

August 21, 2022 – Hebrews 12:4-24 & Luke 13:22-30

Discipline is one of the most important things a parent does for their child. Children need discipline. Children need parents who discipline them. They will never grow to be healthy, law-abiding, productive members of society without discipline.

And yet, I don't know about you, but discipline is also one of the things that, as a parent, I struggle to know how to do. Because there is no training manual on how to discipline your child. No website I can go to or app I can download that says, "When they do this, you do this."

We can look back at our own parents and how they disciplined us. And that's certainly helpful for some people. Unless, of course, they did a really poor job of disciplining us and we never knew it.

Or maybe we did. We know that they were too lenient and let us get away with too much. We know that they were too harsh and maybe even crossed the line into abuse. We know they were muddling along just like us. And so we don't really want to emulate them. But that still doesn't leave us much guidance.

Worst of all, if we mess up, we don't just risk our child's physical future. We risk their spiritual future as well. Because our understanding of God as our Father is largely based on our experience with our human fathers. Our human parents. So if we, as parents, don't get that right, there's no telling how it will alter their spiritual growth.

This connection between our human parents and our heavenly Father, between their human discipline and God's divine discipline, is at the core of our Epistle lesson for today. We are sons of God. And he treats us as sons. Including in how he disciplines us.

And that's a good thing. The writer points out that if God doesn't discipline you in this life, then it means you aren't his son. Not really. And to explain that he uses the analogy of legitimate and illegitimate children.

Everyone on this earth is a child of God in one sense. Because we were all created by him. We all owe him our lives. The man who denies the existence of God was still created by God. He may have disowned his heavenly Father, but he still exists because God put him here. And he is therefore his Father's child.

He's just an illegitimate child. He's a child who has no claim to the family name. No claim to the family inheritance. No claim to the family household. Because he has cut himself off from the family.

God doesn't discipline those illegitimate children. They want nothing to do with him, so he has nothing to do with them. They are off on their own. They can do whatever they want. One day God will judge them.

And they will say to him, "But we're your children." And he will reply, "No, you aren't. Not anymore. You left the family." He'll reply to them the same as those people knocking at the door in Jesus' parable. "I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil."

No, to be disciplined by the Lord means to be one whom he loves. One whom he receives as a son. As part of his family. To be disciplined by God is a good thing. It means he cares enough about you and your future to discipline you.

To discipline you and not punish you. Illegitimate children receive punishment. They are allowed to live their lives without a care in the world. To do whatever they want. Believe whatever they want. They can be prodigal sons, squandering every good thing God gives to us on this earth for their own pleasure. And then they are punished. And it all comes to an end.

Legitimate sons aren't punished. They're disciplined. And there's a difference. A big difference. Punishment exists to satisfy justice. Which, on a divine scale, means it exists to satisfy God. God's anger. God's holiness. God's righteousness. Nobody goes to hell for their own good. They go to hell for God's good.

Discipline is different, because discipline doesn't exist for God's good. It exists for our good. Discipline exists to make you a disciple. A disciple of Jesus Christ.

How does God discipline us? Well, lots of different ways. The writer of our Epistle addresses one of the most important at the very beginning, "*In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*"

Persecution is a form of discipline. When we confront a sinful world, struggle with it, and physically suffer because of it, that is the discipline of God. It's not a punishment. It's discipline. To suffer persecution for the name of Jesus Christ makes you a better disciple.

But there are plenty of other ways that God disciplines us too. He disciplines us by taking away our worldly luxuries. Taking away the comforts we have grown so accustomed to having. Forcing us to see that a God who provides for our daily bread is all we were ever truly promised.

He disciplines us with a culture that is hostile to our faith. With television and movies and video games and social media that force us to make difficult choices about what we will watch and how we will spend our time. With a society that demands constant discernment, lest we fall into temptation and sin.

He disciplines us with failing health and the trials of old age. Suffering that requires us to constantly turn to him in prayer. Challenges that force us to realize that each day belongs to him and him alone. And when our last day comes, no amount of modern medicine can keep us on this earth. But that's OK, because we have the promise of eternal life.

We are surrounded every day by the discipline of the Lord. Making us into his disciples. Disciples of Jesus Christ. Who endured all that we endure. But didn't do so as discipline. No, he endured it as punishment. The punishment we deserved.

Jesus endured the persecution of those who mocked him and beat him and crowned him with thorns. He endured a life spent in poverty, without home or luxury of any sort. He endured the temptation of Satan himself in the wilderness. And he endured the suffering of death.

Death that he didn't earn. The wages of sin is death and he had no sin to pay for. No he died our death. He took our punishment. So that we might not be punished. But instead be disciplined.

So that we might no longer be illegitimate children, but legitimate sons and daughters of God. Heirs to his kingdom. So that we might not approach God as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai, filled with terror at his awesome wrath and power.

But instead, approach God as those returning home to Mount Zion. To the heavenly Jerusalem. To the city of the living God. And to a festal gathering where all the children of God are enrolled in heaven around the banquet of his Body and Blood.

No matter what you endure in this life, if you are a child of God, then you are not being punished. You are, perhaps, being disciplined. But that's not a bad thing.

For we have a father who is not like human parents, blindly muddling around, searching for the best way to discipline their children. No we have a heavenly father who knows exactly what we need. Exactly how we need to be disciplined for our good.

That's what Hebrews tells us. We are disciplined for our good. Or, as the King James Version puts it, for our profit. It is profitable for us to be disciplined. Because when we endure the discipline of God we share in his holiness.

We share in Christ's holiness. We share in Christ's suffering. And so we know what it means to be a child of God. But we also share in something else of Christ: His resurrection. His ascension. His inheritance of the Kingdom of God. To be disciplined by God is to share in everything Christ has. Not because we have earned it for ourselves, but because he has earned it for us.

Discipline is one of the most important things a parent does for their child. Discipline is one of the most important things that God does for us. And yes, for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. But it will yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. It will yield a treasure that will endure. It will yield an inheritance that will never fade away. Amen.