

RESPONDING RIGHTLY TO DIVINE DISCIPLINE (Hebrews 12:4-11)

Lawyers are taught, “When you are standing in a courtroom in the presence of a judge and jury, never ask a question that you don’t already know the answer to.” A lawyer doesn’t want to be surprised or thrown a curve ball when he is arguing his case because that will throw him off balance and trip him up. Asking a question that he didn’t know the answer to just might jeopardize his chances of winning the case.

Preachers aren’t taught to do that when we preach because we don’t really expect people to answer us. Most of our questions are asked for rhetorical purposes. We ask questions because we want you to think, not because we are seeking information.

This morning I am going to ask a question to which I am convinced I already know the answer. I am going to ask a question first of parents and then of the youth who are here.

Parents, when you were raising children in the home, did you ever think to yourself, “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m not doing a good job. I think I’m failing as a parent.”? Years later, did you ever have regrets? Did you ever say to yourself, “I wish I had done this. I wish I had done that.”?

Youth, I imagine you have thought to yourself at some point or another, “My parents, they just don’t understand what I’m going through. They don’t get it, and they aren’t being fair. If they really knew what’s going on, they would treat me better; they would handle things differently.” Have you ever thought anything along those lines?

It is natural for parents to fear they are doing a poor job as a parent. It is normal for kids to complain either quietly to themselves or out loud about the job their parents are doing in parenting them.

Here is the one thing I want you to know: As the children of God, we can never rightly accuse God of doing a poor job of parenting us.

- We might not understand what He is doing.
- We might not agree with what He is doing.
- We might not like what He is doing.

Since, however, we believe that God is all-loving, and since we believe that God is all wise, we must believe that what He is doing as our heavenly Father is for our best.

The topic of today’s text is not a popular one. It is not enjoyable to talk about because it is not enjoyable for us to experience. Our text is Hebrews 12:4-11, and it deals with God disciplining His children.

I would rather talk about God blessing us, God rewarding us, and God using us in wonderful ways to advance His kingdom. That, however, is not the focus of this passage.

One of the strengths of preaching verse-by-verse through the Bible, as we are doing here in Hebrews is that it forces us to deal with texts that we might otherwise ignore or pass over because we would rather not deal with them. God’s discipline is one of those things.

We don't like to think about us needing discipline, and we don't like to think about God meeting that need, but that is what our text communicates; so, that is the subject with which we must grapple and wrestle.

In all but the first verse of our text the word *discipline* is found. Between verses 5 and 11, a span of 8 verses, a form of the word *discipline* is used 9 times. Two synonyms are found in verses 5 & 6: *reproved* and *chastises*. Let's read our text.

The focus of our text and this message is not so much on what God does to discipline as it is on the facts that God does discipline us and how we should respond to His discipline. From our text, I want to emphasize four things we should do in response to God's discipline.

Before we look at the four things we need to do, let me comment on v. 4 and the beginning of v. 5. I view v. 4 as a transitional verse. In the three verses preceding our text, the author of Hebrews compares our Christian lives to a race, a long race in which our great need is endurance. We need to keep on keeping on as we run the race of the Christian life. Now, he wants to change the subject; so, he begins with a word of correction.

He seems to be saying, "You think you have it tough, but it is not as tough as it could be, and it's not be as tough as it will be. You may have experienced some persecution for your faith, but as of yet, your blood hasn't been spilled. None of your number has been martyred for their faith.

I find within those words, a correction for we who live in the west. I'm not talking about the western half of the United States. I'm talking about the global west. In the east, there is severe, physical persecution of the church. In places like North Korea, Afghanistan, Iran, parts of India, Indonesia, and China, Christians are being killed for their faith.

Here in America, as Christians, we may be rowing against the tide of our culture. Maybe you have experienced some acts of persecution. Maybe someone has called you a name. Maybe you have been left off a guest list. Maybe you have been passed over for a promotion. Those things sting. They hurt, but you haven't been threatened by a machete-wielding terrorist. You haven't been captured and tortured. You haven't been arrested and subjected to a mock trial. You haven't faced martyrdom; so, stand strong. If we aren't standing strong now, what will we do when the cost of being a believer becomes much higher?

The beginning of v. 5 contains a second correction. The verse poses a question. The author asks, "Have you forgotten . . ." and then he quotes from the OT. When you and I fail to remember or fail to learn in the first place what God has said, we place ourselves in a vulnerable position. I am truly scared by the fact that Christians who have been Christians for many years don't know their Bibles. They don't know the promises; they don't know the warnings; they don't know the basic truths that are found within the pages of the Bible.

Kent Hughes wrote, "The comfort and strength of God's Word will avail us not at all if we do not know it." He added, "Many today do not know enough of God's Word to survive a skinned knee!"

When real persecution comes, we had better know what God has said to us. We also need to know what God has said regarding the subject of divine discipline. God does discipline His children. If we do not know what God has said about our relationship with Him, we are apt to be surprised, fearful, and discouraged when we experience His discipline.

Such reactions will be prevented **if** we are simply aware of what God has said. Since I don't want you to be surprised, fearful, or discouraged when you face God's discipline, I want us to look at this subject and learn how we should respond when we face the Father's discipline.

Response #1: Remember What God's Discipline Proves.

The OT passage that is quoted in vv. 5-6 comes from Proverbs 3:11-12. That passage appears a bit differently in my version of the OT; so, let me read it from Proverbs:

- ¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of His reproof,
¹² for the LORD reproves him whom He loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.

When God disciplines you, it proves two things. It proves that He is your Father and that He loves you.

When you see a child in the store, who is not yours, misbehaving, throwing a tantrum, disrespecting his mom, what do you do? Do you grab him by arm and threaten to take him to the bathroom. No. That will get you arrested. There is not much you can do other than pray a silent prayer for that poor, distressed mom.

Unless you are a teacher in school, there is not much you can do to discipline kids who are not your own. Sadly, even in school, it is becoming harder to discipline children. You may want to discipline unruly kids in public that don't belong to you, but you don't. If it is your children who are unruly in public, you may want to pretend they aren't yours, but you don't do that because they are yours, and you know you are responsible for them, and you want then to turn out both to be respectful and respectable. No one can be respectable if he or she is not respectful. Your children will turn out to be neither if you fail to discipline them.

Look further down in our text to vv. 7-9.

If you discipline a child, it proves two things. It proves you are their parent, and it proves that you love that child. Proverbs 13:24 goes on to say, "Whoever spares the rod hates his son; but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." The most unloving thing you could ever do to your child is to never correct him, to never reprimand her, and to never apply the board of education to the seat of knowledge.

When I was a young parent, I read what James Dobson wrote. I listened to what James Dobson said. He founded *Focus on the Family*, and I would regard him as a child-rearing expert. He advised that parents should spank their children but not with their hand. He urged parents to use a wooden spoon. I always made sure we had a wooden

spoon available, and I used it as needed. I spanked my children not because I hated them but precisely because I loved them.

Likewise, God “spanks” us, so to speak, because He is our Father and because He loves us. When you find yourself under the disciplining hand of God, remember that He is your Father, and remember that He loves you.

Response#2: Realize the Forms God’s Discipline Takes.

The author of Hebrews doesn’t really spell out exactly what the discipline of God looks like. You might put your child in time-out. You might spank his behind. You might ground her or take away certain privileges. What exactly does God do? Honestly, our text doesn’t really specify.

Using other passages, Kent Hughes writes, “God’s discipline takes three forms—namely, corrective discipline, preventative discipline, and educational discipline . . .”

Sometimes, God simply lets us reap what we sow. He allows us to undergo the natural consequences of sinful actions. God forgives us of our sin, but he doesn’t take away the consequences of our sin.

If you use tobacco for 20 years, you might get cancer. If you abuse alcohol, you just might destroy your liver. If you overeat and never exercise, you might develop diabetes or a heart condition. I believe it is a sin to abuse the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God will forgive us if we confess those sins, but that doesn’t mean God will deliver us from the physical wreckage our sin has produced.

David had multiple wives. He had an adulterous affair; it might be considered rape because how do you say “no” to the king when he has you brought to his bedroom. He arranged the death of Bathsheba’s husband to cover up his crime. That is nothing less than murder. David was forgiven of his sin, but his family fell apart. One son raped his sister. Another son killed the offending son and eventually staged a rebellion against his father in league with Bathsheba’s father.

David benefited from God’s corrective discipline. He went on to write, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Psalm 119:71).

God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh. We are not told what it was, but it was a physical malady of some kind. He says it was given him in his words “to keep me from becoming conceited.” That was for Paul preventative discipline.

What happened to Job was educational discipline. It was through the trials and tribulations Job underwent that he learned and grew spiritually.

I am convinced that the discipline we undergo is not meant to punish us; it is meant to grow us. It is God’s will that we become like, look like, act like, think like and live like Jesus. To that end he allows us to face hardship and difficulties and suffering.

Weeks ago, we encountered Hebrews 5:8. That verse says this of Jesus, “Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered.” If God allowed Jesus to learn obedience through suffering, what would we ever think God would deal differently with us? We are not going to learn to obey God by constant success and perpetual blessings.

If you give a child everything he wants when he wants it, he will become a tyrant.
Years ago, I came across the following poem by Robert Browning Hamilton:

I walked a mile with Pleasure.
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she;
But oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.

For our good and for our growth, God graciously allows us to walk with Sorrow and learn from her, her many lessons.

Response #3: Recognize Why God's Discipline Comes.

Look at v. 10. The author of Hebrews compares and contrasts earthly fathers with our heavenly Father. Both bring discipline, but the difference is earthly fathers bring discipline as seems best to them. They might make a mistake. Did you ever discipline the wrong child because you got bad information, bad intel? Was the discipline ever too harsh or too lenient? Maybe you had the wrong motive. You disciplined the child in anger rather than in a moral noble motive.

God, however, never makes a mistake. He never acts on bad information. Although we may not think so, He always disciplines to the right degree. And He always disciplines with the right motive. He doesn't discipline us out of anger. The Bible teaches that Jesus bore our sin on the cross. God poured out His wrath against sin upon His Son. Our sin has been taken away. Now, the discipline God brings is not meant to punish us; it is meant to grow us. This passage teaches, "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness" (v. 10).

I have used the following poem before, but it beautifully captures what God does for us by disciplining us. As far as I know, the author of this poem is unknown.

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him

Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And which every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out-
God knows what He's about.

God does know what He is about, and what He is about is making you and I holy. Presently, we are far too worldly. We are too concerned with the pursuits and values of this world. God is intent on conforming us to His will and His ways.

Quite possibly, Michelangelo was the world's greatest sculptor. He bequeathed to the world amazing statues sculpted from large blocks of marble. Listen to these two quotes from Michelangelo: "Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it," and "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free."

You and I are like blocks of marble. God looks at us, and He sees within us the likeness of His Son. When God saves us, He sets about the task of cutting away everything that doesn't look like Jesus. Unlike marble, we are living souls, and God's chisel bites. When He hammers us, it hurts, but it is our good He undertakes, and God knows what He is doing. It is our job to trust Him.

Response #4: Recall What God's Discipline Produces.

Notice how the author of Hebrews ends this passage in v. 11. When I read this verse, I think of the phrase, "No pain, no gain." As we experience God's discipline, there is pain, but that pain produces gain. The gain is righteousness.

There are two kinds of righteousness. One is positional, and the other is practical. We are righteous because we are in Christ. Through His death and resurrection and because of our faith in Him, we were declared righteous. That is positional righteousness.

There is another kind of righteousness. It is righteous living. It is a life that exhibits the selflessness of Jesus. It is the life that shows others what it means to live a Christlike life, a life of love, a life of service, a life of kindness and caring. That is practical righteousness.

Such a life does not come about automatically or instantly. Like fruit, it takes time.

The soil has to be prepared. If the ground is hard, it has to be disced and tilled. Then, the seeds have to be planted. Watering is necessary. The sun must shine upon it. Weeding needs to be done. Waiting is required. Eventually, the fruit grows, and the fruit ripens.

That is the way it is with practical righteousness. It takes effort, and it takes time, but God is a Master Gardener. If we will allow Him to use His tools, He will work in the soil of our lives, and He will grow the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc., and we will give evidence to a watching world that God has produced within us a righteous life.

I am a preacher not a lawyer. Sometimes I ask questions I don't know the answer to. Will you submit to the disciplining work of God in your life? Will you patiently and obediently work with Him as He works in your life to make you righteous? I don't know the answer to that question. Do you? And if you do, what's your answer?