

# THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## “Godly Discipline”

Hebrews 12:8-24

August 21 & 22, 2010

It's been said that discipline is one of the most important things in life and yet it's one of the hardest things to learn and accept. And it's true! Webster defines “discipline” as “training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or the moral character.” Discipline implies that someone or something is not perfect and needs improvement. In that sense, of course, we can say that, in a fallen world, everyone and everything needs discipline because no one or no thing is perfect. The Bible tells us that too, and, frankly, so does our own experience. We live in an imperfect world surrounded by imperfect things and populated by imperfect people including each and every one of us here today.

And while we may know this is true, it doesn't make it any easier to accept discipline especially in our own lives. In fact, discipline is almost a “dirty word” these days. I am what I am, we say, just let me be. And yet we know that discipline is something that we all need if we're going to be more than we already are.

There are three kinds, or perhaps better-said “sources”, of discipline. The first is the kind others exert on us. Parents and others in authority can, and often do, exert this kind of discipline. For example, let's say that a child says or does something that is clearly and morally wrong – let's say stealing. A good parent will not only tell that child that stealing is wrong but also will seek to correct that child and train that child not to steal any more. Sometimes this kind of discipline will also involve punishment, sometimes it won't. But either way, this kind of discipline is necessary. Without it a child can infer that stealing is okay and then grow up to find out the hard way that it really isn't.

The second kind or source of discipline is the kind we exert upon ourselves – “self-discipline.” For example, let's say that we find ourselves saying or doing something that's wrong – let's say lying. We need to not only recognize lying is wrong we also need to take steps to stop it ourselves. It's bad for us and it sets a bad example for others. Without self-discipline we will keep on lying and, in the process, ruin our lives but with self-discipline we will seek to put an end to it and tell the truth.

The third and last kind or source of discipline is the kind God exerts on us. And, in the end, this is not only the best kind of discipline, it's the most important as well. For through it, God seeks to train us up to be what He said we were in our baptism – His people. And just as real parenting starts with the birth of a child, so also God's parenting of us starts with our rebirth as His children in baptism for Christ's sake. And part of that parenting is His discipline. As sinful children we might wish this were not so but, in our heart of hearts, we know it's necessary. The point of this discipline is not to punish but to train up. After all, we know that Jesus took our

punishment upon himself so that we might be free from punishment. That's what Isaiah meant when he said, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." No, God's discipline for His children is not punishment born of His wrath – nor is it simply caprice on His part – rather, it's training, it's correcting, it's molding and shaping our lives as His people. It's a means of growing the Christian life.

That's the point the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is making in today's epistle lesson when he quotes a passage from Proverbs 3 that 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 those he loves and he rebukes everyone he accepts as a son." You see, God always disciplines out of love. The point of the discipline is to express that love by helping us grow and become all that He said we were at our baptism.

In the New Bible Commentary it says, "Christians need to remember that whatever sufferings they endure in this life are not worth comparing with those of Jesus on their behalf and that, as Scripture makes plain, God, as a loving Father, uses the trials, troubles and tribulations that we have to endure in our earthly sojourn for our spiritual discipline and education as His children. In fact, the very experience of such things is practical proof that God is dealing with us as His children."

And so God disciplines us through His Word in the very things in this life we must endure – sometimes just because we are His children and sometimes just because we're in the world. But for what purpose, we may ask. Why do I have to go through what I'm going through right now? It's so that, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says so well, that it may produce a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." In other words, God uses whatever the trials, troubles and tribulations you may be experiencing right now so that you may grow as His child – in relationship with Him through faith and hope – in relationship with others through love – and in relationship with yourself through joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control, the very fruit of the Spirit.

When we understand His purpose and when we appreciate what it can produce in our lives, we can be strengthened in faith and life and continue, as the writer said earlier in Hebrews, to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

I haven't read the book When Bad Things Happen to Good People – maybe you have. But on the basis of our lesson for today the reason is plain – God is disciplining those who are His. Much as a loving father disciplines his son, so God disciplines us. May we see the trials, troubles and tribulations of this life, especially those that come to us because we are His, as the means by which we may grow in Christ.

And may we continue to grow in Christ this coming week for Jesus' sake. Amen.