would not trade for anything the person I have become because of it . . .*

Our text says:

Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. . .

How is it that we endure?

Verse 2 or Hebrews 12 has the answer:

*We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. . . Think about all he endured when sinful people did such terrible things to him, **so that you don't become weary and give up.***

Endurance is active, not passive. Endurance is not **gritting our teeth** and just getting through the hard time.

Neither is endurance **relying on our own strength and resources**. "I'm a survivor," I often hear people say. "I can get through this; I'll figure it out!"

Instead, endurance is *active interaction* with Jesus. We cannot do it without Him. He is the one who has already **endured the race** – and he did it brilliantly! He is the one who has **cleared the path of faith and he shows us the way**. He is the one who has **already learned obedience** by what he suffered. He is the one who is able to **sympathize with us** because he was **tempted** in every way that we are – but he didn't give in.

He is the one who is able to **save us completely** because He lives to intercede for us He is the one who is our **perfect High Priest** who meets our every need . . .

We cannot do it without Him, and our **relationship** with Him needs to be as **real** to us as the relationship we might have with our best friend.

I am coming out of several months of where I have definitely experienced God's discipline in my life – the **discipline of training**, I would call it – and it has been a very uncomfortable and sometimes painful place for me to be.

As I look back over the last year and a half or so I realize how poorly I would have done during this time of discipline If it had not been for Jesus, always with me, letting me **process my pain** and **disappointment** and giving me such wise counsel that guided my actions and words. Without Him, I would have consistently **said** and **done** the wrong thing!

Follow Me, Jesus says. I'll show you the way.

Follow Me . . . Jesus says –

Not my teaching . . .

Not my principles . . .

Not my ideals . . .

But, follow **ME** . . . You cannot follow a person unless you can either **see** them or **hear** them . . . Think about it -- it's impossible! We need to **fix our eyes on Jesus** – **to see him** and **hear him speak** *So that we may run with endurance the race that God has set before us . . .*

I titled this sermon *Defining Discipline*. If we take the word *defining* in this title a **verb** – I hope that is what we have done tonight – We have **defined** and **described** God's discipline and how it works in our lives.

But, if we make the word *defining* an *adjective*, instead of a *verb*, we get a whole other meaning. Now the phrase *Defining Discipline* means **discipline that defines** – and in this case, defines us - discipline that **marks** us, **makes** us, **describes** us –discipline that **shapes** us, **forms** us, and **molds** us –Discipline that **defines who we are** –

There is an expression often heard today, spoken of a person **caught in a critical moment** – We say – It was their **Defining Moment** – meaning that what happened in that moment – that event so *shaped the person* that **all other moments and events to follow** are forever affected and changed.

Enduring the race set before us . . . Fixing our eyes on Jesus . . . and accepting God's discipline in our lives . . . Can become our **wonderful, glorious defining moment!**

May it be so!

Amen