

The Holiness of God: God's Holy Discipline
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 6:20-24; Matthew 18:15-17; Hebrews 12:4-14

Our final Scripture reading today is Hebrews 12:4-14. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined--and everyone undergoes discipline --then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 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 spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order 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. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

When we think of moms, we think of a lot of things. We think of being nurturing and supportive, bandaging up scraped knees and bedtime stories. We think of late nights helping with school projects and cheering at kids’ games and endless little things that add up to a lot. We’re thankful to our moms for what they provided for us.

But a good mom also knows how to discipline her children well. It is hard for parents to strike the balance between helping a child find responsibility and accountability, distributing reasonable punishment without creating discouragement or rebellion. We know that a steady hand at discipline helps a child grow up right. Too little discipline and you get wildness; too much and you get a revolt. It’s a tough job! It’s not something we often think about on Mother’s Day when we tend to turn to the sentimental. But providing a firm yet loving guiding hand of discipline is essential for all good parents.

And that’s where we are going to turn today in our final sermon on The Holiness of God – God’s holy discipline of us. This might be an uncomfortable topic for us because we’ve been taught or seen bad approaches to this over time. And yet, it’s something we need to tackle because the discipline of God – and the work of the church in helping restoration and healing happen – is vital to our growth in holiness. In fact, the author of Hebrews this morning tells us that if we are not disciplined by God, we have not been adopted into His family. We should be wary of the person who claims to be a Christian who’s never had a struggle!

Last week, we discussed how we as Christians are being set apart for special use by God. We saw how baptism is the sacrament where God claims us as His own for His purposes, and how communion is part of our preparation for God to use us – that God meets us in the sacrament. Both of the sacraments mark us as unique and different, as holy; the sacraments are not for everyone, but only those who are sealed as a part of the covenant community of Christ. Both ready us and empower us for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. We've also been learning over the last few weeks how God is sanctifying us – not just declaring us righteous, but changing our hearts, minds, and souls so that we truly reflect His holiness and righteousness.

But that's not where the process ends. The process continues through discipline. Discipline has three particular forms that I find in Scripture – there may be more, but there are at least three. The first, which we'll touch on briefly, is called discipline but it's also what we might call striving to become your best person in Christ. Anything worth doing requires some discipline. I'm going to be a better or worse guitar player depending on my practice discipline. You plan to run a marathon, you spend months and even years working up to that point, disciplining yourself to run daily, to go further, faster, longer.

We have what are known as the spiritual disciplines – like praying, reading Scripture, fasting, giving, service, study, confession, worship. As we practice them, we see our Christlikeness grow as the Holy Spirit uses them to mold us more into God's image. The more they're practiced, the more they show their effectiveness. Paul talks about this kind of discipline in 1 Corinthians 9 as self control or strict training, like an athlete does. But where the crown of the athlete is momentary, our crown is eternal. And this kind of discipline is part of what brings about our holiness – not through our striving or efforts that merit God's favor, but through the Holy Spirit using them to build us up in our spiritual life. As Richard Foster, the modern expert on the spiritual disciplines, writes, "Disciplines do not earn us favor with God or measure spiritual success. They are exercises which equip us to live fully and freely in the present reality of God — and God works with us, giving us grace as we learn and grow."

The second kind of discipline is the discipline of hardship and suffering, the type that the author of Hebrews talks about in our second passage today. There are a couple of variations of this that I see in Scripture. The first is the most straightforward – discipline through difficult times that brings about a functional change in the person's character. Let's look at a couple of examples.

We'll get to the story of Joseph eventually in our study of Genesis, but most of us have a hint of the story from the musical or children's Bibles. Long story short – Joseph when he's young is favored by his father, and he boasts about dreams he has about ruling over his brothers. He's arrogant and bratty, though it's clear he also knows God. His brothers in a fit of anger nearly kill him but wind up selling him to slave traders heading to Egypt. Joseph spends a fair number of years as a slave, doing his best and being blessed by God, before he is imprisoned, accused of a crime he didn't commit. He spends years in jail, earning the favor of the guards, but it's a long time before his ability to interpret dreams earns him the respect of the Pharaoh. He eventually saves a great number of lives, but he also becomes a humbled man who does not seek revenge for what his brothers did to him.

We also see it in Paul's life. Paul suffered from an eye disorder after his conversion, possibly due to his conversion experience of being blinded in an encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. It was a big struggle for him, seeing that it not only impaired his vision, it seemed to have significant pain with it too. There are brief comments in a couple of Paul's letters that he signs his signature in great big handwriting so he can see it, and he dictates all his letters for the same reason. It seems that Paul pleaded with God to remove this problem, but God answered Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul had been a religious giant even before becoming a believer, having been a Pharisee among Pharisees, zealous in his pursuit of Christians, a holy roller if ever there was one. God used this hardship to work in Paul's life, helping him realize that it was God's power and not his own that was making him successful in his ministry.

This is the kind of discipline that really tests our faith and makes us realize where the gaps in our belief exist. When an expense hits and it's uncertain where the money is going to come from, do we panic or do we trust? When there's a medical crisis and there's a lot of pain, what's our reaction? How might God be growing us through it? You know, my kidney stone situation has made me very aware of how much my attitude towards life can be dependent on whether or not I can drink anything but water. How often we find God disciplining us to show us that our good temper or cheerful disposition can be taken down so easily when things aren't going our way?

Yet this too is a means of making us holy. As God disciplines us in this manner, we grow to become more like Him. We learn patience, peace, joy, kindness, all in the midst of longsuffering. With the Spirit's help, we begin to root out places where it only appears we are following Christ when in reality we aren't. As the passage says, this is unpleasant business. No one wants to be a Peter who finds out when put under pressure he's a coward. No one wants to be like John Mark who returned home on a missionary trip because he was too afraid to continue on with Paul and Barnabas. Yet in both those situations, God redeemed them and grew them both – Peter became the head of the church in Jerusalem, and near the end of his life, he urged for the brothers to send John Mark to him as a useful friend in Christ. We need not be discouraged by the hard things we experience. God is disciplining us to be holy.

There's a third form of discipline we should talk about this morning, and it's the kind of discipline that Jesus addressed in our passage from Matthew 18. Jesus sets up a standard for disciplining members of the church who have sinned against others. First, Jesus says, don't gossip about it or get revenge – go to the person who has sinned, who has created offense, who has done wrong, and talk to them about it. If they repent, great! "You have won your brother over." If that doesn't work, then there's to be another confrontation – this time with a couple of other people who can speak to the behavior that's going on. If the person still refuses to repent, then it's a matter for the elders of the church – and if they brother or sister still wants to continue in sin, then they should be put out of the fellowship, treated as any other unrepentant sinner.

Paul repeats similar patterns in his letters. He speaks about the church disciplining its members for their own good. When there's a horrific sin overlooked in the Corinthian church, Paul calls the leadership of the church on the carpet for allowing the sin to continue, and he's super clear – unless the guilty party repents, "expel the immoral brother."

This is where the modern church struggles most, because we have a couple of strikes against us. First is the history of legalism in the church. Holiness was very important to the Reformers, and part of the Reformation was encouraging people to not just say they were Christians but to live it out. Holiness was a central point in Presbyterian and Reformed theology; the Puritans knew it was important, and it also spread to the holiness movement that began the Methodist church and all the Wesleyan offshoots.

But the problem was, it was very easy for legalism to be mistaken for holiness. For a long time, church members had to have tokens to take communion, proving they had been examined by the elders and had shown their beliefs and actions to be virtuous. That wasn't a bad thing, but eventually, many churches made all sorts of activities that weren't strictly work off-limits. Some entirely prohibited alcohol; others, playing cards because they were associated with gambling. Some banned any music other than acapella hymn-singing. If it was fun, you likely couldn't do it in some circles. Some of our oldest members may remember these kinds of restrictions still being enforced when they were children.

Calling out sin and being legalistic about trivial issues the Bible says nothing about are wildly different things, but they often get confused. Many people dislike church discipline because they think they're going to get called on the carpet for petty issues like not listening to a Christian radio station all the time. But that's not it at all. What the Bible calls sin needs to be addressed – honestly and sincerely and without delay – but not whether or not you watched a ballgame on a Sunday or played in a euchre tournament or had a glass of wine with dinner.

The other strike against us is that, in a good way, there are churches everywhere, very few of which practice genuine discipline and accountability that we need as Christians. A huge change occurred post-World War 2, and that was church membership. It went from 40% in the late 1800s to over 70% by 1955. That's enormous. But as with any system, you want to keep your gains, and so church discipline in many churches disappeared in order to keep people coming every week. Some church's theology changed so much that sin wasn't considered a big deal any more. And in most areas in the country, if you did find yourself in hot water at your own church, you could travel down the street to attend another, few questions asked. It became very difficult to justify church discipline when it would mean lower numbers in church, lower offerings, and more difficulties. It was the right thing to do, but not the popular thing.

These two issues – legalism on one hand and cheap grace on the other where nothing is confronted – they've hamstrung the church. Top that off with some very bad use of church discipline and it might seem like it isn't worth it. But as the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to help one another in our pursuit of holiness. As your pastor, I'm the frontline man, the point person on this. We are our brother's keeper; we are meant to make some noise when there's a serious sin issue going on. It's for their sake and for our own, because for us to do nothing when sin is clearly happening is a sin itself.

Church discipline, the kind that Jesus and Paul talked about, is not about being the “sin police” or looking to get back at someone who’s harmed us. It’s ultimately about restoration and restorative justice – setting right what went wrong and, as much as possible, helping both the person who was sinned against and the instigator come to terms with one another. As we know, there are many things that are immoral or unethical that are not illegal in today’s modern society. Yet we need to be held accountable for them.

Church discipline is something we agree to when we become members of the church. A few weeks ago at Easter when our new members joined, we heard their statement. That discipline is to keep us focused on Christ. We serve a holy God whose chief aim is for us to become like Him because that glorifies Him. He’s given us the church as a means to stay on track. He’s given us each other so that we do not fight in the battle against sin alone.

I strongly encourage you to find an accountability partner, whether a close friend who you trust to speak the truth to you or someone in the church that you feel you could be honest with. I have one, and I need that accountability. Because we don’t have to be living a terrible life to still be living with ordinary sins that I need to keep in check. Accountability is a way of keeping our lives in check, especially those areas where we struggle the most.

Accountability can also be a beautiful thing in bringing us closer to another brother or sister in Christ. When you know that you can talk to someone who is not going to judge you but instead is going to ask you, “What’s the best way to make this right?”, it’s an awesome thing. When we look at accountability and church discipline, it’s not about writing somebody off. It’s about trying to write someone back in. Even if someone is willfully unrepentant of a serious sin, the goal is not to get them to leave; it’s to get them to repent and fully embrace their life as a believer once again.

Holiness is at the center of all these different forms and types of discipline. Friends, this is our pursuit and goal. We want to be like Jesus. To be a believer is to believe that living like Jesus is the best way to live. To show kindness in the face of ridicule; to call for justice when justice is nowhere to be found; to show grace to those who don’t deserve it and mercy to those who don’t recognize their need for it; to be loving to those who are cruel and merciless...this is Jesus. It is not the human way or the easy way; it is the godly way.

And it is tough. To be set apart for God is a noble thing, but being refined into a tool He can use is hard. A sharpened sword is heated to astronomical temperatures, pounded, and then plunged into the water. Forging a powerful tool takes time and heat and pressure and pain. God’s discipline is His way of forging us in His fires and bringing us out like steel, strong and sharp and ready to cut through the enemy defenses to rescue those who need God’s grace. Do not be discouraged or dismayed if you come under the discipline of God. Those He loves, He disciplines; those He cares about most, He forges through the heat of hardship so we can show that our God can work through anything and bring out a beautiful result.